

GOODBYE TO THE ISLAND

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MARTHA'S VINEYARD IN APRIL IS FRIGID AND WINDY; the sky, a long log of weathered driftwood. For the past two weeks—while rain spit at the window and the bells in the Old Whaling Church parsed the hours—I've been at this inn-turned-writers-retreat, curled up under the covers of a four-poster bed with a typed manuscript in my lap and a fine point pen in my hand, chipping away at a too-long novel manuscript. I've walked barefoot on the cold sand of Edgartown shore and sat huddled in the windy dunes, watching the On Time Ferry shuttle cars back and forth from Chappaquiddick. I've consumed enough Cape Cod Kettle Chips to clog an artery and seen enough pink-and-green Lilly Pulitzer shifts to last a lifetime.

I also have spent the last two weeks obsessing about how I'm going to get back home to Florida. However beautiful Martha's Vineyard is—and I could rhapsodize for hours—it's a major bitch getting on and off the island. The bus I took from Boston to Woods Hole and the ferry to Vineyard Haven ate up a good four hours of my life. But the short flight I stupidly booked from Martha's Vineyard back to Logan Airport will take all of thirty-seven minutes, on a plane that's the size of a tuna fish can.

Even in a jumbo jet cruising at 35,000 feet in the best of weather I'm a nervous, perspiration-collects-in-the-armpits flyer. So I've been sweating those thirty-seven minutes far in advance of the actual flight. I've managed to slip my fear of prop planes into every conversation I've had with my fellow residents at this writers' retreat. One writer delights in telling me a horror story about how her plane to the island hit turbulence and bucked like a wild bronco while two hysterical passengers kept crying, "We're going to die!" Another writer counsels me, "Whatever you do, don't think about John F. Kennedy, Junior." And yet another writer tells me I must look out the win-

dow of the plane—I absolutely *must*—as I will never get such gorgeous views of the island again.

Easy for her to say. She’s a poet and embraces life. I don’t know what to do with life. Most of the time I close my eyes and try to act like it doesn’t exist.

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Now it’s a spectacularly sunny day—the first I’ve seen in a fortnight—and I’m dragging my huge silver suitcase into the Departures door of the Martha’s Vineyard Airport. For reasons not worth going into, I’m three hours early. I can either sit in one of those rustic rocking chairs in the waiting area, or I can ask the woman at the counter if she’ll put me on the earlier flight.

I’m convinced that if I switch flights, one of the following will happen:

- The plane I end up on—which I am not supposed to be on—will crash. End of story.
- The plane I was *supposed* to be on will crash and I’ll spend the rest of my life boring people at cocktail parties with this close-call story.

My first indication that my plane back to the mainland must be Legosized comes when I request a seat on the 12:20 flight rather than the 2:20. The Cape Air representative asks to weigh my suitcase. Then my carry-on bag. Then my *purse*.

“What is your approximate weight?” she asks.

This is no time to lie. “125,” I say. “But over the past couple of weeks I’ve eaten a lot of French fries and lobster rolls—”

She’s big and burly and has no use for my indecisive “—so maybe 126, 127?” She issues me a boarding pass for the 12:20 flight and tells me to take a seat.

The rocking chair I select gets a real work out. I go back and forth to the bathroom four times—nervously checking out the half a dozen or so passengers calmly waiting in their own rocking chairs—until they call the flight. Security is minimal. We’re herded into yet another waiting room, this one with benches. The twenty-something girl next to me yawns. “Can’t wait to crash,” she tells her friend.

I sure can.

I gaze out at the airfield at the Hello Kitty of the aviation fleet. I swear it's so small I could put my arms around it. Surely this is a private plane, like the kind JFK Jr. flew—or tried to fly and failed—to Martha's Vineyard. But on the tail is the logo of Cape Air, a soaring bird, which suggests the airline's motto: *We're Your Wings*.

For the first time in my adult life I feel capable of making a public scene. I want to regress to the terrible twos and holler, "Me no fly on midget plane!" But I cannot pitch a fit. Homeland Security has me on camera. I don't want to end up on the evening news. I can't let myself become a YouTube sensation.

Soon two bruising guys in neon-green reflective vests and BluBlocker sunglasses unlock the gate and lead us over to the plane. They confiscate all our carry-on bags, including my tiny purse, and park them in a most unlikely spot, two compartments in the wings. I watch, horrified. My laptop is in there. What if the trap door doesn't firmly lock? What if my bag tumbles out and all 80,000 words of my novel fall to the bottom of the ocean? Worse, what if I meet the same fate? I'm fifty-three years old. Two-thirds of my life is over. But my novel isn't done yet. I haven't finished writing chapter twelve. And chapter six is still a mess.

