



NAKED CLOUDS OUT THE PLANE WINDOW

## CHAPTER 3

### FLYING NUDE

Gupta and I luxuriated with hedonistic satisfaction in first class where neither had been before except in passing. What cushy seats with lengthy legroom, shoulder space, extra attention from the cutest stewardess, tasty snacks, first class booze—though we weren't partaking. He said it was too early for him and for some reason I don't like to drink or smoke on planes. Maybe it's the altitude or the dry air.

I told Gupta about a friend from Mill Valley who was bumped up to first class. He mentioned to the gentleman sitting next to him how comfortable it was and the gent said, yeah it was good, but nothing compared to Air Force 2. "Air Force 2?" my friend replied trying to figure out what the man meant. "Yes, I used to be Vice President of the United States. My name's Spiro Agnew." He said he thought the guy looked familiar.

"I'll bet our airlines just give you bigger peanuts with first

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class,” I said. “Singapore Airlines is the best even without first class, but with first class it’s in the stratosphere.”

“Do planes fly that high?” Gupta asked.

“This one is on its way out of the earth’s gravitational field—on the escalator to paradise.”

“You speak truth,” he said smiling at the stewardess. “Management obviously doesn’t have to worry about affirmative action in their hiring.”

“Hey Gupta,” I said, “Do you think if I write a book about Australia and put in some really good plugs for Singapore Airlines, that they might pay me?”

“Can you do that?”

“I don’t know. Never heard of it. They have product placement in movies.”

“Do the movies get paid?”

“I don’t know. I wonder.”

“Isn’t that selling out?”

“Heaven forbid! Are you kidding? I’m dying to sell out. Please let me have a chance to sell out—and for a product I really like. Hmm. Maybe I should do a whole book based on product placement. I’ll start making a list of what I could stand behind.” I pulled out a little notebook from my shirt pocket and wrote “Products to Place” at the top of a fresh page and then “Singapore Airlines.”

Gupta watched on. “Is this going to be another neurotic thing?”

“What do you mean, *another*?”

“Like the way you calculate exchange rates and stuff like that.”

“If there’s fun or money in it,” I said, “I’ll do it.”

“You seem to have more of the former.”

“True. Got to put more into the money thing. Starting with—product placement.”

“I think you’ve got to get really famous before anyone’s going to pay you to endorse their products,” he said.

“You don’t have to be famous to sell advertising space. Only to sell a product based on who you are. I’m not talking

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about that. Maybe they'd pay based on a flat fee plus sale of the books."

"Well, try it, but I doubt if there's going to be much of anything happening on this trip that would be interesting enough to write about."

"Of course. Just speculating. I don't really plan to write anything anyway—pretend I'm going to, pretend that any publisher would be interested to begin with, pretend I have big contracts awaiting while bumping around as clueless as Jacques Tati."

"Poor Jacques. Poor you. Truly tragic figures."

My god, I've only known him a couple of days and already he's ridiculing me like one of my sons. Come to think of it, he's just Kelly's age.

We flew on in first class splendor. Gupta kept flirting with our stewardess. She lives in Singapore and wants to live in America. He could help with that. I could see Gupta trying to get the nerve to ask her out, knowing full well he's much more attractive in these seats than he'd be further back. I didn't blame him. All the stewardesses seem to come out of the same tantalizing mold, but hers, I told Gupta, must be the new mold—she's beyond gorgeous. Gupta wasn't paying attention to me—even though I had some excellent observations to make. She'd absorbed him.

No matter. I love to fly. I like to look out the windows but I also enjoy thinking about being way up shooting forward this fast. I turn it into a meditation, shut my eyes, and cruise along into vastness. I only meditate this way while cruising, not when going up or down. Especially not when waiting to take off—then I think about airplanes. I don't believe they're going to get off the ground.

How do planes do it? I certainly understand people who said we'd never fly. I still think that. I look out at the plane wing while we're taxiing and think, nope, it'll never work. It's impossible. It's too heavy and there's all of us and our luggage. And if it does take off, it will only go up for a few seconds and hover in space like cartoon characters do when

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they run off the edge of cliffs and then, after the shocking realization thin air is not going to hold us up, we will drop to the hard ground where we explode.

At times such as this I turn to a higher power. I ask myself, "What would syndicated Miami Herald humor columnist Dave Barry do?" I immediately know. He'd go, "Ha ha! Those nutty airline people are just pulling a practical joke on us! They'll drive this hunk of metal that's the size of the Sears Tower around a while and go through the safety procedures with the passengers and rev up the engines while winking at each other and trying to hold back giggles and then at the last moment go, 'Just kidding!'"

