

SOMETIMES you wake up with a hole in your heart and you're not sure why. It's a circle, carved by something you can't touch, something that opens up in your sleep and wakes you up, hungry. This morning, before I got on the plane, it was like that, like those lagoons left by old, erupted volcanoes. They pull things and people into them because the core of the earth, after it shoots out its molten lava, is as hungry as I am.

My nerves are shot, as if the ends of them have brushed up against coca leaves and are standing on edge now, porcupine-like, pricking me under my skin. Must be why I've had on-again, off-again goose bumps since last night.

I can't come back with nothing.

If something big doesn't happen on this trip, I'll have to leave Tony, leave town, go back to school. Teach.

God, please don't make me a high school art teacher.

My poor mother doesn't even know where I am. My sister either. I'm sick of bringing them down from all the "almosts" and "maybes," the *nearly* solo shows, the hairline fractures between me and success, that line between being a total loser and being a successful artist. I'm starting to hate that word: artist. It's embarrassing.

Only Tony knows where I am, dropped me off at the airport. And Lee. This is all Lee's doing to begin with. She said we could settle it over the phone, if I "really couldn't make it." But I knew what that meant: another artist would eat smashed, stepped-on, black

gum off the subway platform for the chance. Chew and swallow and smile. That's how Lee is—she always makes sure her subliminals are obvious. She's also totally old-school. Been like that from the start. There are dealers you never talk to, hardly ever see, some you never even meet; do it all over email. But Lee's different. She likes setting up coffees and cocktails and power brunches. All of which is why I said I'd go, come up to New York, see what she wanted. That, and she was paying for my ticket. I didn't want to risk it, didn't want me not flying up to be the reason why it didn't happen. Whatever "it" was. She wasn't very clear. All she said was, "If you get your painter ass up here, it could change your life." And my life needs some change, in every sense of the word. In my pockets, definitely.

So here I am, pulling my orange backpack from my shoulders, up and into the overhead bin. I got the backpack in Amsterdam a while ago. It gives me a feeling of satisfaction and loserhood at the same time. Satisfaction because it's been so many places with me, makes me feel like I know something about the world. Loserhood because it's also the backpack that served to bring home every painting I failed to sell.

A few years ago I'd decided to submit work to a bunch of group shows outside Miami and New York, because Miami and New York kept shafting me. And one after another, galleries in Barcelona, Amsterdam, Santo Domingo, and San Francisco chose me for their "juried group shows." The elation at any kind of invitation covered up the fact that I had to hit each country on my own dime and lug back out whatever I didn't sell—which was everything. Which equals: Loserhood.

I was trying to convince Tony it was an "investment," a building of my CV, but I could tell what he was thinking: *She's never gonna make it. She's being irresponsible, not saving any money. She's too old for this. I can never marry her.*

And then Lee came along, and the possibility of a contract with a real New York gallery, a respected one.

Lee had the potential to transform my life—Oprah makeover-style—with a snap of her finely manicured fingers. Get me and my work in front of collectors who drop twenty grand if their interior designer tells them it goes with their rug. Or the snootier collectors, the best kind, searching for someone to “discover.” For now, though, there’s just this, a nervous curiosity about what she wants and stale airplane oxygen clinging to my lungs. Looking through my wallet, I realize I don’t even have enough dough to buy a morning-glory Bloody Mary. At least I have an aisle seat. Time to sit here and pretend to read as everyone trickles into their seats, squirming by me.

The guy sitting across the aisle in the row in front of me seems even more antsy than I probably do. He’s wearing an olive-green jacket that keeps catching my eye with peripheral movement. The guy’s really young, maybe twenty, twenty-two. Bearded. Black, Middle Eastern watery eyes that look a little like the night sky after it rains. Sparkles here and there when his dark pupils catch glints of his reading light. If he weren’t such a live wire, he’d be kind of handsome.

I look down at my *Art in America*, ignore him—try to, anyway. Except that his green jacket keeps whaling around and flinching. He’s looking up and down the aisle now. Up and down, up and down. Rubbernecking. The kid has a massive book in his lap I can’t quite catch the title of. The thing is a tome, could knock someone out flat with that brick. Jesus, I hope it’s not the Koran.

