

“Window Seat”

by Elliot Manches

As I gazed at the ocean below, the obese man sitting beside me heaved into a regulation sick bag. The nauseous hulk filled a thin beige suit with a white shirt open at the collar. His fair hair was lank and greasy, and his fringe had flopped forward over his eyes, so that with the bag held over his mouth his face was almost entirely obscured.

I looked on helplessly as he coughed and spat. It occurred to me to pull down the window shutter, and I did so quietly. Turning back, I was startled to find the fellow staring up. He was still hunched over, his wide back curved, immensely solid. Yet sitting there clutching his discreet white paper bag with a look of exhaustion and embarrassment, he looked more like an overgrown schoolboy to me: all flustered, pathetically protecting his stash of sweets from a gang of taunting louts.

“Thank you,” he uttered weakly, and for a moment I was struck by the image that we were indeed in a playground, I having just disengaged a confrontation over some confectionery treasure.

“Would you like some water?” I asked, looking down the aisle. He began to straighten his hair and wiped his mouth.

“Yes. Water would be good.”

I called the attention of a stewardess. She came over immediately, and then promptly disappeared, tightly holding the top of the sick bag between her thumb and forefinger, at arm’s length. My neighbour stuck out a fat hand with thick fingers.

“I’m Frederick,” he declared.

As polite as he was, I had little inclination to touch the man. But his log-like limb hung in the air and the engine rumbled onwards, so I reluctantly took his hand in mine and shook it. His palm was clammy.

The stewardess returned holding a transparent plastic cup filled with water. She pulled down the tray and placed the cup down. It wouldn't have surprised me if she were to have fastened a bib round Frederick too. She spread her blood-red lips across her orange face and smiled before rushing off to aid another ailing passenger.

"I don't know what it is," Frederick began, staring at the cup, "but even though they might look funny, I'd still love to give 'em one!"

I didn't know what to say. He glanced at me probingly and grinned. I felt uncomfortable.

"I mean," he continued carefully, "you've got to admit, she was no princess, but you'd love show her a bit of the old hokey-pokey, eh!? Mile High Club right?"

He was now looking at me. I turned to the window, hoping to break it off there. I had no desire to talk with the man, and to be honest, I found him offensive in both demeanour and character. I had suffered his unfortunate display of prolonged puking, and now I was being subjected to the inside of his insidious mind. I wasn't interested. But the terrible thing was: I knew exactly what he meant.

"Why is that, do you think?" Frederick asked suddenly, fixing his beady eyes on me.

"Why is what?" I couldn't help myself.

"Why is it that we want to pork these women?" he motioned with his hand down the aisle. Two stewardesses rolled a trolley past oblivious. One bent over to pick something up off the floor. Her skirt tightened.

"Don't include me in your lecherous observations," I said.

"You aren't queer, are you?" Frederick exclaimed a little too loudly.

“No, but-”

“Even if you were, it wouldn’t make any difference. Be the same only you’d be after the stewards instead. Don’t tell me I’m wrong.” He pulled back his lips to smile and revealed a perfect set of small yellow teeth. I clenched my jaw. I’m sure my face was red.

“No inhibition,” I answered. It just slipped out under my breath.

“Ey?” Frederick squinted. I hesitated.

“When travelling,” I began, in disbelief, “when travelling, you’re not around long enough to face the consequences of your actions. That means you can let yourself go and do pretty much what you like.” Frederick frowned, I continued: “and the main desire that must usually be inhibited, despite being exploited, is the libido.” Surely that would put an end to things?

“That’s all very interesting and might explain why you want to poke your whatsit into these girls, but you know what I think?” I didn’t respond, “I think I only fancy them because I reckon there’s a slim chance they’d let me-”

“For heaven’s sake!”

“Yeah.. That’s exactly how imagine it to be.. heavenly”.

“Hah!” I said.

“What’s so funny?”

“This is ridiculous!”

“This is true.”

“I don’t want to hear it.”

“You never do.”

“What? What do you mean by that? You don’t even know me. And you certainly don’t know these women well enough to assume anything like what you’ve been suggesting!”

Frederick was silent. He studied my face for a moment and then slumped over, gazing between his knees. His shoes were remarkably well shined. Good quality black leather, though rather plain. Perhaps my last outburst was excessive. His cheeks twitched.

