

The world looks upside down from way up here. Below, the clouds form a fluffy opaque sky and, above, empty space forms a surfaceless ocean exchanging the familiar earthly horizon for a vague gradient from dark blue to darker blue. The first officer grips the control column with white knuckles but dry palms because never in his life has he felt so certain of what to do. He's spent thousands of hours training in simulators and thousands more flying this exact model of passenger aircraft. He's got a spotless record and is on track to be promoted to pilot-in-command shortly.

He recalls now the faces of his parents and younger sister and then the faces of guests over for dinner. He sees them in the blue gradient just like when you stare at a bright nothingness awhile and you get those floaters that you can never quite look at directly because they race away from wherever you're looking just as you look there. He sees them just like how your brain conjures ghosts to make up for a prolonged lack of visual stimuli. All their faces, in his mind, are generically the same. As in, they're occluded or effaced from the vision of these memories and so his mind just fills in the missing information with a hazy stock image of what a face ought to look like and he notices this and finds it kind of intriguing in a psychoanalytical-type way, this idea of seeing everybody's face but they're all the same, and he rolls his eyes at the thought of psychoanalysis as being anything more than pretentious horseshit. Or maybe they all look a bit like his own face, the mirror image of which is the only face he can vividly recall. He frustratedly shakes this train of thought away. What he remembers distinctly, though, are their voices and phrases, but only because their voices really were generic and the sentiments those voices expressed really were clichés. Even so, stilted in the way of dialogue in bad movies directed by eccentric auteurs. Strangely enough, the first officer observes, he can't remember anything about what he said himself, only what other people said and how they said it:

In, in the first officer's opinion, an annoyingly expressive but superficial voice that makes his mother sound like she's pretending to be genuinely curious, like it actually matters at all what the answer to her question is, but then, on a deeper level of social analysis, obviously doesn't give a flying fuck: 'What about the little one? He's off to college next year isn't he? Heard back yet?'

And then in an equally expressive voice that says, on one level, 'Oh! I wasn't going to bring that up, but since you asked...' and, on another level, 'I was waiting for you to bring that up': 'Oh! Well, since you asked, he's just heard back from UCSB the other day...'

'Wow, that's so exciting! Congratulations! Now, remind me which major he's doing again?'

'Oh he's not *majoring* in anything per se, he's doing the QUEST program.'

The First officer mutters: '[probably something sarcastic]'

'Well, QUEST is an exclusive, integrated *interdisciplinary experience* at UCSB that allows students to... [our first officer became distracted by his food at this point]. QUEST stands for [something stupid] which means that... [and this keeps going on for a little while].'

'Wow, that's so exci— [younger sister elbows mother] —interesting!'

'Yes, we're all very excited for him. But enough about us, where's FO going?'

'Oh, well he's going to West Lafayette, Purdue's Professional Flight Program in their School of Aviation and Transportation Technology. We're all very proud of him, our little pilot.'

'Wow, that's so [a well chosen synonym for 'exciting']!'

Our FO: '[something sarcastic, again]'

'Oh cheer up FO, being a pilot is so cool! You get to fly these modern marvels of engineering and everybody on board trusts you with their lives to take them to wherever they need to be so that they can see loved ones, start a new life in a new country, bond with their family, go on personal adventures, or even just attend a boring a conference on business, but people like you keep the world running. Plus, you get paid to travel the world!'

FO: 'Oh give me a break, all pilots do nowadays is push buttons and tick boxes.'

'Well, I'm sure there's—'

