

Megan Starks
Fiction
Approx. 1,650 Words

Touchdown Toward Midnight on the Potomac River

The 32 passengers of Delta Airlines connecting flight 7419 plod across the damp tarmac like herded buffalo, leaden and awkward under so much weight of luggage. They are tired after a six-hour delay in the Washington National Airport. They are both reluctant and eager to embark. They are beginning and ending journeys, strangers converging for a single 45-minute transport, and their heads and shoulders are being drizzled on under the open November night sky.

Two by two the travelers stuff their pink-tagged belongings into the underbelly of the weatherworn Bombardier and mount the metal steps into the cabin's interior.

The first year attorney-at-law carries only an over-night bag with extra pairs of underwear and a black laptop briefcase so she is the first to pass the cockpit in search of her seating. She has streaked-blond hair, wears dark jeans with navy pointy-toed pumps and has flown all the way from Seattle to visit a man she met three months ago on the internet. She likes to pretend to work on vacation because it makes her feel important. Keeping her laptop bag close, she nestles into the cushiony pleather backing of her aisle seat, B on row four, and munches into a 100-calorie snack-pack of Pringles.

The others follow suit, settle. The flight attendant greets everyone with a cool welcome through the intercom. She speaks in regulations and encourages everyone to applaud the serviceman on board with them this evening on behalf of the carrier. The plane launches.

It is black outside, dim within, and the cabin is warmed by the collective breathing of the

passengers. They are soaring through wet clouds. They feel sleepy but also electric, so very alive.

Here is where the story begins: less than ten minutes into the flight, an unexpected, buffeting phenomenon will occur when the first officer retracts the wing-flaps, rendering the plane un-airworthy. Lax regulations have not required the pilot to be trained in intentional water-ditching, and while the plane is equipped with seat flotation devices enough to cover each passenger and crew, they are carrying neither inflatable life-vests nor rafts. Despite all of this, everyone will survive.

The husband and wife, 12C and 12D, haven't been speaking since their dog died. From the first days of their marriage, Kodiak, a massive German shepherd-mastiff mix had acted as their buffer. They'd adopted him as an adolescent with a shady past. With the former prize-fighter in the middle (and he had the scars and one mangled eye to prove it) there had been affection, conversation.

There had been someone to dote on. With him slobbering thick, snotty juices all over the bed there had been reason to wash the sheets.

Lately the wife has been sleeping in the guest bedroom amidst the work-out equipment and boxes of holiday decorations. Kodiak had been their common ground, but now speaking with her husband is like trying to chip through a thick block of ice, and she just isn't sure she can do it all over again.

Things would be so much simpler if she had never fallen for this man.

The wife leans into the husband, intent to ask him how the latest round of lay-offs at work

have been when the plane shudders unexpectedly and begins bouncing, wobbles from side to side.

“Turbulence,” the husband says, but the intercom remains silent.

The emergency lights do not flare, oxygen masks do not spill down from overhead. The lit seatbelt advisory sign merely flashes with a ding.

“Turbulence,” the wife says.

But the assault victim four rows ahead knows they're going down.

The assault victim has been watching out the window. She is Aware. She is the one who first notices when the plane dips dangerously close to the tree line.

She is not alarmed. Maybe it's that she spent so much time being alarmed before that she just doesn't have any alarm left in her. Or maybe it's because she can't hear the sound of the rain for all the battering. It had pelted her on the tarmac, runs across her window in fine rivulets. But rather than a metallic pitter-patter all she can hear is bang, bang, bang.

And the river below looks like glittering asphalt.

Crashing is a slower process than most people know, she thinks.

During an interview with CNN later, she will say, “It was all very serene and nothing hurt,” which doesn't account for all that blood in her memory.

The assault victim can hear the thoughts of the man in front of her. He, 7A, is thinking in his glossy-bald head, “it's all in god's hands” over and over and over again. “It's all in god's hands,” like she thought in the moment she first laid eyes on that frostbitten blanket of abandoned field.

