

Zoe Leonard

No Way Out But Down

How are you supposed to act when your plane is going down? Most people around me are screaming, so I'm considering it. It's hard not to scream—that is, if you're a natural screamer. It's a gut reaction to terror, and cathartic. Like how you throw up after eating spoiled food—your body has to expel the poison. I'm not judging anyone for screaming, because like I said, it's instinct, but it's certainly not reassuring to those around you who *aren't* screaming. Like when I was six, in the back of my mom's Volkswagen, and a pickup truck was speeding towards us down the wrong side of the road. My mom screamed because she could do nothing else—didn't have time to react or get out of the way, or, even if she did, she couldn't. Fear locks you up. I was locked up, too, and that's why I wasn't screaming.

That's why I'm not screaming now. We're not in a freefall—at least, there seems to be some semblance of control to this descent. After we heard the explosion, the pilot said something over the speakers, but I could barely hear over the sound of screaming. Her voice sounded reassuring, like she had things under control, but the oxygen masks just dropped, which is giving me this seizing dread feeling I associate with hearing a graveyard bell toll at midnight. I might actually die on this plane. I probably will die on this plane. No, but the angle is stable—what did the pilot say? That we might be able to land? But if the engine exploded, doesn't that mean we're dead? I don't want to think about it. If all of time exists at once, there's a version of me in a place better than this, where I'm less scared. I don't want to keep thinking about being scared. Hearing my mom scream that day of the car accident made me the most scared I've ever been in my life, maybe even more than now. At least all these people screaming are strangers.

I feel bad for any children on this plane. I hope there are none—I don't remember seeing any when I boarded, but if there are, they're probably looking at their parents for

guidance. Maybe it's worse for the parents, who probably can't hold it together themselves. It's difficult to pretend everything's okay when people are screaming. But I've seen parents do some amazing things for their kids.

After the accident, my dad walked out of the hospital room smiling. I smiled too. He picked me up.

"It's going to be alright, honey," he said. I didn't know what he knew.

"Is Mommy okay?" I put my head on his shoulder.

"The doctors are working really hard to fix her up. We just have to wait."

"Can I go see her?"

"Not yet, baby, only the doctors can go inside."

"How come you got to go in?"

"Doctors and husbands only."

He carried me downstairs to get a strawberry smoothie at the cafe inside the hospital.

"My head hurts," I said, clamping my eyes shut. "Oww!"

"You got a brain freeze, honey," my dad said. "Drink a little slower."

"Do I have to go to school tomorrow?"

My dad laughed. "You think you can get out of school for a brain freeze?"

I nodded, but the discomfort was already subsiding.

"You can't get out of school for brain freeze, but maybe I'll let you stay home anyway. You're going to stay with your grandfather tonight."

"A-gong?"

"Yes, A-gong. We'll go to his house soon."

"Why can't I go home?"

"Because nobody will be there to watch you. I have to be here, to stay with Mom."

"How come I can't stay here with you?"

"Don't you want to go stay with A-gong? He'll make you the noodles you like."

My stomach rumbled, imagining rice noodles in a shallow ceramic bowl. My A-Gong had a pair of Hello Kitty chopsticks that he would always take out for me. "But I want to see Mom."

"You'll see her soon. There's no place for you to sleep here."

"Where are you gonna sleep?"

“I’ll find a place to sleep. Maybe I’ll sleep in the car.”

“Sitting up?”

My dad chuckled. “Yeah, sitting up. You don’t want to do that, do you?”

I shook my head. “A-gong will make noodles?”

“Yes, I think he’s making them right now. He knows you’re coming soon.”

“Okay,” I said, “let’s go.”

Two days later my mom died. My last memory of her awake was her eyes, wide full moons in the rearview mirror, flicking back to look at me a moment before the truck made impact. When I was that little, my dad never let me see him cry. The exception was the funeral, but then, everybody was crying. It’s normal to cry at a funeral, just like it’s normal to scream when your plane’s going down. That poison, the grief in your veins, has to come out somehow. Otherwise, you swallow it and die. I always wondered where my dad put the rest of his grief. He did a great job, by himself. I didn’t really keep it together like he did. I had a tough time, and grew into a shitty teenager. When I was sixteen, I got into another car accident, riding on the passenger side while my friend was driving drunk. It was minor—neither of us were hurt. When I got home I expected my dad to yell at me, but instead, he pulled me into his arms and sobbed. That’s the first time it clicked—that he needed me too. After that, I tried to do better.

But now, here, it’s just me, and I’m allowed to freak out. I’m allowed to scream or cry or speak in tongues and clack together prayer beads like the man sitting next to me is. No, on second thought, I think he’s speaking Spanish. It’s hard to hear with the screaming and wailing and rumbling from the jets. I suppose it’s good that I can still hear the jets, though I think the one on this side is on fire. I’m sitting by the window towards the back of the plane and there’s smoke outside. If I crane my neck, there’s the engine. And yes, it is definitely on fire. That’s not comforting. I keep breathing through the mask and telling myself I’m not going to pass out. Or, maybe I want to pass out. But if I pass out I won’t be able to brace for impact. I’m breathing. The mask is delivering oxygen. My chest is squeezing my heart like a fist.

“Let me out!” a woman shrieks from two rows in front of

me. “Let me out! Let me out!” She’s crawling over the people in her row to reach the aisle. I don’t know where she thinks she can go. Isn’t it safest to be sitting down? Maybe she’s claustrophobic, but then, why would she take the window seat? Well, whatever comfort she finds stumbling around the aisle, I hope it helps her. Sometimes it helps to stand up.

I got trapped in an elevator once, with four other people. This was at another hospital. The poor young girl in there with me broke down right away because she was claustrophobic. She crouched in the corner with her elbow over her eyes and started panting like she was about to hyperventilate. I wasn’t sure what to do. There were a couple of big guys in the elevator. One of them was a nurse at the hospital. He sat down with the girl and instructed her to breathe. The other guy called 911 for the fire department. I sat down on the other side of the nurse.

“Breathe with me,” said the nurse. “I don’t want you to pass out.”

She nodded, and grabbed the shirt around her chest.

“Count to three,” he said. “Inhale. One, two, three. Exhale.”

She did this for a few minutes, and her breathing slowed.

“Hey, there’s no need to freak out,” I said. “It’s not a big deal. Elevators break all the time.” I wasn’t sure if this was true. I certainly had never been stuck in one before. “What’s your name?”

She wiped her snotty nose with her sleeve. “Lily. What’s yours?”

“I’m Ciel.” I looked at the nurse.

“I’m Roger,” he said.

“Seal,” said Lily, “like the animal?”

“Kind of,” I said, “it’s spelt with a ‘C.’”

“Oh, yeah, I get it,” she said. “Not *seal* like the sea creature.”

We both laughed. She took in another shaky breath.

“Are you a college student?” I asked.

“No, high school. I’m a junior.”

“What school do you go to?”

“Mercer.”

“Oh yeah? I went there too! Does Ms. Shelby still teach English?”

Lily nodded. “Did you have her?”