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I'm going to Mexico to get laid.

I scan those seven words a couple times before drawing a line through them twice and then looping over the letters with my pen again and again, making them impossible to read. I doubt that Ms. Bradford would take the time to decipher the original writing—she *says* she considers cross-outs "the equivalent of erasures"—but it doesn't pay to take chances. Sometimes what a teacher says and does are two different things.

But I am. Going to Mexico to get laid, I mean. I'm practically eighteen. My birthday is only two days away and I've never slept with a girl, something I'm determined to change the first chance I get.

Of course, the fact that I'm flying there with my mother, my aunt and my younger brother might suggest the likelihood of that happening is slim. But I'm a person with a purpose, so that has to count for something. Even Ms. Bradford understands the importance of purpose. Every day when we walk into her Grade 12 English class, she's got the lesson objective already on the board, and the first thing we have to do is copy it at the top of a new page in our binders. It's supposed to help us focus on the

purpose of the lesson, something she learned in an educational psychology course to encourage "scaffolding," teacher-talk for making connections between this lesson and the ones before it. Personally, I think it's just a way to shut us up in the first few moments of the period, but maybe it does both. I'll give her the benefit of the doubt. After all, I owe her for letting me miss a week of her classes.

I think for a bit about how Ms. Bradford might write this objective:

Find a like-minded, compatible partner and proceed to lose one's virginity.

I've surprised myself by actually recording this in my notebook, and I begin doing the line and loop thing all over again.

"You won't get much value if you don't leave some of it on the page, Jace." This from my mother, who obviously hasn't been reading the *Maclean's* magazine she brought with her on the plane. It's open on her lap, but she hasn't turned a page in over ten minutes. I thought she was watching Lucas, but I guess I was wrong.

I continue lining and looping, wondering if she read what I wrote from across the aisle. I don't think so. My mother isn't the kind of person to invade someone else's privacy. But, again, you never really know people. My older brother, Stefan, proved that.

I clear my throat. "It's exploratory writing," I tell her. "The teacher *expects* us to cross things out. It's all about finding our voice."

She sighs, and I know her practical nature would like to comment on "voice," question the value of looking for something you can't lose in the first place, but she says nothing. I watch as she adjusts herself minutely in her seat, something she's done repeatedly during the four and a half hours we've been in the air.

It's automatic, something I doubt she's even aware she's doing. It's because of long days in the restaurant, cooking over the two stoves in the kitchen or, if things get really busy, waiting on tables out front. Her back is a wreck, although you'd never know it to look at her. Tall and slim with long black hair, she carries herself like one of those people paid to teach poise to clumsy kids. Even when things fall apart in the kitchen and orders are backed up ten tables deep, she never rushes, never loses that quiet calm and grace. She's so *not* like my father.

On the other side of her, next to the window, sits Lucas, his eyes focused on some point in front of his face. To see him like that, you'd think he was mesmerized by the movie that's playing on the monitor in front of him, but I know he isn't seeing it, isn't hearing the dialogue on the earbuds plugged into his seat. He's gone again, disappeared inside his nine-year-old head, listening to sounds or non-sounds only he can hear. Physically, he's a smaller version of our father, dark and sturdy, but that's where the similarity ends. Lucas can sit for hours without making a sound, while Pop never stops talking.

I look at my watch, still set on Atlantic Standard Time—11:19—and think of Pop at the restaurant. He'll already be gearing up for the Saturday lunch crowd, neatly printing the specials on the chalkboard while calling greetings to early customers and barking at the waitresses, Monica and Estelle, to refill the sugar bowls and the salt and pepper shakers. Always talking, talking, the air around him a tidal wave of words.

His business card reads "Evander Antonakos," but he's "Van" to my mother and their friends—not to mention the people who return to the Parthenon Grill time after time. "Repeaters are the key to success," Pop often expounds, along with a dozen other sayings he's picked up over the years, some from a restaurateurs' conference he attended a while back but most of them from my Uncle Stavros, who has two restaurants in Halifax, a third

in Sydney and plans for a fourth in the Annapolis Valley. He's one very successful businessman, my Uncle Stavros. He owns a huge house in Halifax's South End, a summer home in Chester, four vehicles (one of them a vintage Porsche Spyder 550 I'd give my left arm to drive for a day), a 36-foot sailboat that he keeps moored at the Armdale Yacht Club (and takes out maybe once every summer) and enough disposable cash on hand to pay for anything else he wants. Like this vacation the four of us are taking to the Mayan Riviera.