'We go through tens of thousands of hours of risk-free training in simulators that cost more money than our sad little lives are worth to the airline so that we can go several decades not needing to use 90% of that training because those engineers made the damn things so fucking foolproof that they basically fly themselves. And if I need to use my training it's probably because those goddamn engineers finally fucked up and I'm imminently going to get crushed like a sardine in a tin can thrown from the literal stratosphere. I'm the sardine and the marvel of modern fucking engineering is the tin can. And at mach .8, the ocean surface doesn't care what revolutionary composite those engineers built the fuselage out of, it just goes *krrnk* and there's nothing left but little two-dimensional pieces of composite fuselage, salty human flesh, and XXL Hawaiian shirts. And to be totally honest with you, I sometimes wish the engineers, or at least some poorly-trained maintenance worker, would fuck up for me, just once, for here I am, sitting in a tin can, bored out of my fucking mind as first officer to a captain that won't shut the fuck up about his wife's scented candle business and I've nothing to look at but the endless, horizonless, upside-down world. It's terrible, the way there's nothing overhead, and how the cruel sun bears down on me unobstructed. *This* is hell. But then even farther below, the clouds obscure what is yet more hell, the realm of everybody I've ever hated and, worse, everybody I let myself not hate. That's where the divorced English teachers, the captain's nagging wives, and the verbally duplicitous dinner guests are born (all wet and gross to awe-struck parents that dream of what this tiny, beautiful creature is going to do, how many lives saved, minds changed, and dollars made) and where they live their lives (through all its ups and downs and downs and downs: cribs, diapers, milk, tears, toys begged for, tantrums thrown, babysitters frustrated, vaccines that won't hurt one bit, daycares napped through, school, sports, knees scraped, rubbing alcohol that might sting just a lil' bit, friends made, others lost, teachers, principals, grades, cliques, acne, old toys donated or stowed away forever, standing in front of the mirror, standing in front of adults with their arms crossed, only that they're not so much taller than yourself now, crushes had, drugs consumed, that coy nervousness that always precedes the loss of virginity, lessons slept through, graduation ceremonies sat through, applications written at the last minute, rejections read the first minute they're released, acceptances celebrated, more of the same, only now you're self-aware, uncertain beginnings to a long career, remembering what you'd tell grown-ups when

they asked you what you wanted to be when you grew up, coworkers that come and go, moving up in the world but feeling for the life of you that you're sinking, find somebody that makes you feel like you can just tell them anything, tell them something you probably shouldn't have, arguments about things that you only realize don't matter until way too late, feeling depressed about things that you only realize don't matter until way too late, your own wet little child whose cries and giggles make you melt all the same, old friends reacquainted, most forgotten, new friends made, new family members gained, old ones gone to a goddamn better place, contracts signed, retirements saved for, take a few days off work to take the whole family to Hawaii, beachgoers that remind you of what you used to look like, memories reminisced, memoirs written, lines scribbled, written memoirs crumpled up and thrown away, children grown up and drifted away, herniated vertebrae diagnosed, empty houses and lawns too big to be mowed by a lawnmower too heavy to be pushed with a broken back, rumours whispered, retirements planned, dollar store farewell cards signed, tears that nobody actually understands, retirements had, existential crises overcome, grandchildren born, new continents visited, friends lost, more forgotten, dialysis sessions attended, funerals attended, mammograms and prostate exams, loved ones bedridden, a funeral attended, an emptier house, retirement home pamphlets, that sick reversion to infantile dependence, now dependent on people who know you more for your liabilities than your possibilities, chronic illnesses surrendered to, and, one day, drowned in the perpetual abyss of, etc.) and, lastly, mercifully, where they die.

He sees it now, his tombstone is adorned with an always smiling picture of him and a pretty bouquet of flowers. He dusts off the placard and moves the bouquet over to see that, and his eyes go wide with horror, that all it reads is: ET CETERA. And what's worse, he looks around and sees that there are rows and rows of tombstones, all varied in shape and colour, but he spots a few identical ones that betray him the knowledge that his must have been picked out of some catalogue of mass-produced tombstones by a loving family member, no question being upsold by a tombstone salesman who insists that this very expensive hunk of marble is the one that Mr. FO would have wanted, and that any other, less expensive hunk of marble would be a grave disservice to his honourable name. And so but then, these endless rows of sporadically matching tombstones each have their own smiling visage and bouquet obscuring what he knows somehow are those same seriffed letters.

Every time he takes off or lands from some city he's flown to and from hundreds of times already, he can see from high up the glacially slow commotion of the bustling city streets. And lo, he whispers, look at those fuckers dance ('Hm?' the captain goes. 'Nothing.'). But the last he'd let those words reverberate in his skull was hours ago departing from LAX. And he knew for a damn fact that that would be the last time. Because now, cruising at 35000 feet, the captain's gone for a tinkle (the captain's diction, not FO's) and the first officer's locked the door which can't be opened from the outside except with the key that's currently in his left pocket ever since that time some dudes walked into the cockpit and flew the plane into a building. So he throttles down and watches the number on the altimeter dwindle. The cloud ocean, at an unnoticeable rate, falls up towards him. After some time, one realizes that the cloud ocean is