But Singapore Airlines took it further than that. As I was thrust back in my seat and saw the ground receding that morning, I told myself they've really gone to extremes with this hoax by creating a long outdoor stage where everything is built gradually smaller and smaller so it looks like it's getting further away but is actually just right down there thirty feet or so with the plane wheels still touching the ground. I remember Clay looking out of the window on a flight years earlier and, in his wee toddler voice, remarking at how small the houses were. He understood.

The stewardess is busy with other passengers so Gupta will talk to me again.

"Is it love?" I said.

"She's so beautiful and friendly. But I just got over a very emotional relationship and am more interested in something superficial."

"It doesn't have to be superficial to not be out-of-control, insane hyper-stupid love."

"Sounds like you've been there."

"Indeed. I don't want to go crazy like that—not now anyway. A little comfortable affection without the mania would be fine."

"And some hot monkey love," he added.

"Or sweet potato love."

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“Is that Zen?”

“I think even romantic love is an expression of our ceaseless quest to awaken to our true nature.”

“You mean that sex is a substitute for religion? I thought it was the other way around.”

“Nope.”

The conversation moved on past our mutual desire not to become endorphin slaves. He said one of the things he’s looking forward to in Australia is testing the Coriolis Effect, which is the way water swirls in opposite directions in the Northern and Southern Hemispheres. He had a friend who saw a demonstration right at the line of the equator in Ecuador. A woman poured water into a container being held by another. On one side of the line (painted on the floor) it swirled one way and on the other side of the line it turned the other. “Must test it,” he said. He went to the airplane restroom and reported the toilet and sink both had so much suction that the water didn’t cooperate with his examination. He was sure all drains in the Southern Hemisphere went clockwise.

Moving on from the Coriolis Effect, we agreed we had the absolute best type of movie viewing setup with our own screen with many choices and good sound. Airplane movies are usually hard to see and harder to hear. Not with this setup. I’d spent a little time watching a Discovery Channel show on roller coasters. Gupta said he’d like to have a choice of air disaster films like *The High and The Mighty*.

“That one really got to me as a kid,” I said, “wondering if they’re going to make it to Hawaii after they got beyond the point of no return—and what will happen to the little boy who’s asleep.”

“I liked another John Wayne film I saw named *Island in the Sky* where they crash in remote Canadian wilderness,” he said.

“Don’t know that one. *Airplane!* and of course the sequel. So loony. Almost everyone poisoned so only the nut case can fly it.”

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"*Twilight Zone*," said Gupta getting animated, "where the guy played by John Lithgow has the extreme fear of flying and the gnarly gremlin is tearing out wires from the plane engine!"

"Yeah that was great. But the best airplane crash scene in a movie that I know of is *Fearless*. They feed it to you little by little. Seemed realistic as heck."

"Totally—I was chilled to the bone."

"Stop! Please! Please stop!" came from behind us.

We turned to look. Oops. We were freaking out the poor woman there. "Sorry," said Gupta.

"Excuse us," I said. "I'm sure everything's alright on this flight."

"I don't know," said Gupta stretching up and craning his neck to look out her window. "Don't you think the smoke coming out of that jet is a little suspicious?"

"Stop it!" she said.

"That was cruel," I said, nobly coming to her defense. "Sorry ma'am. I won't let him get out of hand again."

She returned to her magazine and then looked up at me and shook her head as if to say, "Naughty boys."

"Are you going to forgive us?" I asked.

"Okay. But that was horrible. Don't do it again."

"Sorry. Sorry. Sorry. It was his fault. He made me do it." That made her laugh.

She's cute and by herself so I went around and talked to her. That's another good thing about first class. I can get out without bothering Gupta. Our neighbor is from Kuala Lumpur where we stopped on the way—capital of Malaysia. They speak a lot of English in KL, as it's called, just like in Singapore—former Commonwealth states. She got bumped up to first class. She said she always asks and every now and then it works. She was on her way to Perth to see her sister and brother-in-law and to buy dolls to put in her collection or sell on the Internet. She looked like a doll. Cute little woman. I could feel the juices flowing in me—or whatever it is that happens. But she was way too straight for me. She had four

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sisters, all married. She was thinking about marriage already. I was just thinking about how nice she'd be to cuddle up to. But it was just thinking. There was nothing there but an interesting conversation.

It's not just she who has to be on guard though. This is how men get trapped too. It's like men and women just say hello and if the chemistry is right, they start spinning webs to catch themselves in. Thank gosh it almost never works but sometimes—we're caught! And it all starts from the first glance. It might even be over after the first glance. I imagine all those deluding chemicals swirling—clockwise in the Southern Hemisphere I suppose.

I asked if she's Muslim but she's not—she's Catholic.

