

Connection

A man on my flight is named Gabriel; I am Gabriella. As we wait in a Mexico City airport terminal, he tells me that in his dream two nights before he conjured an earthquake. His sister from Oaxaca called to tell him how it rattled the ceiling, shook the glasses to the floor. “These things always happen,” he tells me. “In my dreams, people die, then the next day, it comes true.”

We’re the messengers, I tell him. Our names assigned us an identity long before we could choose. We aren’t always aware of what our communication means, or why we give it, but we do.

The long white terminal hallways extend forever. Video boards flash gates and times that may or may not be correct. The two messengers, he and I, run a relay between 28, 25, 21, 19 to find our connection, flight 3970.

He has a kinship with animals, he says. He finds them when they die. His mare, she was 22, he fed her in the morning, then came home from school to find her laying on her side in the warm sun. He put his backpack down, peered into the yard. She was still, her lungs absent of rising or falling. He stood there, watching her, not wanting to disturb the quiet. The list of animals goes on—dogs, pigs, deer, geese. The ages become more unrealistic. “I found the chickens, too, upside down, hanging by a leg,” he says. “They were 35.”

I tell him about my dog, so attuned to me that she anticipates my moods before they happen. She slinks to her bed, tail between her legs, and then poof, I’m angry, gnashing my teeth, slamming dishes in the dishwasher.

Gabriel likes my teeth. “This is why,” he says, popping his left front tooth out with this tongue. “Oh!” I say. The tooth is attached to a flesh-tinted retainer with hidden wires. He hates

taking it out to eat. In his gum, in the place where the root should be, is a metal circle, a magnet. In a few months, once the flesh has healed, they'll replace the magnet with an implant and, for the first time since he was 12, he'll have a front tooth.

I have fake teeth too, I say. My finger traces four. I'm missing one of two lateral incisors that guard my top big teeth. The teeth on either side of the missing incisor were drilled down to nubs of nerves when I was 17 and I had a gaping hole in my mouth. The other incisor is pitifully small and had to be capped. When I was in high school, I also had a retainer with a fake tooth. Sometimes I didn't take it out to eat. It was easier than explaining.

"Damn bullies," he says. "They always find something to pick on."

We finally find the right gate, with an endless stream of people waiting. On the runway, a packed shuttle motors us to our plane.

As we clutch gray plastic straps suspended from the bus's ceiling, he tells me about his friend who was shot during a trip to Orlando. "I saw a blue light," he says, "then my friend hit the ground." How did it happen? I ask. He leans into my ear, so close I take a step back. "These fucking racists," he says. In Texas, where he lives, Gabriel has been stopped by highway patrolmen. Once, he hit a deer and when he called for help, the troopers accused him of killing it unlawfully.

I have nothing to say.

He is from Chihuahua. When he was little, his grandmother moved him to Mexico City. At 12, he told her he had to leave. "The gangs, the violence, it was bad," he said.

I'm from St. Louis. When I was 1, we moved to Toluca, Mexico, for my dad's job. We left when I was 3, but the culture change haunted me. My grandmother said American children broke my heart. A boy named Spencer slapped me in day care after we returned, and I cried for

weeks. When I was 12, I left one private Catholic school for another. I became quiet and withdrawn for the first time in my life.

He places his strong right hand on my arm. I tense. Perhaps I've given the wrong message. Still, I don't pull back.

We line up in front of a steep staircase leading into the plane, more than an hour late for takeoff. He tells me about his neighbor. Gabriel owns 11 acres in a tiny Texas town. "Blink, you don't see it," he says. He was burning his trash; he's allowed to do that because of the 11 acres. "I have a container and everything," he says. "That fucking bitch, she yells at me. I cuss her out. She owns the only store in town. Now I have to drive to another town to buy anything." He laughs. "Karma, it kicks you."

I think but don't tell him about screaming at customer service representatives, airline ticketing agents, the credit card company. That my co-workers grow quiet and won't look at me when I pontificate in meetings. How I've written letters I'll never send to family members, to my former babysitter who exposed himself to me when I was three.

When we get inside the plane, I rush to my seat without waiting for Gabriel. The little white TVs above the seats play Wile E. Coyote and Road Runner cartoons. Over and over, Wile E. is flattened, impaled, blown to bits in his quest for pesky, smiling Road Runner.

I grip the armrests as Wile E. balls his hands into fists and his anger is steam coming out of his ears. He lunges at that stupid bird and the earth drops from underneath him. He falls out of sight into an immense canyon and when he lands, the ground cracks with tremors. An earthquake.