As Mr. Bruiser-1 pushes the trap door shut, I remember that inside my purse is my survival kit for this flight: chewing gum, terry cloth eye mask, foam ear plugs. *Wait!* I want to call out. But Mr. Bruiser-2 is herding all six of us passengers onto the "aircraft," telling us to take any available seat except the row in the back.

I'm the last to board. To think that I almost told the clerk who checked me in at the counter that I prefer to be seated on the aisle. This plane has no aisle to speak of. Worse, there is no co-pilot. A scruffy-looking passenger has parked himself in the seat to the right of the pilot.

With her weathered skin and dirty blond ponytail, this lady-pilot is no JFK Junior. But can I trust her? What if her name is Tiffany? How will that look on page 2 of the *Boston Herald*? *A Cessna 402 bound from Martha's Vineyard to Logan Airport crashed, killing the pilot, Tiffany Pilot-ess, and all passengers on board . . .*

Why can't I fasten my seat belt? Answer: somebody large has been sitting in this seat before me. I yank and pull and finally get the belt to fasten firmly around my waist. Bruiser-1 (or -2) shuts the plane door. The engine roars to

life. I confirm my seat pocket holds a barf bag and ponder my strategy for making it through the next thirty-seven minutes without suffering a massive heart attack. On regular planes my strategy consists of doing Sudoku. Sudoku. And more Sudoku. I cannot freak out if I am solving for 4, penciling in the 8, eliminating down to the 1.

But here there is no Sudoku. There is only the very tiny plane slowly heading out to the very short runway, and the knowledge that within the next few minutes this piece-o-shit with the shaky wings is going to be up in the air.

I decide to close my eyes. Right now. And keep them closed for the entire flight. I shall not cheat. I shall not flutter an eyelash until, God willing, I hear the wheels bump down onto the runway at Logan.

Closing my eyes is a tried and true strategy, one consistent with my lifelong motto of *If I ignore a problem, it will go away*. Like that lump I find in my armpit. The student who keeps coming into class late. The fuzzy brown mold that keeps inching forward along the bathtub grout. On terra firma I find it very easy to close my eyes. So why not shut them at 10,000 feet? Let the poet gaze out the window to watch the Aquinnah Cliffs fade into the distance. I'll choose to imagine that scene inside my head.

I squish my eyes closed and feel the plane lift. We're up. We're off. The buzz of the engine is deafening, but the flight is amazingly smooth. That is, for the first five, ten minutes. (I'm not sure, because I don't dare peek at my watch). Then the shuddering and shaking begins. It's no longer enough just to sit in self-imposed darkness. I must chant. I must pray. Praying was how I got through my last MRI. I can safely say you haven't lived until you've spent half an hour face down in a metal tube that clangs and bangs and seems to intone *Satan, Satan, Satan*.

Silently I recite the rosary. I keep thinking we're flying over cold green water—Nantucket Sound, Cape Cod Bay? I keep thinking of JFK Junior. *John Kennedy's Plane Vanishes Off Cape Cod* was one of those headlines, like *Princess Di Killed in Car Crash*, that at first I thought was a joke. The beautiful and the rich aren't supposed to die. But when they do, I devour all the details. Thank you, *Vanity Fair*, for letting me know that JFK Junior was scheduled to pilot his wife Carolyn Bessette and her sister to Martha's Vineyard around six p.m., but the trio got delayed because Carolyn was getting a pedicure and made the nail technician redo the polish three times before she was satisfied with the color. By the time they took off from Essex Airport,

it was already dark and JFK Junior—who had little experience flying at night—may as well have been flying blind, as he grew disoriented and couldn't tell the difference between the sky and the ocean and the land. The plane went into a spiral and ended up at the bottom of the Rhode Island Sound.

As the plane I'm on continues to shudder and shake, I whisper Hail Marys to myself and wonder who dove to the bottom of the ocean and brought up the muscled body of the former president's only son, he who once was deemed America's most eligible bachelor. Which diver took JFK Jr.'s lovely, willowy bride in his arms? Did he even notice the color of her toenails? Why couldn't I remember the first name of the dead Bessette sister? Is the moral of this story as simple as this: ladies, get your nails done the night *before* you board a less-than-jumbo aircraft?

How long would it take for a tiny plane like this to corkscrew out of the sky? And which images of Martha's Vineyard would I see behind my still-closed eyes in the final seconds: the weathered wooden walkway leading down to the lighthouse, a seagull swooping over the brackish bay, bright pink cherry blossoms against a white clapboard church, a green-and-white canvas awning whipping in the wind? If these are the last thirty-seven minutes of my life, why can't I find the courage to open my eyes and take in the view?

The images flashing behind my eyes are so distracting that I don't even feel the descent. I gasp when the plane hits the runway with a decisive bang. When I open my eyes, I see the pilot's fingernails are painted orange, like a coral reef. Inside the terminal, Legal Sea Foods never looked—or smelled—so good.