

**A Company of One**  
**K. Karl Leavitt**

*“The worst heart of the world is a grosser book than the ‘Hortulus Animæ,’ and perhaps it is but one of the great mercies of God that ‘er lasst sich nicht lesen.’ ”* —Edgar Allan Poe

The captain’s voice sounded composed, in control, devoid of panic or concern.

A line of thunderstorms from St. Louis to Birmingham had been evident on the airport terminal TV screen, and eventually, the storms had become apparent in the windows on both sides of the aircraft. Sunshine and a mackerel sky gave way to increasing darkness and clouds of malice.

We flew on into and among the storms. Minor bumps gave way to lunch-heaving lurches. Occasional lightning revealed massive, surreal canyons amidst the clouds. Oddly, flares of sunlight appeared, shifted, and then disappeared.

The plane swayed and shook as though it were in the hands of a drunk.

“Flight control has plotted a path through these storms, ladies and gentleman, but it’s going to get a little rough. I’m asking the flight attendants to have a seat and all the passengers to remain in their seats as well, with your safety belts on.”

The captain’s voice had a calming affect, I believe, because no one seemed overly agitated, at least no one within sight or earshot. For my part, I found the images outside the windows compelling, so much so that the notion of potential or impending disaster hardly entered my mind. If any such trepidation did occur, it passed so fleetingly as to leave behind no trace.

We jerked up, sinking like anchors in our seats, and then weightless freefall, only to level off with a crashing boom that rattled everything in the cabin. The lights flickered, went out for an instant, and then the oxygen masks fell down from the ceiling. No one spoke. No one screamed. Eerily, for an instant—a cubic centimeter of time and space—everything seemed quiet and still, although I knew that the engines continued to roar, that the craft continued to buck and shake, that outside the storms roiled violently all around us.

“Ladies and gentlemen, the cabin has NOT lost pressure,” one of the flight attendants reported. “You do not need to put on the oxygen masks.”

Still, several people were already wearing theirs and seemed to be in no rush to remove them.

Outside boiled the awesome majesty of several powerful and furious thunderstorms, clashing, merging, piling up. Deep caverns formed and melted. Mountains appeared and swam away, revealing hidden valleys, glimpsed from afar by a brilliant and short-lived flash. Lightning continued to streak all around us, illuminating a stranger scene inside the cabin; some people wore orange plastic cups over their mouths, trailing clear plastic tubes connected to the ceiling via limp plastic bags—*the bag will not inflate, but oxygen is flowing*.

Things moved separately and together. As a group, we were thrust up and then back down. Looking at the overhead luggage compartments, it seemed that the cabin was being

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twisted, wrung out like a damp dishtowel. All this in a silent second, in an instant stretched, and stretched along with it were my perceptions.

My neighbor across the aisle was a woman, fortyish. She held her eyes fixed straight ahead, her body frozen.

“It’s just shifts in air pressure,” I said. “We’ll bounce around a little, but the plane is built for it.”

“Are you a pilot?” she asked. She scrutinized me. It seemed that she wanted to believe me, to trust what I said.

“I just travel a lot,” I said, trying to sound reassuring. “One time, I sat next to this engineer guy, from Lockheed, or maybe it was Boeing. Either way, we went through a patch of turbulence that had half the plane terrified. The whole while, this guy talked about air pressure variances and structural integrity formulas, the properties of various alloys, welds, and rivets. The short of it was, these planes are built to take a lot of punishment. As long as the engines keep running, we don’t have much to worry about.”

Her hair was perhaps too styled—relatively short, with bright streaks of varying shades of blonde. She wore a business suit, well-tailored, light gray with a muted plaid of maroon and black. She could talk about efficiencies, I imagined. She might have been an accountant, I supposed, or a government bureaucrat, not severe, really, but exacting, intense, and certainly daring anyone to make an issue of it.

She looked at me intently, her eyes grayish-blue, somewhat watery. “Makes sense,” she said, but her eyes belied an anxiety that no words of mine would allay, not unless I had credentials that she would consider expert.

The cabin bucked, and it seemed that her anticipation would become actuality. I was tossed forward, then back, and then upward, to the farthest extremity of my safety belt.

Then, the luggage compartment just above my head opened.

After that, nothing. The next thing I knew, an attendant was blotting my brow with a cold towel, asking me if I were all right. Outside the window was a clear blue sky, with happy puffy clouds, dazzling white, drifting lazily by in the sunshine.

Evidently, some time and many miles had passed.

“What happened?”

Accompanying the sunlight was a pounding in my head, as if all the thunder I hadn’t heard during the storm were replaying just for me.

“A bag fell out of the overhead compartment,” the attendant explained. “Are you all right? You’ve been unconscious for several minutes.”

She seemed very pretty, her eyes the color of the sky in the early evening. Her presence distracted me from my aching head, if only for a moment.

“I’ll be fine,” I said, and I believed it.

“I’ll get you an icepack,” she said.

I watched her walk away. Really, she looked as though she might be sixteen, although I figured that was impossible; guidelines might have loosened over time, but the airlines still kept some restrictions on hiring.