I turn to my left and look across the other aisle at my Aunt Mara nursing yet another vodka martini. She's my mother's sister, only a year younger, although you'd never know it to look at her. A fair amount of Stavros's disposable cash has paid for some fancy nip-and-tucking that, besides taking ten years off her, has made her one of those people that men turn and stare at when they pass her on the street. Not that she wasn't good-looking to start with—pre-Stavros family photos clearly show that—but her nose is a work of art, and there's not even the hint of a wrinkle around those dark Mediterranean eyes. A sleeker, more brittle version of my mother, Mara looks as though she should be clinging to the arm of some jet-setting rock star, instead of the stem of a nearly empty martini glass. Scratch that. It's a *newly* empty martini glass, and I can already see her reaching for the button that will bring a flight attendant carrying another full one. She's given them strict instructions to keep them coming, and they do. That's what flying First Class gets you.

A burst of raucous laughter erupts behind us, and I know its source without having to look. But I look anyway. Laying my notebook on the empty seat to my left—Stavros paid for all six seats in our row so Mara would have no one on either side of her—I turn to peer through an opening in the curtain that separates First Class from Economy. Sure enough, the hockey players are at it again, giving one of the female flight attendants a hard time. Her face is

pink and I can tell her smile is pasted on as she says something I can't hear to the jerks crammed into the Airbus's four-seat centre row and spilling over into a fifth seat across the aisle. A male flight attendant stands behind her, and his deeper voice sends snippets of his comments through the curtain: " . . . kind of behaviour is unacceptable . . ." and " . . . not be tolerated . . ." The kinds of things you'd expect to hear from a high-school principal, instead of a harried Air Canada employee in the final hour of a flight from Halifax to Cancun. But this group of five has been the centre of considerable attention all morning, even before they finished checking in at the airport.

My father dropped Mom, Lucas, Mara and me at Halifax International at five o'clock this morning, almost two hours before our flight was scheduled to leave, but there were already long lines of travellers snaking around those chrome posts in the terminal. Definitely not the best time to be taking a vacation, since it's the week in February when the universities and colleges shut down for their midwinter break—which explains why the average age of the people lined up around us was about twenty. Very few of them looked to be teenagers like me, and almost none were as young as my brother, the obvious reason being that people our age are still in school in February. But Mara told Stavros she needed to get away, and Mara gets pretty much whatever she wants, whenever she wants it. Stavros asked my father if he could spare Mom and me from the restaurant because he couldn't go himself, and he insisted on paying the whole shot, just to have someone to keep Mara company. My father couldn't really say no, not after everything my uncle has done for him. And certainly not after what my mother has been through this past year. I guess you could say we've all been through it, but it hit my mother the hardest. That's what everyone says, anyway.

We had just joined the much shorter line for Executive and First Class passengers when five guys wearing Dalhousie

University jackets came through the terminal's revolving entryway. *Burst* through is more like it, since every person in the place immediately swivelled to stare at them. Judging from the noise they were making, I expected to see twenty people storm in, but there were only the five, whooping and yukking it up like they'd just won the Super 7 Lottery. All five wore the Dalhousie Torrents' hockey insignia, and I immediately recognized the tallest member of the group: Connor MacPherson, the Torrents' right wing. MacPherson's picture had already been in the *Chronicle-Herald*'s sports section at least a dozen times that year, the last one for tying the league record for goals in a single season. With several weeks of play still left, he'd beat it easily. A world-class athlete, they said.

And, apparently, a world-class asshole.

Even after my family and I got our boarding passes, checked our bags and began making our way toward the security scanners, we could still hear all five laughing and horsing around in the Economy Class lineup. One of those airport rent-a-cops had already asked them to settle down, but I got the impression he was a huge Torrents fan because he didn't sound too threatening. I half expected him to ask MacPherson for his autograph.

Airlines must make a killing this time of year—there were restless mobs milling around each of the departure gates we passed on the way to our own. Luckily, there were a few seats still available at Gate 23, and the four of us sat down to wait the hour and a half until we boarded. Despite how early it was, a man across from me was immersed in work, his fingers flying over a Toshiba notebook open on his lap. It had one of those polished chrome casings, and the raised cover mirrored both Lucas and me perfectly. As usually happens when I see a reflection of the two of us together, I couldn't get over how different we looked. Both of us have dark complexions and wavy black hair, but Lucas is solid and compact—"built low to the ground, like me," my

father used to joke—while I take after my mother's side of the family, taller and longer-limbed. Mr. Winaut, my junior high basketball coach, was disappointed when I told him I was giving up the game at the end of our Grade 9 season to work in my father's restaurant after school. "You'd have no trouble making the senior team next year," he told me, but it didn't matter. My father needed me. He needs me now even more, which is why I gave up volleyball last year, too. But I still play soccer, both school league and summer play. People will expect you to give up everything if you let them.