"Ah! I've got a Catholic book," I said and went back to get my shoulder bag. I got out a book on Pseudo Dionysius and asked if she'd ever heard of him. Nope. I told her he's a third century monk named Dionysius, or a fifth century monk who signed that name, not to be confused with the god of wine, Dionysus. Almost the same—it's what the names Denise and Dennis came from. She nodded trying to keep up.

"Okay—so he's phony Dennis right? Pseudo Dionysius. He's possibly the most influential writer on mystical Christianity, a big influence on Meister Eckhart." I can see that doesn't ring a bell. "That's okay," I told her. "Eckhart fell out of favor—the Jesuits I mean Franciscans had it out for him."

"Jesuits can be mean," she said. "I know—I went to a school where they taught."

"I've heard that from others all my life. Meister Eckhart's quoted in the movie *Jacob's Ladder*." She wasn't familiar with it. "Good movie," I said. "Pseudo Dionysius is quoted by Saint Thomas Aquinas—I swear I read—1300 times."

"Oh—he's one of the great Saints."

"There we go. And Pseudo Dionysius taught him everything he knew—or a lot of it. Here, let me read you some." She was amenable.

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I read her a paragraph of stuff on the first cause, a term he often used instead of god and he listed everything it wasn't, which was everything people thought god was. It's not truth, it's not power, not this, not that, and on and on.

"Then what is it, what is god to him?" she asked with concern.

"Beyond conceptual thinking," I said. "Beyond any definition or attribute. Here—he says beyond any affirmation or denial."

"Hmmm."

"I love this guy," I said, "He says to his fellow monk Timothy not to bother to try to share this lofty teaching with people who can't imagine anything beyond instances of individual being. What do you think of that?"

"That's very interesting. What does it mean to you?"

"That the supreme being is not a being, that the truth about you and me and god and Jesus is not bound by the constraints of this realm of separate being—of being beings."

"They didn't teach me that."

"Didn't they teach you it's a mystery?"

"Yes."

"Well that covers everything they don't bring up."

Now she wants the book. Nope—I gave her the basic info so she could buy it, suggesting she order it from Many Rivers Books and Tea in Sebastopol, California, where I got mine. I point to the address on the bookmark—130 S. Main Street, Suite 101, Sebastopol, CA 95472.

"Just say you want the book on Pseudo Dionysius and tell 'em I sent you."

Gave her the bookmark and she wrote the name of the book and my name on it. Another convert. Before I went back to my seat I got her name, Mai, and sister's phone number in Perth.

The plane flies on. I hear Sonny and Cher in my memory bank.



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Gupta was asleep. I settled back in my seat and ruminated on Australia, which I knew nothing about except what I'd learned from Francine, Tasmanian John, Mr. C. Dundee, and rumor. It's the rumors that had stuck. I'd always had a dread of going down under because such a point had been made of all the lethal critters there. That guy from Ohio in Singapore, the one who took the photo of the punk kids, told me Australia's got something like ten of the twelve most poisonous beings on earth including a lethal spider so aggressive it's been said to bite through shoe leather to plunge its terminator venom into toey flesh.

I was sure Francine would do her best to protect me, but still I trembled with distress as I closed my eyes, and, falling into light slumber, visualized myself in a serene park with kangaroos, koalas, emus, sea gulls flying over a lazy beach. That worked for about one minute and then I find myself floating into a long hall under a sign, a sign that reads, "Welcome to Australia, A Great Place to Die," which features a diorama of everything there that could poison or chew on me. Then a sinister looking large brown snake starts crawling out from the display. Brilliantly colored, variously shaped reptiles, spiders, crocodiles, sadistically grinning kangaroos with fanged teeth and spikes on their swinging fists and barbs on their tails, threatening emus, and fantasy critters that writhe and slither their way toward me as I back nervously into the shark-infested sea, the floor of which is covered with fatal stone fish, the waters crowded with bright ribboned poisonous turkey fish, deadly sea snakes inching up to my pinkies, and the streamers of the super-toxic box jellyfish with their minuscule barbs I am unprotected from by the fact I'd forgotten to don pantyhose on my legs, arms, and head, which I had heard about from Tasmanian John who was once surrounded on three sides by these cold wet insta-killers. Luckily the fourth side was open. I swim that way with him to safety.

I was back in my seat. Barely awake. Gupta was still asleep. The nice tiny woman behind me was reading peace-

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fully. I sat up and followed breathing in and out, in and out. In stages, dream dangers were gone, my companions were gone, the airplane was gone, my clothes were gone, my body was gone. I was gone. Breath alone nakedly hurled ahead 35,000 feet up at 550 miles per hour.