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Then I noticed the passengers in front of me were peering back over their shoulders. My stern neighbor across the aisle shot glances at me, as if I'd thrown up, or done something else even more embarrassing.

"What happened?" I asked her. "Did I pass out?"

"Yeah," she said. "A bag fell out of the luggage compartment. I didn't see it, but it must have hit you right on the head. You slumped over into the aisle. I pushed the call button, but the attendants didn't come until things smoothed out. It got pretty rough back there." She said this with a tone of vindication, as though her nervousness had been proved sound and my confidence profoundly misguided.

"Right," I replied, rubbing my head. A good-sized knot was forming just above my left ear.

The flight attendant returned with a ready-made icepack. I held it to my head, and by the time we landed, all was well. I skipped the recommended trip to the in-airport clinic, opting instead to get my luggage and go home.

It was late, that time of night when few concessions are open, and the airport is nearly empty. As a group, we trudged to baggage claim.

It was at the luggage carousel that *it* happened: the event of the day.

Given the experience that we had all just shared, there might have been a mood of celebration, frivolity, or at least camaraderie, but it was too late in the evening. Everyone remained subdued, quiet and somber.

The stillness of the airport—somewhere a vacuum was running, from the escalators came a hum and an occasional click, click, clickity—contributed to a feeling of being up and about when you ought to be inside somewhere comfortable, sleeping. People glanced at one another furtively. They exchanged a nod or a smile, when it was called for. At that time of night, it seemed, no one was there to meet any of the arrivals.

The buzzer went off, announcing the imminent arrival of our bags, and out of the corner of my eye, I saw something, someone who caught my attention. I cannot say why. Upon seeing the man, I saw nothing to demand any particular consideration. He was wearing casual clothes, casual shoes. His posture was not provocative. He was not shouting or cursing about missing luggage. He stood there, waiting for his bags like everyone else.

He had been looking at me, I thought. It had been that which had caught my attention. Then his eyes met mine.

The look in his gaze was not that of a coincidental stranger. His eyes held purpose, as if he had been scrutinizing me with specific intention, as if he knew me. I saw a calculating intelligence of depth and age beyond years. It was a novel experience, terrifying in a way, but also intriguing. Perhaps that was the worst part: I felt as though I *must* cast my eyes away, act as though I had not seen, but I was held there, frozen, perceiving and being perceived.

The instant was just that, but it was enough for me to see something that I had never before seen, something unexpected. It was unmistakable: the man was no ordinary man. Perhaps he was not a man at all. The intelligence in those eyes was *ageless*, from a time before—before reality, before *anything*—an immortal entity void of human caring, of empathy, of human existence, a being of an entirely different order. The consideration, the scrutiny I saw in those eyes was not curiosity or interest. In those eyes were cold measurement, computation and

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summation. In those eyes dawned realization, the recognition of recognition. He knew that I had seen him, that I knew.

In my ears awoke a buzzing not unlike an insect drone, and I remembered something important, something at the edge of my experience.

I had been trotting along, trying to keep up with my father as he strode down the street. My hand was in his, and from time to time, he picked me up and carried me for a few paces.

We had been in the Mission District, on what errand I couldn't say, but it had been sunny, and all around us had been energetic, cheery people. I remembered the smell of my father's aftershave and the smell of food, fresh tacos, burritos, and tostados from street vendors.

I was back on the ground, walking more slowly, when a man stepped out of an alley. Suddenly, he was right next to me. He startled me, and I let go of my father's hand. I looked up at the man. He was even more disheveled than was the norm for his ilk. He looked down at me, a small child, and said in a smoke-choked voice, "Change?"

I can imagine the scene from another's perspective, a passing adult for instance: a child staring up at a person of the streets, dirty and destitute, asking for spare change of anyone and, apparently, everyone.

"Change?" the man asked again, pleading.

For my own part, I was unable to discern the subtleties of the situation. I had been, after all, but a small child, yet I remembered that man. I remembered that his mouth gaped in an awful smile, exposing rotten teeth and gums, with ropes of saliva like black blood. A sour smell reached me in waves. He looked to be old, very old, and in his eyes was something horrible.

I remembered that man, that cadger. It was not an epiphany; I knew the memory, but I had not thought of it for a very long time.

The odd man in the airport was still staring at me. I felt as though I had been gone and had just returned, but nothing around me had changed; only the briefest instant had passed.

The odd man smiled, and in his eyes was the look of death within death, the end of the body, the mind, and the soul, barren beyond barrenness, a desolation of unappeasable wanting and unending hunger.

The man looked away quickly, and the moment ended. The buzzer announced the imminent movement of the conveyor belt. I looked away. When I turned back, the man was gone.

For a moment or two, I stood fixed, my head swiveling in search of the odd man.

It occurred to me that possibly the falling bag had given me more than just an embarrassing moment and a headache.

In time, I collected my suitcase and retreated. I glanced around once more for the odd man as I made my way out of the terminal, but he was nowhere in sight.

With some knowledge comes no gain, no illumination or satiation, for with it you can do nothing, and the questions answered only raise an insatiable curiosity of a most unhealthy sort.

Discretion pays the reward of secrets kept. I drove home alone.