I thought he was about to throw up again. I could imagine orange chunks sliding off his expensive footwear, yellow liquid filling the insides, soaked up by his white socks. I nearly put my hand on the poor chap’s back, but thought better of it.

Then, in convulsions, he began to retch. My eyes almost popped out of my head. Then it stopped, and seconds later Frederick belched loudly. He began to laugh. He grew hysterical. His pitch fluctuated from the deep guffaw of a hearty old man to the shrilly shriek of an over-excited young girl. Evidently my fated companion had gone insane.

I suddenly felt very tired and quite dizzy, and the company was becoming all too much. I couldn’t be dealing with such a character. So I tried to stand up.

“NO!” Frederick boomed, and lashed out with a clumsy arm. He struck me across the chest and I fell back into my seat. I was stunned. Frederick stopped laughing.

“You’re mad!” I shouted.

“You’re morose,” he replied.

“Don’t start.”

“And uncomfortable,” he said.

“Of course I’m bloody uncomfortable; I’m trapped like a battery hen, being beaten up by some lunatic bumpkin!”

“I haven’t beaten you up.”

“You bloody hit me!”

“You’re imagining things.”

“What?”

“You got up and fell down.”

“You blocked me.”

“You hate confrontation, don’t you?”

“No-one likes confrontation.”

“Not true.”

“Let me go!”

“You’re free to leave.”

I stood up slowly, brushed myself down and turned to pass. Removing the cup without intervention, I lifted the tray back. But as Frederick sat there with his truncated legs bent at the knee and pressed up against the seat in front, it was impossible from me to squeeze by this immovable mountain.

I asked politely if he could make a little room. Frederick turned his legs and immense torso to one side, but this freed up a negligible slither of space and there was still no way I could scrape past.

“Perhaps you could stand up?” I asked.

“No thank you,” he replied.

“Then I’ll have to climb over you.”

“Whatever.” He sighed impassively.

I stood up onto my seat. Then, stretching one hand on top of the seat in front, and the other on top of my own, I stepped up onto the armrest and began to make my great escape.

As I looked round and down the aisle, I noticed that I had drawn the attention of countless rows of suspicious eyes. I felt dizzy than ever, and now quite shaky. I took a gulp and resolved to venture on.

“Oi! Sit down!” shouted some yuppie six rows back. A child pointed behind me and I looked back. Evidently I was blocking the in-flight film.

“Come on!” yelled another saboteur.

The stewardess was making her way down the aisle. Frederick began to laugh. Standing over him I could feel his breath against my crotch. The passengers’ cries continued:

“What’s he doing up there!”

“Get out of the way!”

“Idiot!”

It was all too much. I collapsed backwards into my seat.

“Tosser,” a lady said. Frederick was roaring.

“I’m calling the stewardess!” I said.

“Good, I fancy a shag!” The savage was now gasping with laughter. I pressed the overhead call button, slumped back and folded my arms. Moments later the stewardess arrived.

“Yes?” she asked sweetly with a voice like chocolate, “How can I help you gentlemen?”

The stewardess stretched her red lips to smile again, flashing her white teeth, and batted her powder-blue eyelids and long artificial lashes over her clear blue eyes. The recycled air was choking. She folded her arms tightly, propping up her breasts. I began to tremble.

Attempting to explain myself, all I could do was form and un-form an ‘O’ shape with my mouth.

“This m..man..” I muttered.

Frederick shot me an inquisitive look, before staring at the stewardess as she leaned forward to catch whatever I was about to say. He grinned. I continued.

“This man.. he..” my chest tightened, I glanced at Frederick.

The two eyeballing heads were a foot away, and the seat in front was surely leant so far back as to be resting against my nose. My head was thumping.

“He... would like.. another glass of water.” My voice seemed absurdly high. Frederick bit his top lip.

“Certainly sir.”

The stewardess picked up the glass and headed toward the kitchen area. I caught myself watching her when I noticed Frederick looking at me.

“Stop it!” I said.

“Stop what?”

“You can’t keep me prisoner here. Let me out!”

“We’ve been through this before - I’m not keeping you anywhere.”

“You won’t move out of the way!”