He gets up and goes to the bathroom at the front of the plane. Sits down. Then goes to the bathroom again, this time at the back of the plane. We’re about to take off. The flight attendant leads him back to his seat. I put away my magazine, and I realize that, all of a sudden, I’m nervous about this guy. Maybe it’s because he’s wearing that jacket and I’m Cuban-American, and anything that resembles green fatigues does something to my psyche. Maybe it’s something else, the slant of his eyes. What’s he doing? He sits down again. Gets back up. The flight attendant comes by and asks him to sit still, to please buckle up. We’re reminded, over the loudspeaker, to please make sure all electronic devices are turned off. I check my phone. The

kid's leg starts to shake. The guy next to me taps me on my knee—a suit, *Wall Street Journal* in hand. “What’s wrong with that guy?” he asks. I have no idea, I tell him. We’re trying not to stare at the kid. The suit folds his *Wall Street Journal* until it crumples into a pocket of news that’s already old and expired, gaining obsolescence by the half-second.

“Should I say something?” I ask him quietly, trying not to make a fuss.

“Somebody has to, I think,” the suit says.

Which is when my heart starts to beat like an enormous, swelling, red balloon inside my chest. Ba-boom, ba-boom. I’m being racist. I’m a jackass. You’d think an “artist” would be more enlightened. What a stupid word. I’m an educated person, right, I shouldn’t think that just because the guy looks like he’s from... Maybe he’s just—

The kid gets up again, stands in the middle of the aisle. Sits back down.

Ba-boom. Ba-boom.

“We have to do something,” says the suit. He’s growing agitated, his freckled face turning paler than it already was to begin with.

Why didn’t I tell my mother where I was going? I don’t even think she knows Tony’s number, and Tony won’t know anything’s happened until he sees it all over the news. And Lee. Lee’s going to think I stood her up. And Leo, who I haven’t seen in forever, is going to wonder why I never got in touch, to meet up after my meeting, like I’d promised over email. I should’ve at least told Nina I was going to New York, maybe she’d have come along, had a sister-trip with me or something. But no, because then she’d be here right now, in danger. And Dad, when was the last time I saw Dad? Even talked to him? I’m a shit daughter, we have a shit relationship. We have a *shit* relationship—

“I’m going to tell the flight attendant something,” I tell the suit.

“I think you should,” he says. He looks like he’s about to throw up.

Ba-boom. Ba-boom. Ba-boom. All the way down the aisle.

“See that man over there?” I tell the flight attendant, trying to keep my voice calm. “The guy with the green jacket?”

The flight attendant looks at me like I’m annoying him.

“Listen, he’s been acting really weird, he’s freaking everybody out. He keeps getting up and sitting down and he’s, I don’t know, please, just go over and look and see, you’ll see he’s acting very strangely—”

“Well, he’s definitely freaking *you* out, miss,” he says, continuing to prep the drink cart. “We’ll see what we can do.”

The flight attendant stays very cool, practically rolling his eyes at me. This must happen to him a million times a day, I get it. But what if this is the real thing? I don’t know what else to do and I don’t want to make a show, so I go back to my seat.

When I reach my aisle, the suit’s eyes question me.

“I told them,” I say.

“You don’t think they’d do the same thing all over again, do you? Same tactic. That’d be stupid, right?”

I guess it would be stupid. They wouldn’t ram another plane into—

The flight attendant is standing in front of the kid, with the drink cart now. The kid orders something, but I can’t hear his voice. Then I see the flight attendant is reaching for a Budweiser.

“The kid ordered a beer,” I say to the suit. “That’s a good sign.”

“Yeah, that’s true, they don’t drink, right?” he whispers.

“Can I see your passport, sir?” The flight attendant asks the kid, before handing over the beer.

“Good, good. They’re taking precaution,” says the suit.

Then the flight attendant hands the kid his beer and it’s our turn to order our beverages. Suit and I remain vigilant. We order ginger ale.

An hour goes by quicker than I realize, and half of one of those stupid romantic comedies they play has taken its course, when the kid, who’s been staring straight ahead for a while, starts to look back and forth again. And then because I’m looking straight at him, he gives me a big smile. “I kind of love Jennifer Aniston,” he says, pointing at the

screen. “She’s hot. Plus, you know, I think she’s a good actress. I know that sounds stupid, but it’s true, man. Rachel was a great character. She was hilarious.”

He says all of this with a perfect American accent. The kid is American. He’s talking about *Friends*, for God’s sake. The suit next to me starts cracking up and the kid thinks it’s because he agrees with the Jennifer Aniston thing. “Right? Am I right?” says the kid with frat boy intonation.

I feel deflated, like a complete and total fool. The kid’s just nervous. Maybe he just doesn’t like flying. Maybe he’s got a big meeting, like me. Wait till I tell Leo. What a ridiculous misunderstanding, what a ridiculous person I am. I’m laughing a little too, now. Nervous laughter.

