

IN THE EVENT OF EMERGENCY

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Nina's only Jewish when she wants to be, only when it counts. Now is not one of those times. She sits beside me in the theater and passes, leaving me exposed.

It's our last night in London; tomorrow morning we fly home. Earlier today, Nina found us these discounted theater tickets. For only £14 apiece, we get to see a show that covers all of Shakespeare's plays in just under two hours.

Together, we scan the theater. Nina is scouting for royalty and I am on the lookout for other black people. We've made a game of it, though we usually both come up short. "No sight of the queen," she says, pressing her cool thigh against mine.

I count four black faces. Three women and a man, none of whom are seated together, none of whom glance my way. "Four," I whisper. "There and there."

Nina counts, lips moving silently. "You forgot yourself," she says. "That brings it up to five."

The lights dim and the curtains go up on three white actors with a large antique trunk full of props. As soon as the men begin to speak, their accents give them away. Americans, just like us.

"To think we came all this way," Nina says, unwrapping a candy and popping it into her mouth.

The actors are human *Cliffs Notes*, condensing each play, giving the audience just the bare bones. The play is banal, relying mostly on puns, slapstick, and punch lines. The actors whizz through the lesser-known plays in two to three minutes, while spending some five minutes apiece on *Hamlet*, *MacBeth*, and *King Lear*. One actor plays all of the women's parts, pulling on a wig and strapping on a pair of false breasts. I am about to excuse myself to the restroom when the tallest of the three pulls on an Afro wig and adjusts it, patting it into place. He crosses his arms over his chest, bends his knees and bops. Swaying from side to side, he begins to rap.

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“What’s he doing?” I whisper.

“*Othello*,” Nina says, as though it should be obvious.

He turns the *Tragedy of Othello* into a hip-hop piece, with himself in the title role, the other two actors playing Iago and Desdemona. Between human beatboxing, he huffs out the story of Desdemona’s love, Iago’s traitorousness, and Othello’s jealousy. The actor with the falsies, “Desdemona,” fawns over “Othello” while he rhymes about the real reason she loves him. “Desdemona” kisses his cheek and “Othello” winks at us. Then he swings his hips toward us and grabs his crotch, cupping himself. No longer a man, Othello is now reduced to a sexual organ. With one gesture, the actor metamorphoses Othello into Run-DMC. The audience erupts into laughter and the actors switch to *Julius Caesar*.

“Let’s get out of here,” I say, rising, and gathering my things.

Nina’s hand shoots out and circles my wrist. “Sit down,” she hisses. “You’re ruining the show.”

“Me?”

I let Nina pull me back down, but for me the show is over. I take my seat, huddling more than sitting, shielding myself from it all. Nina touches my knee, but I pull away. “You’re acting just like a child,” she says.

“Maybe so,” I say.

As a child, I tested into an enrichment program designed to prepare minority kids from New York’s inner-city for secondary school educations in private independent day schools. The program held a “ball” every year, where model kids were displayed to the rich donors and sponsors who funded our scholarships. I was seated with a young, white couple. After her husband left the table to get our drinks, the young woman turned to me and shook my hand. Reading my nametag, she said, “Hi Ellen. I’m Kyrie Reardon.”

“Hello, Mrs. Reardon.”

“Please call me Kyrie.”

“I’ve heard that name before,” I said, thinking of two boys back at school.

"I always thought my mother made it up."

"How do you spell it?" I asked.

"K-y-r-i-e," she said.

"My friends spell theirs K-h-a-i-r-y," I said, hoping to impress her with my esoteric knowledge and wisdom beyond my years. "In Arabic, it means charitable, beneficent." Kyrie shrugged and her shawl slipped off of one shoulder and slid to the ground. We pushed our chairs back to see where it had fallen. I scampered under the table after it and grasped the shawl. It felt softer than anything I'd ever known. Its label read 100% Cashmere, and holding the unbelievably soft and expensive shawl was an introduction to Kyrie's world and the world to which the enrichment program was sending me.

