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All the Old Knives

Written by Olen Steinhauer

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ALL THE OLD KNIVES

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There's a delay taking off from San Francisco— caused, I'm guessing, by an overburdened airport, but no one will tell us for sure. At times like this, sitting stalled on the tarmac, it's easy to think apocalyptically—airports at the bursting point, highways clogged with SUVs helmed by citizens in meltdown, smog alerts and gridlocked emergency rooms, corridors lined with the bleeding. When you're in California this kind of vision explodes into grandiosity, and you imagine the earth ripping apart, spilling all this overconsumption, all the cell phones and seaside villas and hopeful young starlets noisily into the sea. It almost feels like a blessing.

Or maybe it's just me. For all we know, the delay is due to a technical problem. We get over-the-speaker

apologies, "thank you for your patience," and occasional attention from already haggard SkyWest stewards who shrug in answer to questions, tossing around "sorry" as if it's the easiest word in the English language. The woman next to me fans herself with a brochure for Presidio Park; redwoods and dense foliage flash, sending a little stale air my way. She says, "Another day, another delay."

"Tell me about it."

"Someone here's bringing bad karma."

I give her a smile, not quite trusting myself to reply out loud.

It's a small plane, an Embraer turboprop that can seat thirty, though on this one there are no more than twenty, all texting whoever's waiting for them in Monterey. My neighbor takes out a phone and thumbs in her own message, something that starts with "U wont believe . . ."

I keep my phone locked away. After fifteen hours flying six thousand miles, then suffering through the mass psychosis of American passport control, the precise time of my arrival feels unimportant.

Were I younger, I might feel differently. International flights used to be a chance to rest up for the coming adventure, but at some point I lost the ability to doze in the air—in 2006, I think, after turning thirty-nine. After . . . well, after the Flughafen. Once you've watched the high-definition video of a

hundred and twenty corpses on an airplane, you know you'll never relax again in coach. So by the time I enter California I'm dry with fatigue. My fingers feel shorter and fatter, and my cheeks are alternately warm and cold; a chill sweat periodically soaks my undershirt.

I'm trying not to think too much about planes, and instead look ahead to my destination. Celia Favreau, née Harrison. She will wait, or she won't. For a few minutes, I even convince myself that I don't care. No heartbreak, because at this moment I don't have a heart to break. If she's not at the restaurant, I will simply order a dry martini and some fried shellfish, contemplate civilization's imminent collapse, then head back to the airport for an evening flight back to San Francisco. One last phone call to cover my bases, then fly back to Vienna, where I can finally collapse. I've traveled for too many years, and in far worse conditions, to be unnerved by minor inconveniences. Besides, not having to look her in the eyes would certainly make my job, and my life, a lot easier.

It's four thirty by the time we take off—a half hour late. The propellers whine outside the window as my seatmate pulls out a Kindle. I ask what she's reading, and this leads to a discussion of the virtues and deficits of the contemporary spy novel. She's halfway through an old Len Deighton, in which a hunt

for a mole leads the narrator to his own wife. "They just don't make stories like this anymore," she says wistfully. "You knew who the bad guys were back then. These days . . ."

I try to help her out. "Radical Islam?"

"Right. I mean, what kind of an enemy is that?"

An elusive one, I want to say. Again, though, I think better of it.

By the time we land an hour later, I've learned a lot about this woman. Her name is Barbara Jakes. She was raised in Seattle but moved to Monterey with her first husband, who eventually fled to L.A. with a Salinas waitress. After a few months, the waitress abandoned him for a film producer. He still calls, begging for reconciliation, but she has remarried and is now a mother of two sons—holy terrors, she calls them—and works in the health industry. She reads old thrillers in her spare time and watches NFL football with her boys. She's beginning to suspect her new husband is cheating on her. "You start to wonder," she tells me, "if maybe it's something you're doing that's making them stray."

I shake my head with authority. "Blaming the victim. Don't fall into that trap."

I haven't been in the States for a couple of years, and I've forgotten how readily Americans open up. An hour-long acquaintance, and she's already taking my advice on her emotional health. It seems ludi-

crous, but perhaps it isn't. Perhaps it's only those who don't know us at all who are able to see us most clearly. Perhaps strangers are our best friends.

In Monterey I catch a glimpse of her husband—a man whose body had been sculpted by soft office chairs, whose casual clothes are made more ridiculous by the addition of a well-worn fanny pack—and from a distance I try to assess the possibility that he's cheating on Barbara. I watch him gather her overnight bag and kiss her briefly on the lips before leading the way out to the parking lot, but I just can't see it. I wonder if Barbara is jumping to conclusions. I wonder if her experiences with her first husband have made her paranoid. I wonder—and I know how much projection is going on—if the scars of her life are beginning to fester, and if they will soon damage those closest to her.

There's only one person ahead of me at the Hertz counter, an overweight businessman, sandpaper scalp, early sixties. I don't remember him from the flight, where I was distracted by Barbara's problems and by not thinking too much about air travel. Now he's disputing the hidden charges for a hatchback—insurance, taxes, fees—and the clerk, a cheery example of California hospitality, explains everything to him as if he were a child. Finally, he stomps off with a new set of keys, lugging only a small shoulder bag. The clerk shows me an opaque smile. "Sir?"

I take a look at their available cars and request a Chevy Impala, but then ask how much for their high-end convertible, a Volvo C70. Twice as much. The clerk waits with Zen-like serenity as I deliberate and finally shrug. "The convertible."

"Yes, sir."

I sign a few papers, use an old Texas driver's license to identify myself, and put everything on my Company card. Soon I'm strolling out under a cloudy October sky, but it's warm enough for me to slip out of my jacket. I use the remote to unlock the car. A few fenders away, the overweight traveler is arguing loudly with someone on his phone as he sits in his idling hatchback, the window up so that I can't make out his words.

I take out my own phone and turn it on. Eventually it connects to AT&T, and a message bleeps. Despite five years and what I've come to do, my heart skips a beat when I see her name on the screen. Turns out I do still have a heart.

You'll be there, right? Text back either way.

I send Celia a single letter—Y—then get into the car. It starts like a dream.