imminently near, at which point it immerses the craft and, for a few moments, there is only chaotic white, but then the blue is restored and the world flips back to upside up and the horizon is there to greet him. The cloud ceiling now rises up and away at a seemingly diminishing rate and the water ocean falls up towards him. It shimmers pacifically. But that shimmer has a change of heart as it gets nearer and the captain's percussive expletives too grow louder from behind the door, banging away and begging him to open it. The mesmerizing fragments of reflected sunshine shrink and disappear pending his increasing angle incident to the normal of the surface and oh how the banging on the door becomes so terribly concussive. Because now the shifting white on the ocean surface is liquidly hostile, menacingly baring fractals of froth and impatiently lapping up at him, waiting to devour him. He hears from somewhere far but growing nearer screams for help. He can see it too, how those screams barely penetrate that composite fuselage and weakly make it several metres out before inverse squares laugh at its futile effort to break from insignificance because even the nearest sniff of coastline is thousands of kilometres away. He also hears the same immature commotion from the rear of economy class due to those kids that the flight attendant complained to him about 35000 feet ago. He sees their complexly variegated lives and histories, both tragic and uplifting, all interwoven and connected in ways that they'll never even realize. He only realizes it now too, as the altimeter pares all but one digit. He thinks of all the long-married couples toting rolling suitcases and small sunscreen-beaked children and how, no doubt, they've been through their pointless marital disagreements, and yet they still found the will to save up for and plan and be excited for a vacation that's on one level fun for the whole family, but on another level a frivolous waste of money, and but finally, on the most important level, a normal fucking thing for perfectly ordinary people to do. Because, frankly my dear First Officer, I don't give a damn that you wanted to be a special little dipshit. It would have been easier of you just to be another regular little dipshit doing regular little dipshit things with your regular little dipshit lives, which, it turns out, consists of remarkable and interesting things, only rendered dull and unspecial by the peculiar refusal of the human mind to recognize the significance of anybody's cognition but our own. And so, he knows what will happen without even hearing it, the nacelles of the high-bypass engines tease the whitecaps whose patience has been tested long enough by the intentionally gradual descent of the aircraft, but the ocean is gentle with the innocent airplane that only ever did what it was told to. It touches down softly just as intended and it's inhabitants lurch only ever so slightly forward as the water drags on the thousands of complexly-curved and once-spinning turbine blades. And he knows that a flight attendant or some heroic passenger will follow the all-capitalized instructions on the big cabin doors and, against mounting underwater pressure, force one of the doors open just as the waterline reaches about the halfway point of the now-open doors so that, with orderly efficiency, the Pacific Ocean pours in and gives a watery greeting to the absolute horror of everybody spectating in the cabin who can now feel in their stomachs the downward acceleration brought on by the sudden ingress of weight. The cargo hold in the belly, still sealed off against the water, floats up as the water-logged cabin sinks down so that the whole world inside the cabin flips upside down again and empty Coke cans and foam cups and airline-branded napkins

and noise-cancelling headphones and screaming passengers all slide to starboard, then roll along the walls and finally drop back down to the rising Pacific Ocean. Some of the overhead compartments burst open and a few suitcases as well, so now, all the passengers and crew are fighting, not only gravity, but a tangle of undergarments and Hawaiian shirts and clusters of travel-sized bottles of various scented liquids and creams. By chance, the quickest-thinking passenger was seated near the back of the plane and so there too, at the back of the plane, was the first and only door to be catastrophically opened. All the water rushed in from the tail of the plane. Consequently, the plane, through its whole barrel-rolling maneuver and accelerated sinking, also gradually pitched its nose up, giving our First Officer a beautiful view of the uninterrupted horizon through the now upside down cockpit windows. He hears sporadic crashes against the door again of various things that float as the water has quickly filled nearly the whole cabin except a lingering pocket of air right at the upraised nose of the plane. The open door is now a whole airplane-length underwater. Things that float such as suitcases and also people, clambering on top of each other for one last gasping breath of air before getting pushed under again by another wanting the same. Pounding up at the door and screaming to please for the love of God help us. The First Officer is horrified as he hears the banging on his door get louder, more desperate, and more frequent, so terribly concussive, until they reach a climax, and they subside again, and then all goes quiet. The last sad thump against the door sounded like it suppressed its own vibration the way a bird crashes into the wrong side of a window and it sticks, lifelessly. The water, ruthless and efficient, finds its way around the locked door, around the hinges and past every seam. In water that steadily soaks every part of his uniform, starting at his socks, our First Officer thinks of what could have been. What should have happened, what, he forces himself to believe, will happen: He will make an announcement over the PA that the local time is 16:20 and the weather is sunny and warm as always, to take a look outside and see the beautiful Hawaiian islands. He will land at HNL at 16:40, ahead of schedule. He will stand alongside the captain and smile at every passenger on their way out the door, some of whom thank him earnestly and shake his hand before getting pushed along by the weary line. The last passenger off will be a girl running down the aisle making airplane noises to accompany her scale model version of the one he just landed, which loops and rolls around the empty seats and her father who smiles too and gently tells her to come on, let's go, the pilots are waiting for us. So, I will walk over to the girl and the father to tell them that we're not in a hurry, take your time. The little girl looks up at me in awe and in a momentary lapse of my God-damned conscious thought, I bring one hand to my other wrist and unbuckle the simple aviator's watch that my own mother gave me before I headed off for university. She gave me that watch in the departures hall of LAX with the same affectionate expression she wore when she looked over at me in between fake laughter at dinner tables. I was her little pilot, she had said. That was what she had always said throughout my days as a little boy who dreamed too of commanding the skies. I who had also once looked up in awe at a towering pilot on a flight landed at some airport I don't remember anymore and he gave me his cap with elegantly embroidered golden wings, which of course I wore everywhere I went, even though it was so big for me that I had to keep adjusting it so I

