



The Woman On The Plane

Davis D. Glanton

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WHEN I first see her she is sitting alone sandwiched between two Chinese, waiting, like me, at the gate three hours prior to our scheduled time of departure because Shanghai's PuDong Airport lacks either a decent restaurant or bar and China Eastern Airlines' passenger lounge is old-fashioned, dirty, with poor service and employees who speak very little English. In fact, the seats are so uncomfortable I think I'd be better off standing up or waiting at the gate, which I am doing when I see her. But China Eastern's price for the flight is a thousand dollars lower than its nearest rival. The woman is the lone female passenger of a dozen Caucasians waiting at the gate among a hundred yammering Chinese. Hefting my carry-on to my shoulder, I cross the floor in her direction.

A closer look tells me the woman is early to mid-forties, give or take, with bleach-white hair sheared butch-short on the side but arranged like neat rows of razor-wire atop her head. She is incredibly thin with a face as sharp as an ax-blade. She wears tights; the line of her thigh tells me that when she stands she will be tall, maybe six foot. She holds a tablet in hands with fingers as long as a man's but more slender, if not necessarily more feminine. Intimidating, I decide. I inch my way forward, hoping to make eye contact, when a Chinese bumps me and knocks me off-stride.

When I look for the woman, she's gone. We don't lock eyes again until I'm seated on the plane and she's moving in a conga-line procession along the aisle in my direction. She's scanning seat numbers, eyes toggling from her boarding pass to the numerals imprinted on the overhead luggage bins when she makes eye contact and smiles. Her eyes appear black as marbles and despite the smile, I flinch. But an hour later she is seated beside me and we are chatting amiably like old friends to begin the scheduled fifteen hour non-stop flight from Shanghai to New York's JFK.

Hours later, flying somewhere over the East Siberian Sea and continuing in a monologue for hours thereafter, my travel companion relates to me a remarkable tale of money, sex, greed and woe worthy of a Penny Vincenzi paperback novel. Having consumed a number of shots of cheap China Eastern Airlines liquor, I can be forgiven to think she is drunk. But I know she is not. The woman holds her whiskey like a camel holds its water. As a seasoned traveler, I know enough not to get in the way of a good story, so I let the woman talk. She begins by telling me: "You need to understand, we were desperate, because if we weren't, well, none if it would make any sense, would it?" And from here, her story unfolds...

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