“I like Ross,” I say. “He was the best character on *Friends*.”

“David Schwimmer,” says the kid, nodding. “Yeah, he was good too.”

I flush pink with shame. The suit and I are embarrassed to look at each other. The suit stretches his hands in front of him, grabbing for the news again, shutting himself off to further conversation. So the kid talks to me instead.

“Did you watch the movie?” asks the kid.

“No, I’ve been trying to avoid them lately because I overreact,” I say, fumbling through the words a little, but trying to be cool. “You know what they say about planes, that, um, that you cry more and laugh more. I get hysterical. Especially if I drink wine, then I know it’s the end. Something to do with, I can’t remember totally, but something about the oxygen level, or disorientation—”

“Or just plain plane nerves, man,” he says, chortling. “Ha. I punned.”

A statement that makes me realize the kid’s in college, probably a freshman, and that the book he had on his lap earlier was probably some Russian novel he’s been assigned, or a massive chemistry textbook.

“No, seriously,” he continues, “it’s scary to fly now. I spaz out. And it’s not like the stewardesses are hot anymore either. The one that came by earlier hasn’t shaved her legs in, like, months. Scruffy. Girls at school are like that too. I don’t get it.”

“Feminism,” I say, “I guess.” I smile and, not sure what to follow with, I start to stand, deciding I should pretend to go to the bathroom, even though I could’ve probably waited until we landed.

I kick myself all the way to the bathroom, feeling dumb for my fear, sad about it even, regretting all those hours of CNN and, just to get the other side of things, Fox. All those traffic jams filled with NPR streaming on the car radio reminding us that there are still terrorist operatives living and learning inside and outside the country. Red alerts, orange alerts, yellow alerts. Take off your shoes, lift up your hands, x-ray, scan, search. Bend over. “Better safe than sorry” robotically looping in everyone’s mind like neon ticker-tape flashing headline news.

By the time I get back from the bathroom, after standing in line fifteen minutes, the kid is fast asleep, mouth wide open, hands folded on his lap. The suit is too. Both of them sound asleep. Suit’s even snoring a little.

Soon enough, we’re zooming in on the city from ten thousand feet in the air. Looking down at all those street grids, I feel calmer, less heart-punching ba-boom, but I still feel the hole in my heart from this morning. That hasn’t changed. An hour ago I thought I was going to die, and now I’m pretty sure I’m going to live to see another day. But the hole’s still there. There’s no sense of real relief in that department, which is desperately unsettling. What’s wrong with me?

There it is, spread out before me—the freefall between me and the messy muck of being in the city again. I hate New York. Because when you’re there, inside the grid, you can’t see the whole picture, just what lies in front of you. You can get lost. Not like painting, where whether you’re inspired to the point of bliss or you think you’re losing control, the canvas is always there—whole in front of you like

a map—and you're the one drawing lines of perspective. You can always find your way out. That's the power of painting.

LANDING IN LaGuardia all alone, it's cold for September. I try not to look at the suit or the kid I took for a terrorist as I brush by everyone on my way out of the plane. I go straight, follow the signs to the exit, out the door, onto the glittery sidewalk. I forgot what this felt like, the sharp invisible burn through your clothes, going straight for the bone. I zip my jacket, wrap my scarf, and off I go onto the M60 into Manhattan. Every once in a while a blush rushes through me when I flash back to telling the flight attendant he had to watch out for the kid. I can't help but feel like an idiot, like I swallowed the same pill everyone else did.

Forget being independent, individualistic, all those "American" things that used to be strong and good, where the "American" and "Artist" in me melded together—at those traits, those words. I knew I'd have to respond to the attack as an artist, I knew that right away, that would come eventually. But what I'm finding is that responding to what happened to me as a person is harder, harder personally than professionally, because when I think about being in New York that day, not that long ago, and I remember the immobility of it all, how time froze over like in some superhero movie where Gotham stops in its tracks, when I remember that—the virtually impossible made real—it's almost okay to be irrational about the whole thing.

Regardless, I've got to stop hashing this over in my head, put some sort of clarity in my stride, start concentrating on the meeting now. That's why I'm here, isn't it? Not to go backwards in time, not to revisit the past but to move toward the future.

We ride straight through Queens. The houses with Christmas lights still on, even in September; nothing's changed. Strolling through Harlem—an Old Navy now near the Apollo—and then there I am on 110th Street, getting on the subway, on my way to Chelsea to see Lee.