“You won’t climb over me.”

“You’re being unreasonable!”

“*You’re* being intolerant.”

“This is absurd!”

“This is amusing.”

“You’re mad!”

“You’re weak.”

“Shut up, shut up, shut up!”

Frederick rolled his eyes and rested his head back. He pulled a face and started to watch the film without listening to the headphones. A steward came by with a fresh cup of water.

“We’re nearing the end,” Frederick said, “but I’ve seen this before.” I stared at my shoes. Space had returned, everything was a world away.

“Do you think,” Frederick said, “that stories are invented entirely in the mind of the writer, or that they exist independently somewhere out there, waiting to be come across?” There was no trace of irony in his voice. Again Frederick had surprised me. And again, I really was not interested.

“I honestly don’t know.” I said wearily.

“I think it’s a bit of both,” he said, “that the story itself exists on its own, but the way in which it is told is the invention of the writer. And you know what?” he continued, “I reckon some people learn how to write but have

nothing to say, whilst some people have things to tell, but don't know how to tell them."

"Really?" I wanted to sleep. Frederick went on.

"Perhaps this is just a story. A short story."

"Perhaps," I spoke without thinking. My eyes were sore and closing.

"Yeah, this could be a story about the two of us. What do you reckon the author's like. A he or a she? Illiterate or over-read? Modest beginner or pretentious prat?"

I didn't respond. He continued: "Hey, who's the subject of our story? Me or you? I suppose it could be neither, could be in the third person, but let's just say it's not, it's in the first. Who's the 'I'? Me or you?"

"I don't care. Leave me alone!"

"Ah, so it's you! You are the first person! The narrator of our story! Of course, there is so much more you could say about me, than I could about you. Or more for the regular reader to laugh at as you paint your linguistic portrait of the fat guy who talked too much and puked his guts out, as the poor old storyteller sat helplessly stuck on a plane. And what would I say about you, if I were to tell?"

This new show of articulation was beginning to alarm me. He continued:

"I know you. You pathetic hamburger! That's you! You boring, tasteless, skinny homogenised offal-scraping! No nutritional value! I'm shouting now readers! You're all the same; you sell yourself to an unenlightened public who can't afford any better. You exploit everyone you can in your middle-class, male-orientated, make-belief society. Your narrator's looking scared now readers. He thinks I'm a lunatic and he doesn't understand a word I'm saying. Do you?"

"Well-

“What do you do for a living?”

“I-”

“Don’t tell me, I know. You get paid a lot to do very little. Mostly you travel around and eat at fancy restaurants with other privileged high-earners that don’t do much. Am I right?”

“I work nine hours a day!” I protested.

“You don’t work for nine hours. You might spend that time in your clean office gloating at the pretty young girls you surround yourself with, or chatting about nothing on the telephone to arrange your next dinner arrangement. But you don’t work. You don’t have to scrub floors all day or stack endless shelves, or run about taking orders from snotty customers in congested restaurants, or spend hours in the freezing cold inhaling fumes while fixing burst pipes. You don’t spend your time stitching expensive shoes together in dark airless noisy factories.”

“I’ve done some of those jobs!”

“You may have done some of them for a bit, but not for long. Not for life!”

“Well that’s because I studied hard so I wouldn’t have to do that kind of work!”

“Some people can’t afford the luxury of a university education. And some people have to leave home when they’re still at school, and then drop out just to feed themselves. But there’s no work for the underprivileged- ”

“Why are you telling me this?” I cried, “I know it already! I can’t help being more fortunate than other people.” Frederick hesitated for a moment.

“I thought I’d make your story more political,” he said.

“What story?” I exclaimed.

“LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, PLEASE FASTEN YOUR SEAT-BELTS. WE WILL BE LANDING SHORTLY”.

“The story you are telling,” Frederick added, “it seems too bourgeois.”

I began to feel nauseous again. Frederick continued:

“Many stories,” he said, “especially those on screen, are written by overeducated but unenlightened people with too much time on their hands.”

“Enough!” I said.

