

Flight 631

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There's nothing that's quite surreal like listening to music being pumped through headphones so loudly that it drowns out all other sounds. People move their mouths right next to your ear and nothing comes out. They shuffle their bags around; still nothing.

I'd venture to say that Philadelphia is an even drearier city than Pittsburgh. It's been overcast almost constantly every time I've visited it in recent memory. The smoke-spewing factories sprawl out all along the riverside next to endless swaths of concrete plains and giant Best Buys and Ikea outlets. From any of the wall-sized windows at the airport terminals, stone-grey domes and stacks sit on the horizon with motionless clouds of smoke hanging just above them.

And they say Pittsburgh is a dirty little city. Here is the place where the nation was founded, which currently has the highest crime rate in the country. Here are symbols of liberty and independence, if you can fight your way through the gang wars to see them.

I am quite sure that they only ask you to turn off electronic devices during takeoff so they feel like you're listening during the presentation of the plane's "safety features".

I was one of the last to board because I didn't check in early. The pickings were slim as far as available seats. My row-mates are nice, quite, space conservative females, and behind me sit a couple of considerate college students who are content to listen to their music and not kick the back of my seat. In front of me are several loud, bleach-blonde women who try hard to be younger than their middle-aged years, cooing and squealing over magazine advertisements. I can smell the cocktail of perfume samples from the chemical-soaked plastic pages from here.

When they dimmed the cabin lights, I reached up to switch on the tiny little harsh bulb above my seat. The girl sitting by the window on my left looks up; I switch her light on for her so she can keep reading, without an exchange of words. Her name is Melissa; I saw it printed on the boarding pass sticking out of her pocket. She rifles through magazine pages, never staying on any spread long enough to read more than a few sentences at a time. She holds her chin-length hair out of her eyes with one hand, jacket slipping off her shoulders to reveal a low-cut black tank top underneath, oblivious to my observation.

The woman to my right in the aisle seat switches on her own light. She reads a Pullman novel, probably influenced by the release of the new movie based on

his trilogy. They say things like Harry Potter and other popular children's books are good in that they are getting kids to read, even after they have been made into movies. Study guides and teaching aids are designed around them. And I suppose getting kids to read anything is a step above encouraging them to watch television all day, but when they are done with the seven-book series, will they pick up more books and move on to more classic, thought-inducing literature, or are they just going to go back to their Toonami and Cartoon Network trash?

You can tell the difference between people who love flying and ones who don't by the ones who crane their necks, gently trying not to invade a stranger's personal space, just to stare endlessly out of the windows to see the trails of light growing smaller and smaller. The ones who keep watching with utter fascination, even when the clouds cover up everything there is to see and the sky grows too dark to even see the clouds. The ones who always insist on a window seat so they can curl up against the glass unmolested.

I never understood why people preferred to sit next to the aisle. The ones who wanted to be far away from the sight of the distant ground, so they can have easier access to the bathrooms and drinks and their carry-on bags. Just relax and look out of the window and enjoy the damn flight, guys.

Flight attendants come by, offering drinks that the girl by the window and I gently decline, distributing packets of honey-roasted peanuts. I put mine in the pocket of the seat in front of me; Melissa devours all of hers with two careful fingers over the glossy pages of her magazine while still staring at the orange glow of the setting sun that we are flying towards.

I've wondered what it would do to a person's sense of time if they spent twelve hours a day flying only east.

I offer Melissa my peanuts. She seems shocked and grateful and made sure I didn't really want them, then proceeds to cram my portion into her tiny face, too. She proclaims her love for stale airline peanuts in crinkly foil wrappers.

Once in a while, I like being nice to random strangers when they're not acting like ignorant asswipes. It's not like I ever expect anything back for it, but more that I feel like decent people should be periodically rewarded for good behavior in public. And I might also like seeing nice girls happy over dumb little things, like two extra packets of peanuts from a stranger on an airplane.

There's no chance to get intimate with anybody on a short flight. I've been on fourteen hour flights where you're almost forced to talk to the people around you and get to know them, just because you'll be around the same handful of people for so long that it goes a lot easier if you can relate a little bit to the people you're sharing butt space with. It becomes easier to ask someone for their extra blanket or to thank them for passing you a cup of water when you know their name, their wife's name, their kids' names.

The taste of damp coffee grounds sits on my teeth. Airport coffee, overpriced and disgusting, forced into me earlier just because I need the caffeine to feel even remotely alert. That stale, dry feeling on my tongue that reminds me terribly of cheap cigarettes and greasy spoon diners. Those were nights I left behind after graduating high school. I still keep half a pack of Pall Malls in my desk out of nostalgia, and end up burning a couple of sticks a few times a year during

periods of extreme stress. The tobacco doesn't help to ease the tension; it's just the taste on my tongue that reminds me of simpler times. When friends were still young and ignorant and petty, still alive enough to love freely and fearlessly, when we were all indestructible and uncaring enough about any of the real issues of the world. Dumb teenager crap.

Melissa asks me if I know whether or not we're landing soon. She curls up against the window around a grey sweater, watching the lights of Pittsburgh grow closer as the ground rushes up to meet us. We fold up our trays and watch attentively, but the runway always sneaks up on us before we realize it, and then we're on the ground and rolling slowly up to the gate.