could see anything other than the ground. And so now the father will politely refuse the gift and the girl will look at her father, also unwilling to accept it without her father's endorsement but I can tell how much it would mean to her to have it, just as something to hold on to and remind her of this dream. I insist that she take it, it's really not that expensive anyways, and I take the girl's warmly delicate hands and place it in her palm the way good people in old movies do when giving somebody something important. The father smiles too and thanks me but I don't pay him any attention because all I see is this little girl too shy to show her true excitement at the watch that, even on the tightest hole, slips down to her elbow as she holds it up to marvel. Later today, back on land, I will go to the crowded beach and stare out at that same uninterrupted horizon and I will think of home. My little sister who I know for certain will go on to make so many people laugh just as she did for me. And my mother who, even in failing health, never ceased to smile at her little pilot. A smile that says it doesn't matter what you do or how well you're doing at it, whether you're a pilot-in-command or the guy that sews the epaulets on the uniforms of the pilots-in-command, I love you all the same, that is, to the moon and back. And so too does the little pilot see the lives of all 216 people on board flash before his eyes, each only as pointless and unimportant as his own. He thinks of what was and then what could have been, the passengers that already were and also the ones that would one day become doctors or engineers or pilots, tailors or airplane maintenance workers, people who would dedicate their lives to their trade or others that have never worked a day in their life, because none of them lead such simple lives as to let their *humanity*, whatever that even meant, be defined by their occupation or lack thereof. These people that could have dedicated their lives truly to one thing and one thing only: the endless toil of engrossing themselves in things that don't matter but feel for the life of them that they do. Working, fighting, crying over something rather than nothing. And just because one foolish First Officer stopped feeling anything towards everything that didn't seem to him, in the grand scheme of things, to matter one bit, now every single one of their uniquely pointless lives, some belonging to great optimists and others to people who'd rather end it anyways and most others yet somewhere in between, are frigidly terminated. Every single passenger on board had had their own journeys that by stroke of cruel misfortune led them to this plane, each journey complete with their own mothers that loved them to the moon and back, or fathers that patiently watched them play with their model airplanes, or, even in the absence of any heartfelt affection, an enviably persistent internal motivation driven by the self-promise, the blind faith that one day things will get better. But he knows how in a few months the rescue planes and ships will give up searching for the plane whose flight recorders he had disabled what feels like long, long ago. They'll never find anything more than the few Hawaiian shirts and travel-size bottles that manage randomly to finally drift out the open door when the plane makes its long, graceful spiral to the ocean floor where it will finally come to rest, entirely intact. Everything else will remain trapped forever inside of it or else become food for the fishes. The families will never know how or why. All because one sad little dipshit decided he wanted to be special. And it crushes him to realize that his name will be immortalized, he will be special, only as one of the many lives lost aboard today's ill-fated flight, and not for anything else that might redeem him, because only

now does he wish, now that it's way too late, that he could have seen just how ordinary he really was. So perfectly ordinary, just like every other soul he wishes never boarded this plane with him. And he wishes finally that he had time to open that door to the cluster of lifeless bodies pressed against it and breathe back into them every last breath he had, only that he doesn't have many left himself, only that the water never stopped to care what he wished for. Instead, the water climbs, a chill up his spine, with the apathetic constancy of the clock. And now, it grazes his turned-blue lower lip so that the last thing nobody ever hears our First Officer say before he succumbs to the suffocating cold is:

*ah shit.*