St. Francis de Sales Writing Contest

“Thinking About Airplanes”

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“Thinking About Airplanes”

They say never judge a book by its cover. Now I haven’t read enough books to know the difference, but I have learned one thing: you can say the same about people too. You have no idea what people are about ‘til you open ‘em up and hear their stories.

My Grandma always told me this, but I was either too young to understand or too old to listen. But, like all women, she knew how to phrase the last word in just such a way that you thought and festered over it long after you wanted to be concerned about it. Next thing you know, you find yourself giving in to that naggin’ voice in your head, letting it have its way so you can just have silence. Religion’s a lot like that too, but the funny thing about both of ‘em is you always end up realizing they were right, that the nagging slowly changed you into a better person than you wanted to be in the first place.

I remember going out with Grandma when I was eleven, just a year before she died. She was always uncomfortable in the house (it had to do with my father) and so she would take me out on little trips around town to get treats or baseball cards. She couldn’t move too fast at that point, and got tired real easy. She stopped about halfway to Main Street for “just a little rest,” as she would say, and sat down on a bench. I sat down next to her and swung my legs back and forth, squinting down the street towards the ice cream shop where we were headed.

“Son,” she said, looking up at an airplane, “You see that there plane?”

“Yeah,” I responded, looking at her and staring at the reflection of it in her glasses.

“There’s people in that plane who you will never get this close to again, even though they’re miles away. Yet, sitting here on this bench, we’re actually closer to them than we mighta been if we were sitting up there right next to them.”
“How’s that?” I asked skeptically.

“Because at least we’re thinkin’ about ‘em. Most people go their whole lives without ever considering the people right beside ‘em.”

I thought about this, but it made me feel funny. I looked up at the plane, thought about all the people in it with their own thoughts and opinions just like me, and suddenly felt like I was on the edge of a cliff that before had only looked like a flat dirt road. It was my first hint that life had a depth to it I had never been aware of before— but I sure as hell wasn’t ready to explore it.

A fly had come and buzzed around my ear; I swatted it, and quickly everything became normal again.

“How’s that?” I asked.

Grandma was still looking up at the sky. She had a smile that turned down at the corners, as if her mouth was always fighting to stay sad, and she blinked a few extra times when I blurted my question. She had nodded and carefully stood up, grabbed her cane and walked me down to the ice cream shop. And though I tried to forget all that deep stuff about the plane, even a double fudge sundae couldn’t erase the funny feeling her comments created.

Like I mentioned before, Grandma and Dad didn’t talk very much. They often exchanged nervous glances when they were around each other, as if they both had a guilty secret and felt embarrassed about it. One got the impression that they were reminded of past sin and couldn’t see nothing but the memory of it in each other’s faces.

It wasn’t until I was thirteen, a year after Grandma died, that I had the guts to ask my father about it. He sighed and rubbed his hands together like he always did when he was gonna
talk about something important, like taxes or the Bible. He sat like that all through church every Sunday, shoulders hunched, head bowed, sighin’ and rubbin’ his hands. He looked at me and said,

“Son, your Grandma ever tell you you should always think about other people, try to put yourself in their shoes?”

I nodded solemnly, remembering the people in the airplane.

“Well,” he said with a sigh, “Let’s just say your Grandma and I learned that lesson the hard way.”

He got quiet, as if he was finished talkin’. After a minute of cautiously peering at him I asked him what he meant. He looked up at me, sighed again, and suddenly I realized he was startin’ to look old. It made me real sad, and I regretted asking the question at all. But then he leaned back, as if he had decided something, and asked,

“Son, did you know you had an aunt?”

“No,” I said, surprised. My Mom had three brothers, and I always thought my Dad was an only child.

“Well,” he said, “she was gone by the time you were born. She never got much attention growing up; my Mom and Dad were always fighting and absorbed with their own problems. I got lucky because, as the firstborn son, my Dad at least paid attention to me; it was so important to him that I become something, carry on the family name, do him proud. But my Mom— your Grandma— stayed so busy and preoccupied she forgot to give my sister the same attention. I was there for her when we were little, but when I got older I decided I was too cool, got too big for my britches I suppose. I wouldn’t let her hang out with me and my friends; as I got older and
started working, I noticed she looked a little lonely, and would decide to start hangin’ out with her again, but always forgot or ran out of time.”

“She was never anyone’s priority,” he continued telling me, looking out the window.

“She had a couple boyfriends that treated her like crap, and she started looking pretty rough. But then I left home and joined the army, and with me left my Dad’s only reason to come home, so he started living at the local bar. After being stationed up North for a few months they let me go home in December right around Christmas time, seeing as how they didn’t need me for much else at the moment. I had barely heard anything from home, and the only time I wrote was to send them short letters sayin’ I was fine and when I’d be coming. I walked in the door and found my Mom sittin’ at the table crying. Figurin’ it was just another argument I asked for Dad; all she did was shake her head and point upstairs.” My Dad’s voice shook and for the first time in my life I saw his eyes start waterin’. He stopped and swallowed hard before he continued.