We'd only been sitting there a few minutes when a girl about my age sat down beside Toshiba-guy. "I got you this," she said, handing him a Tim Horton's coffee in a lidded cup. You could tell she'd only been out of bed a short time, like the rest of us—her blond hair was pulled back in a casual ponytail—but she definitely looked better than anyone else around, with the possible exception of Mara. Despite her fair hair, her skin was darker than mine—darker, in fact, than anyone else's in the departure lounge. She'd obviously been preparing for the southern sun on a tanning bed. She reminded me a little of my girlfriend, Cynthia—*ex*-girlfriend, as of last week—which made me dislike her on the spot. Ponytail carried herself in that easy, confident way that pretty girls have when they know they're being watched. And there were definitely a lot of people watching, including two older married men sitting nearby, their eyes darting in her direction when their wives weren't looking—and when they weren't gazing at Mara, of course. Aging predators on the prowl. Guys like that make my skin crawl.

But even they don't irk me as much as guys like the five Torrents, who barrelled down the aisle of the departure lounge a half-hour later and, to the obvious dismay of several of the people on our flight, stopped at our gate. Of course, by this time all the seats near the gate were occupied, but that didn't stop

them from dropping their carry-ons near the wall of windows overlooking the tarmac and sprawling across them. All five were roaring at some comment one of them had just made, while behind them under glaring floodlights, our Air Canada Airbus 340 waited by the passenger ramp, fresh snow collecting on its wings. I'd really been looking forward to leaving winter and the restaurant behind for a week, but the prospect of five hours on a plane with that group of knuckleheads suddenly took the edge off my excitement.

Okay, I admit it. I'm not a hockey fan. Which, I know, earns me membership in a very small group of Canadians. But the whole rink scene never appealed to me: all those people screaming from the stands, goading players to drop their gloves and fight. Parents are often the worst, shrieking at their kids to beat the shit out of each other. Of course, some of my feeling about hockey probably has to do with Stefan, but mostly it's the mentality of the blood-thirsty fans. Mostly.

When the Air Canada employee at the departure gate finally announced that the passengers could begin boarding, MacPherson and his troop clambered to their feet, high-fiving each other and cheering like idiots. Several people in nearby seats rolled their eyes, and I heard Ponytail mutter, "Why don't you guys give it a rest?" Which immediately made me rethink my previous bias—Cynthia definitely would not have made a remark like that; she might have *thought* it, but she wouldn't have said it out loud. Toshiba-guy, who I assumed was Ponytail's father, immediately shushed her, but not before MacPherson replied, "Why don't you come over here and let me rest it *on you*, baby?" Followed, of course, by more whoops from the other four.

"Now see here—" Toshiba-guy began, but two uniformed men standing near the gate intervened, moving quickly to the five and speaking to them in low tones. Whatever they said had the desired effect because the group didn't say anything more.

That didn't stop MacPherson, though, from pursing his lips at Ponytail in an exaggerated air-kiss. I could hear her murmur what sounded like "Prick!" under her breath, and then the First Class passengers were called to board.

The warning the hockey players received at the departure gate worked for most of the flight, but during the last hour they've gotten considerably louder again. Some of it probably has to do with the drinks they've been knocking back ever since the flight attendants began selling them, but, whatever the reason, I'm definitely glad to be sitting in First Class. Even through the narrow opening in the curtain, I can see misery lining the faces of the passengers cramped together with them in Economy.

I look over at my mother again, but she's still staring unseeingly at the magazine on her lap. I wonder if the hockey players have made her think of Stefan, wonder what images are passing before her eyes. And then, of course, they're passing before my own.

The pilot comes over the PA announcing that we've begun our descent into Cancun, and behind me in Economy I hear someone sitting near the curtain mutter, "Thank Christ!"

The water below us becomes land and the plane dips one wing, turning toward the sun. As we begin our approach to the airport, I force myself to think of palm trees and hot sand. Lithe, tanned girls in string bikinis. And my objective, buried twice beneath heavy loops and lines in my notebook.

Anything but the images forming and reforming in my head.