“They know nothing outside of their limited experiences,” he went on, “which are pretty much all the same. Yet, like so many self-proclaimed artists, some have a desperate urge to rise above mediocrity. They must be different, be a genius of one kind or another. But they’re all the same. That’s why their stories sell to the rest of the neurotic middle-class, reassuring them of the value of their own mundane lives. And that’s why they sell to the working class, as the only possible aspirations peddled to them-”

“Please stop!” I begged.

“I’m not ready to stop,” he sneered. “it doesn’t seem like the right place for the story to finish. The ending should always have a link with the start. But where did this story being? What’s the first memory you have?” He looked at me wildly.

“I don’t know!” I cried.

“I’ll tell you mine. It’s a dream. I was very young. I remember being in a valley that began to flood with a sea of red. Everyone and everything was being flipped into the air and washed away. I felt a rush of weightlessness and then a thud. I had woken up on the floor having fallen out of bed. The

sheets were pulled over me. When I realised what had happened, I pulled back the covers to see five white luminous figures in the dark brushing their teeth.” He paused for a moment, watching me.

“I was terrified and crawled to the bedroom door,” he continued, “but I couldn’t reach the handle and collapsed, sobbing in a heap, waiting for help. When my father came in to see what all the commotion was about, the figures disappeared in the light. He picked me up and let me sleep between him and my mother. I threw up during the night.”

Frederick was apparently now trying to bore me to death. I had no idea what he was talking about and I felt terrible. I pulled up the shutter and looked out of the window. The ground was coming closer. I could easily make out the hubbub of street-life below. There were flutters in the pit of my stomach. Frederick went on regardless.

“People don’t see ghosts anymore. They’ve taught themselves not to see anything. I’m sure we’d all be great artists and athletes and psychics if we were only raised the right way. Given love and encouragement. There’s nothing supernatural about being psychic,” he added. I kept quiet. “It should be the most natural thing. Everything is there to be perceived. It’s all One. At the moment we easily predict certain things, but not others. That’s only because we don’t see straight. Everything’s a story, with its own inner logic that can be intuited, just like the ending of this story-”

“WHAT IS WRONG WITH YOU?” I turned to him in a flash of indignation.

“There’s nothing wrong with me,” Frederick answered calmly, “just injecting a metaphysical aspect to your story.”

“Look, I don’t want you to inject anything anywhere. Please stop going on. I’m really not feeling very well!”

At that moment the plane met the runway with a warm thud. I could feel the tarmac rumbling past under our feet.

“We’re only moments from the end now,” Frederick said. I was exasperated. We sat in silence. Things were starting to spin.

The plane slowed down and soon ground to a halt. I could see the stairs being wheeled to the hatch. Seat-belts began clicking. Despite requests from the cabin staff to remain seated, people wrenched open the overhead compartments to rescue their hand luggage and fight for a place in the exit queue. Frederick didn’t move. I was still trapped. I kept scratching my fingers and flicking my seat-belt buckle. I sat on my hands, only to start stretching my toes and tapping my feet. *He* was utterly still, gazing straight ahead with a precocious smile on his fat face. The hatch opened.

Finally the queue moved forward. Frederick got up to join at the end, with me right behind. I wished him a thousand miles away. As we reached the exit I saw our stewardess standing by, ushering passengers out. She looked down at me and I blushed. The thought struck that Frederick might use the opportunity to do something outrageous. But I didn’t care anymore. I just wanted to be free again. I pushed past him and rushed forward.

I was now at the door. The stewardess said something like: “I hope you enjoyed your trip.” I smiled wryly and hurried through the hatch onto the staircase.

Before I took two steps, the bright Sun blasted my eyes and the sweltering heat knocked me off my feet. I grabbed hold of the railing on my way down, and swung back up against it. Steadying myself, I gasped for breath. But the humid air was heavy and stank of gasoline. It filled my lungs with nausea and I gagged violently. As I leant over the railing my cheeks twitched and my mouth opened, ejecting a bucket of vomit onto the runway below. I stopped to belch, and then threw up again. My knees buckled, but the stewardess rushed forward to catch me before I hit the floor.

“Thank you,” I said weakly. Then I threw up all over her. She tried to give me a compassionate smile with her sick-spattered painted face, but she

jumped suddenly and glanced round, rubbing her behind. Frederick walked past. He darted back to wink at us, then carried on down the steps, howling with laughter.

“The End!” he roared, and disappeared from sight.