“Staring at her and getting a bad feeling I ran up and burst into my sister’s room. I found her there lying on the floor, her eyes open, her hands cold, and her arms covered in her own blood. You could still see the trail of tears on her face, coming from eyes that could no longer see a damn thing. Apparently killing yourself was easier than continuin’ to live every day feeling unwanted. That was the first time I really looked at her in years. She had become a woman before I even realized it, and now I’d never be able to tell her how beautiful she was.”

“We buried her the next day, Christmas Eve, and all night and the next it rained. My Dad stumbled home at some point, patted me on the back and told me I was a fine young lad, then stumbled off to bed. My Mom and I spent Christmas sitting at opposite ends of the dining room table, glancing at each other guiltily and trying to ease the discomfort with the bottle of
Christmas rum. Three days later I went back and toured Europe with the army. Three weeks after that my Dad got hit by a car while trying to cross the street drunk in the middle of the night. All I got from my mother was a simple telegram with her new address printed on it, an apartment in a different city, her childhood hometown. For a week she barely left the apartment, barely moved, barely ate. I drank away my sister from country to country, and my Mom kept a silent vigil for months. A year and a half after she died, I came home for a week, and we could barely sit in the same room for more than a couple minutes before things were too uncomfortable. The responsibility of my sister’s loneliness fell on both our shoulders, and every time we were together we were reminded of what we had done, how we failed her, were so wrapped up in ourselves we had no idea she was dyin’ inside.”

“At some point she found Jesus, and started being happy again, but there was always some sort of bittersweet hidin’ behind her eyes. She made it her life’s mission to never let another soul be forgotten, seeing my sister in every neglected person she met. You would’ve thought she got over it, the way she smiled all the time, went to church every Sunday and extra weekdays too, kept her apartment nice and neat. But as she was laying on her deathbed she whispered to me after everyone left the room, said she hated how many people were goin’ to be there for her when she died. She couldn’t stand knowin’ she got to die surrounded by love, by people who thought she was such a great lady, when her own daughter went and died on the floor, cold, forgotten, and alone….”

My Dad’s voice trailed off, he had calmed down but was all hunched over, looking old again. Something about the whole thing didn’t sit right with me, so I asked him, “What happened to her?”
“Your Grandma?” He asked. I nodded. “Well, she had the preacher come in and had a long talk with him, and he helped her feel a little better. She died after lunch the next day. I wasn’t in the room, the church society ladies were all takin’ a turn. They came out and told me she passed away quietly, and let me go in alone to pay my respects. She looked peaceful, so I guess God helped her forgive herself in the end.”

We sat there in uncomfortable silence, my father wrapped up in his own thoughts and my head heavy with all of these deep, confusing things. After a couple minutes he started like he was wakin’ up, looked at me, rubbed his hands together, then stood. He came over and rubbed my head, and as he was leavin’ the room I called out, asking him,

“What was her name?” He stopped and turned.

“Jessie. Her name was Jessie,” he said quietly, then slowly left. I heard the door open, and saw him out the window going for a walk, hands in his pockets, head down, moving like his feet were heavy. I thought about all this for a long time, even prayed for Aunt Jessie sometimes, even though that was a Catholic thing to do. When I walked around, I looked at everybody as if I had never seen human beings before, wonderin’ what each of them might be hiding, how many of them also had secret hurts weighing them down, changing them.

Unfortunately I too forgot about Aunt Jessie eventually, and though I couldn’t look up at a airplane without hearing my Grandma’s voice, I became pretty selfish when I got older. Like most of the boys in my town, I wanted to be a professional baseball player, and like most of the boys in my town, I didn’t quite make the cut. I decided to go to college, which was a bigger deal then than it is now, became a businessman and married the preacher’s daughter. We had a nice
house, a couple cute kids, and I started thinkin’ pretty high and mighty of myself. Like my father and his father before him, I started drinkin’ a little too much and spent less time at home than I should have. I always treated my family right, mind you, but I would come home late when my kids were already in bed, then leave for work early. A few years went by before I realized I never saw them, and one day I came home and was reminded about Aunt Jessie quite unexpectedly.

I travel around a lot for work now, and today I’m the one in the airplane instead of the one lookin’ up at it. I’ve been sitting here staring at my damn phone for two hours straight, ignoring every other living thing around me as if I didn’t know any better. The teenage girl sittin’ next to me just shifted, scratched her shoulder or something, I didn’t notice her before, but when she shifted I saw it. Right there on her wrist she has ‘em, those horrible white lines in a row, the same ones that killed my aunt, the same ones I found on my daughter three years ago. You wouldn’t think it if you looked at her, with her pearl earrings, pretty little skirt, and those little flat, round shoes all the girls like to wear. I bet if I looked at her she’d give me a nice smile and turn back to her book. And maybe I could just smile back and continue to ignore her. But here I am again, with a woman’s voice naggin’ away in my head, and I know I ain’t got but one choice. I’ll talk to her, Grandma, because after all, it wouldn’t be right for some stranger sitting miles below us to be thinkin’ and carin’ more about her than the man sitting right next to her. Like I said before, you can’t judge a book by its cover, and maybe if some stranger had simply asked Aunt Jessie how she was that December day, she’d still be here to tell her story too.