

Changing Planes

by Robin Layne

I couldn't believe he was gone... *really* gone now. Looking out my window in the 747, I watched a small plane circle in the blue Honolulu sky. Did Brent's look like that one? I gritted my teeth.

I'd lived in Hawaii for over a year. Brent had refused to visit, even when I arranged a book signing for him. It wasn't *I* who had abandoned *him*. I had every right to take my dream job here. Nevertheless, as I prepared to face his memorial service, guilt prodded me.

My seat felt scratchy on my bare arms. The air smelled stale. It wasn't anything like riding in the borrowed biplane with the wind in my hair, the roaring engine, the swift takeoff, the rattling cables... and Brent behind me at the controls in his classic leather helmet and goggles over his glasses.

I'd thought he'd be happy when he got his own plane. Instead, he left everything—to do what? Crash on purpose?

I heard footsteps—on carpet? I must have been hypersensitive. Heavy breathing—coming closer. A pair of black dress shoes hurried up the aisle. They were *untied*. The steps quickened. I lifted my eyes to see cream-colored slacks, a matching button-down shirt, and long black hair. Hawaiian? The man's skin was too pale, his features too fine.

Now he stood in front of me, looked full in my face, and smiled. He said with a foreign accent, "May I sit here, milady?"

Milady? Had I heard wrong? Or was he practicing for a Renaissance fair job? I shrugged. The stranger settled into the seat next to me, stashing something under it. I looked down to see it

—and found his face inches away... a handsome face, careworn around the eyes. He smelled like evergreens.

I sat up as he did.

A flight attendant told us to fasten our seatbelts. The man beside me struggled with his. "This isn't the kind of seatbelt I've used," he said.

"What kind have you used?" I asked.

"A smaller airplane," he said, and then snapped the seatbelt into place. "Have you been in an airplane before?"

I nodded. "My job takes me all over the place." "What manner of work?"

"I'm a buyer for a bookstore chain."

I looked out the window as the jet lumbered forward. Soon the runway and airport buildings were shrinking...

"Where are you going?" the man asked.

"Portland, Oregon." I wasn't sure I wanted to chat, but the silence felt ominous. I looked back at the stranger. "Because of an airline discount, I'm stopping in L.A."

What progress I had made since college! My first flight was just four years ago, when Brent—

"My first flight in an airplane was recent," the stranger said.

My sinuses stung with threatened tears. I brought my manicured hands up to my nose. I didn't want to make a scene.

"What ails you?" the stranger said. I again wondered about his archaic wording. "Have you lost a friend?"

"How did you guess?"

He shrugged.

"Actually," I said slowly, "he was more than a friend."

"What happened?"

"I'm not sure."

He waited in silence. I wondered what country he was from. *Let's see...* His nose was straight. The muscles around his curved lips were developed like a French speaker's. He kept looking at me with eyebrows lifted. *Oh, no.* He expected me to tell him the whole story.

"I have handkerchiefs," he said, touching the bag on his lap.

Trying to avoid my turmoil, I changed the subject. "Your shoes are untied."

"They cramp my feet," he responded.

"Why are you wearing shoes that don't fit?"

"They're the only ones I have."

His clothes looked too good for a man who owned only one pair of shoes. He pulled at his safety belt until it unhooked. "I must find the gar—the—rest room."

"You're not from anywhere around here, are you?" I said.

He shook his head, then winced. "Your pardon, lady—my head hurts."

I fished into my straw purse for a bottle of ibuprofen. "Try these."

He squinted at the bottle. "What should I do with it?"

"Swallow them, of course." I opened the bottle and dropped two tablets into his palm.

"My thanks." He walked toward the restroom.

I stopped a passing flight attendant and whispered, "I'm a little worried about that man. He has a headache and maybe other problems. Could you maybe keep an eye on him?" She nodded.

At the back of the line, the man swallowed the ibuprofens without water.

After he returned from the restroom, the attendant got some wet paper towels and told him it might help to lay them over his eyes and forehead.

I made up my mind to guess the stranger's nationality. I would not ask his name; that might provide an unfair hint. When he settled back with the towels draped over his upper face, I tried to engage him in small talk, but my conversation kept wandering back to Brent. The stranger seemed sympathetic. "Go ahead and tell me about the friend you lost," he said.

I listened to his accent. Not French. Irish? His behavior suggested he came from a more backward country. Either that or he was suffering from some form of amnesia. He was pleasant to talk to. His voice had a musical cadence.