I handed the shawl up to her and she draped it around her shoulders again, this time tying a loose knot over her chest to secure it. "The only other person I've ever heard of to have my name was a little black boy. Go figure," she said, laughing nervously. "I don't mind or anything. I mean—it's okay."

Kneeling there under the table, it seemed that I had crawled into an unfamiliar space. Kyrie's world was closed to me and no enrichment program would ever make it truly open. She saw me as entirely different from her, so different in fact that she found it unnerving to know there was a member of my race with whom she shared a name.

I took my seat and the servers brought our food. Kyrie's husband returned with two glasses of white wine and a ginger ale. I sat silently beside them, hot and stiff in my lilac dress, my food and drink untouched. I no longer thirsted for Kyrie's world or for enrichment. In fact, I had no appetite at all.

To think of the miles I'd traveled and the money I'd spent to receive this humiliation, to think of the black Brits who'd joined in, feeling free to laugh, to think that the truth of the matter was that the joke was really on me and everyone in the small theater knew it, and—

finally—to think that Nina too might have laughed had she been alone, were unbearable thoughts.

“You’re too sensitive,” Nina says. “I’ll give you back your £14.”

This weekend—this entire trip—has been her idea. She is determined to see things go well. Eight months ago I’d married a man I’d known only briefly. Now, newly single, I no longer trust my own judgment and it is easy for Nina to convince me of many things. Nina convinced me that I needed this. She hopped on the Internet, found a President’s Day deal on the airfare and hotel and convinced me this opportunity was too good to pass on. She convinced me to go to London for the long weekend even though we knew it would be cold and rainy this time of year. She convinced me that we couldn’t leave England without taking in Shakespeare.

“It’s not about money,” I tell her. There are things that Nina will never see, things she will never notice, slights that she will neither catch nor understand even if she spends a lifetime trying. She has the luxury of passing through life invisible and undetected within the mainstream at whim, a luxury I will never have.

“Then what do you want?” she asks.

“A pound of flesh.”

Nina looks at me, too hurt to respond. Now she is Jewish.

The flight attendant holds a telephone receiver horizontally, speaking into the mouthpiece. “In the event of an emergency,” she says, “the exits are clearly marked.” Other attendants are spaced at intervals throughout the aircraft. Timing their actions to her voice droning the safety instructions, the others punctuate her words with hand signals, pointing to the exit lanes, emergency exit rows, and windows.

The attendant stands two rows in front of us, her smile stretched unnaturally wide. She stares right at me, making me pay attention. Fine lines feather the corners of her eyes and mouth, the cost of professional smiling. One day, I think to myself, she will have varicose veins, a just punishment for her needlessly high heels.

Nina rummages in the drawstring bag she's stowed beneath the seat in front of her. She pulls out empty candy wrappers, flattened potato chip bags, and crumpled snack cake cellophane. Nina never follows along with the safety instructions brochure in her seat back's pocket, never stops to locate the nearest exits. She takes something to make herself sleep during long flights, but it takes a while to kick in. She can't stand the feel of the plane on the runway, the way it angles up and climbs into the sky and takes a few minutes to right itself, the way her ears fill with air so she can't hear herself breathe.

Now the flight attendant reminds those seated in the exit rows that they have special duties to perform in the event of an emergency and offers to reseat anyone uncomfortable with or incapable of performing those duties. The men lounging in the exit rows stretch out and enjoy the extra legroom, ignoring her. Although the attendant asks for everyone's full attention, no one seems to be watching the safety procedure demonstration but me. I follow her every gesture, hang onto her every word. I need her to tell me what to do. I watch her pretend to put on her oxygen mask. I slide my hands under the edges of my seat and pull upwards ever so slightly, just to make sure that I can detach my seat cushion and turn it into a flotation device should we ever need to make an emergency water landing.

"This is a frigging nine-hour flight. I need something to take the edge off," Nina says, making me miss the last part about the emergency raft.

"What's the problem?" I whisper, keeping my eyes on the attendant.

Nina pretends not to hear me. When her search comes up empty, she finally speaks to me again. "Do you have anything to eat?"