She went back to see it, the place-where-she-didn't-die, once the grass had grown up

some, had veiled the pockmarked land.

The pilot cracks the intercom, warns, “Brace for impact,” but the assault victim doesn't because she thinks, what's the point?

At that time, he didn't know there were people who loved me and would miss me so I told him, “There are people who love me,” and “I don't want to die,” and then he shot me in the back three times—would have been more if he hadn't first missed twice—but even with bullets torn into me, my body wouldn't die. It crawled on palms and elbows, dragging shins and toes through the thorny, glistening grass and when that hurt too much it got up and ran.

And this airplane might not know that I've survived worse, but the open-air knows because the half-moon watched me and this black-snake river reflecting that shape knows and even now lifting now out of my seat, struggling to breathe, gravity's got no hold on me.

There is no screaming this time.

The wife in 12C keeps her eyes downcast because she doesn't want to watch the space before her shred into mangled shrapnel and bodies. Like this it feels almost like that time they stayed in the shady motel with an actual vibrating bed. Time slows or no longer exists. She thinks waiting is the worst part and let's just get this over with.

The wife says, “I'm sleeping with your best friend,” because it seems like the moment for confessing.

What she really wants to say is 'our best friend' but she doesn't feel she has the right to make such a claim based on their *history*.

It doesn't matter that she only says 'your best friend' with such a vagueness because he knows exactly who she means. He understands that she is leaving him for Josh Finnegan—Finn,

the high school class clown turned ex-roommate from college who ended up his best man, who at their wedding said 'You're like the family I never had' and who has this infuriatingly easy-going attitude toward anything and everything and can smile his way out of handcuffs for Christ's sake after attempting to purloin a street sign.

This is fact, not fiction, for the first time in years. Because the plane is going down and the husband's thinking the truth is he hated Finn, hated his languid smile and the way it felt in more recent years when they got drunk together and held hands, and he's thinking and I hated her and I hated everyone because they couldn't possibly understand what it was like to lose the parents you'd grown to love by your older brother's hand. Because never having a family wasn't the same as watching them slip through your fingers. So I spent all of my time back then showing him and her and everyone else how much better I was than them, and then I ran away on scholarship, but she followed me and he followed her, and then he moved in, and then I married her, and then his lips touched mine and more, and now she is following me into the grave, fingers clawing into my skin, and I'm terrified that he won't be able to survive it. How stupid, the husband thinks, that the three of us have become tangled together for so long. But really it's just sad.

He grips his wife's hand. "I know," he says, and, "so am I."

Then they plunge into the water like a poorly skipped stone narrowly, missing the 14th Street Bridge and a tugboat.

In the aftermath, everyone starts moving even though they secretly believe they are all dead.

The lawyer drags her laptop with her because it has everything—her whole life—inside,

not realizing it will be as a net of rocks bound around her neck.

The wife is crying because already she regrets. Outside the water level is clear above their window and she's panicky that they'll sink, trapped in the back of the plane. It's a free for all to get to the exit doors located in the front of the cabin or along the wings. Because the rear exit door is submerged, it cannot be opened.

It hurts to move, and the husband hauls her along by a slender wrist.

A woman carrying a toddler tries to crawl over the seats, and the glossy-bald man barks out, "Women with children go first!"

People in the aisle part reluctantly, some semblance of order is formed. The men open the exits to let fresh air in. Passengers pile onto the wings, some clutching seat cushions to their chests. The water is too frigid to swim, but the plane is sinking slowly.

In the distance, the tugboat draws nearer.

The husband and wife emerge onto the eastward-facing wing. A man has fallen into the water. He flounders meaty arms above his head, is hauled up onto the tip of the wing only after he's stopped moving. The husband slips an arm around his wife and toward the horizon she

t

h

i

n

k

s

s

h

e