

The Flight

Except for the softness of his middle, Carter thought, he might as easily be taken for her lover as her father.

He glanced beside him. Ruthie wore a blue jumper and looked like any highschool girl going on vacation or to visit an aunt.

How long before her belly would swell noticeably?

Light glinted on the window. He pressed his forehead against the plastic but could not see the sun. Below, cloud cover hid the land. He felt as if he were a bomber pilot hunting a target.

Flat black silver-edged arrows were painted on the wing. They pointed back and down. Between them was stenciled "Emergency Walkway Only."

Beside his head a squat red arrow aimed up at an "Exit" light. He congratulated himself on having chosen a seat by the emergency exit. In case of trouble he and Ruthie would be sure to get out.

He leaned forward and pulled an airline magazine from the seat pocket, leafing through an article on "Twelve Great Spots for Family Vacation Fun." Maybe they would rent a place at the shore this summer. If Ruthie felt like it by then.

Her mouth was working, the small even white teeth—the costly product of braces—dragging back and forth across her lower lip. The lip bore tendrils of torn skin.

She was too nervous; like her mother.

He thought of the secret life she carried, certain it was a girl. With her, when her mother was pregnant, he had always imagined the baby to be a boy.

"Scared?"

"I guess so."

"Don't be. You couldn't get better care anywhere. Strictly confidential."

"She nodded. "I know."

"Try to relax, okay?" He checked his watch. "Another fifteen minutes we'll be landing."

"You going to call Mom?"

"When we get in? Sure. The worry-wart."

"I bet she's still mad."

"She'll get over it."

"You think so?"

"Some people take longer to adjust is all."

She gnawed at her lip's pout. "She said she'd never forget, ever."

"Your mother is emotional," Carter said. "She says things she doesn't mean."

"I hope so."

"You've got yourself to think of, remember." He patted her hand lying limply on the seat arm between them. "You've got your whole life ahead of you. We don't want one mistake to ruin it, do we?"

She twisted her wrist, her hand turning palm up to grasp his. Her thumb got tangled in his fingers. She squeezed and let go.

"Thanks. Daddy." She didn't face him. She stared at the seat back in front of her as if she feared his look would silence her. "You've been a real help. Really. All along. I'm sorry, you know, it happened. Mom . . . You've done a lot, taking care of everything. Thanks."

"Forget it." He felt it was as embarrassing for him to listen to her small speech as it must have been for her to deliver it.

They had never talked much to each other. She had always been her mother's girl.

Yet Rachel would let, force, the girl to ruin her life. The way she had argued, actually ranted! He'd had to slap her face to keep her from hysterics. Then Ruthie crying herself sick. The two of them.

He had put his foot down. He was not going to allow any daughter of his to make a decision she would regret the rest of her life.

What it could have meant to him back then. To have taken the East Africa assignment instead of sticking to the Cleveland office.

But you couldn't pull up stakes with your bride set to deliver in little more than a month. So she'd said anyway. What about the hospitals? Were there competent doctors? The trip over, even the preparations for it, might be enough to make her miscarry.

Well, he thought, he'd been young. It was the privilege of the young to be foolish.

He wondered if Billy Gilmore was thanking him this very minute for the gift of his future.

Had he been the only one? She claimed he was.

Ruthie was leaning back in the reclined seat, eyes closed. Her baby-fat face struck Carter—was it the amateurish daubs of eyeshadow now smeared by tears?—as tainted with corruption.

Her mother, despite her initial protests, had proved adept in his car's back seat. He doubted he had been the only one. No matter what she said, he would always doubt it.

Did he doubt even that he was the father of the girl beside him? Why shouldn't he? What traits claimed her as his? Her face, especially the low forehead and weak chin, was distinctly her mother's. And wasn't her behavior her mother's as well? Women so stupid or so clever as to get themselves pregnant.

He thought that maybe it was something in the blood, a looseness, a carelessness, passed down from mother to daughter.

What had he to do with either of them?

They had no hard edges. They seemed a swamp in which he was stuck neck-deep. The smell was sulphurous and turned his stomach.

The wing beyond the window dipped toward earth like a divining rod to water. The "Fasten Seat Belt" sign flicked on.

"We're starting our approach," Carter said.