"Some shortbread," I say. I do not offer it. Let her ask, I think.

"Well?" Nina says, waiting. Across the aisle from me, a balding man naps.

"What?"

"Can I have it?"

"Thought you were giving me the silent treatment?" Back in our

hotel room after the play, Nina turned on the freeze. This morning, we awoke and packed our bags in cultivated silence. Prior to boarding, Nina sat in the seating area without speaking, all of which was fine with me. I didn't mind the silence. I wanted her angry, wanted her to know how I felt.

Nina pushes her hair out of her eyes. "We were having fun, weren't we?" she asks. "For once, we were having fun, just you and I without anybody else to come between us and you had to go and ruin it."

"It wasn't my fault."

I hand Nina the little red box of shortbread from the carry-on under my seat. She reaches gingerly, taking it with just the tips of her fingers. Normally, Nina would try and find ways to touch me, but now she won't. If we were speaking, she'd find an excuse to reach over and smooth my hair or run her hand along my sleeve. Sometimes it is Nina's fingertips on my wrist, turning my arm to look at the time. Sometimes it is Nina's leg pressed too close to mine because we are crowded in by others and she can pretend we have no choice. These stolen touches—subtle enough for me to ignore and Nina to deny—are the only times I know Nina to be tender.

Nina breaks open the clear plastic and removes two shortbread cookies, quickly eating them. She drapes the airline blanket across her shoulders and leans her body as far away from me as possible in our little two-seated row. Her entire right side is pressed against the window. She removes her jacket and balls it into a pillow. "Wake me when you're ready to apologize. Or when the food tray comes by," Nina says, propping her head against the small oval window and crossing her arms over her chest. "Whichever comes first."

I switch on the overhead light and begin to read the book that I have brought with me. The balding man across from me awakens and glares at the offending light. He pulls a pair of eye shades from his coat pocket and places the black covering over his eyes, losing himself to cool and abiding darkness.

I can't remember if this book is a good one or not. By this time next week, I will not remember reading it. I will forget it, the way I forget all things that do not matter to me, but Mrs. Reardon and the embarrassment of a name, the condensed play, and the look on Nina's face are things I will remember still.

If I could take back what I said, I would.

Flight attendants are in the middle of the beverage service when the turbulence hits. The captain makes an announcement overhead, asking us to remain in our seats with our seatbelts securely fastened until the turbulence comes to an end. The attendants stagger down the aisles on their high heels and belt themselves into their booster seats, leaving us to our own devices.

Now there is no one to guide me.

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Nina snores beside me, her mussed hair blocking the window. Clouds and light and sun and heaven filter through the red strands, making her hair glow like flame. I lift the armrest that divides us and Nina slumps against me. In her sleep she is gentle. She curls into me, her red hair clinging to the pills of fabric in my sweater. In her sleep, I can love her. If I could love her all of the time—or if she could always remain asleep—we could have more moments like this. I wonder why we had to travel so far in order to feel so close. Maybe it is the flying actually, that feeling of being nowhere and everywhere at once that makes it okay to put my arm around her and let her sleep on my shoulder and not care what someone glancing over might think. Once the turbulence subsides and we are ready to land—once our window shades have been raised, our seatbacks are in the upright position, and it is again safe to use our portable devices—I will wake her and say I'm sorry.

In the event of an emergency, there are no rules that you remember. When faced with unprovoked danger, guidelines all fly out the window. How I wish I had been better prepared earlier, better equipped

to respond. If I could only have a do-over, I'd step onto that platform and make my way onto that stage. The British, ever prepared for bombings and terrorism with the absence of trash receptacles in public places and rigorous airline boarding procedures, would not be prepared for me. The three actors would try to play it cool, careful not to show their alarm. Perhaps they'd improvise around me as I walked across the stage to the third actor, the one who'd played Othello. There I'd stand for as long as it took him to face me. When he finally did, I'd reach for him. Catching him unawares, I'd take hold of him. Cupping him in the palm of my hand, I'd claim the pound of flesh that is my due.