I leaned back and sighed. "His name is—was—Brent Paliman. An author and pilot. I don't know whether to say 'is' or 'was'... because I'm not convinced... he's... dead."

"Oh?"

"If he's dead, it would be disrespectful to be mad at him. But—damn it, I'm mad, anyway!"

"Why?"

"He disappeared in his plane six months ago, leaving a will saying to count him dead if he was gone over five months... and a note saying, 'Goodbye, all... Forever.'"

The stranger pulled the wet towels off and sat up. "He wrote that? How cruel."

"Yeah, you'd think a competent author could think of something kinder to say. Are you familiar with his writings?"

The man cocked his head.

"He published two war novels that are selling like hotcakes and a handful of short stories," I said. "He could have done much more. He was *so* talented." Restraining the tears hurt.

The man unzipped his leather bag. "Tears will help you wash away the sorrow," he said gently. "Believe me. I know." Gazing intently at me with sea-green eyes, he handed me a soft blue handkerchief.

Accepting it, I figured I would be blubbering in front of everyone. But something about this man put me at ease. I could confide in a stranger; he wouldn't gossip to anyone I knew. My eyes welled up so that I couldn't see the embroidery I felt on the handkerchief. When my seatmate covered his eyes again, I said, "Brent left everything to his old friend Mark."

"Do you wish he had left you something?"

"Something—even a token gift! Mark might as well have his manuscripts, because he could maybe fix those up for publication. I have no literary talent myself. But he didn't even leave me a note. You'd think I meant nothing to him. I was his girlfriend for two years!"

The man shook his head. "I didn't realize—I'm sorry he neglected you," he said.

I wondered why the stranger had interrupted himself. But my puzzlement over Brent demanded more attention. "That will he left proves the disappearance was premeditated," I added.

"But not suicide?"

"There are easier ways to kill yourself than saving up years to buy your own plane and then flying off in it," I said.

The man nodded. "So you think he's still alive." He folded the paper towels and laid them on the armrest.

"He could have gone off to some island to live as a hermit," I suggested.

"Perhaps," the man said.

"He had a way of isolating himself that drove me nuts," I went on. "But his fantasy world was incredible!"

"Was it?" A smile.

"He wrote a novel in high school called *Wing of the Raven*." My voice lowered to a near whisper. "Nobody published it. Agents said the theme of the good twin verses the bad one was cliché. But when I read it, I forgot the words on the page. I was *there*."

"Where?" he asked.

"Hoteree... a green, magical country in what he'd named the Old World. Most of it was written from the point of view of a bard named Randolin. When Brent's special magic worked, I walked in Randolin's skin, experiencing everything he did."

The man looked at the carpet. His long black hair hung over his ears and down his chest, hiding his expression.

What a vivid character Randolin was! I remembered the scenes when he wandered the countryside on a horse with antlers and sang in castles and inns. With two locks of his long black hair braided in a wreath around his head, with his pale green eyes and pining mandolin, he broke hearts regularly. The greatest heartbreak came when the bard had to kill his twin Randamir to save his country because Randamir had taken it over, murdering everyone who got in his way.

My seatmate said, "Wherever Brent failed to recreate the scene well, you were jarred back to the place you were when you read it?"

"All this time, I've been talking to one of Brent's fans?"

He paused. "I—never held a fan for him."

I laughed. "You *have* read his books?"

"Not—exactly."

"How else could you know the effect they have on people?"

He paused again, then said, "I'm an entertainer. That kind of magic is common to all who create for the enjoyment of others. Your—lover?—is extremely good at it."

When he said lover, a blush warmed my cheeks. I avoided the man's gaze.

He handed me a second handkerchief, pink and bordered with unfamiliar flowers. "These are lovely," I said. "Where did you get them?"

"A lady in my country made them when she learned I wasn't going back." I blew my nose—then regretted soiling a work of art. "Why not?"

"I wished a change. One arrives, another leaves." His R's were like purring. I still couldn't match his accent to any nationality I knew. "Have you any good memories of Brent?"

"He could be really fun. He liked park swings. He published his first novel at twenty- three. And he piloted a borrowed World War I biplane that took me back in— time..."

A dizzy feeling almost made me fall out of my seat. I remembered something I had tried to forget four years ago: Riding for the first time in the front cockpit of that orange biplane, listening to the wind hiss through its cables, I had somehow found myself in the middle of a dogfight. Certain the plane had been hit, I saw and felt it plummet in flames; smoke even choked my lungs as guns echoed through a cloudy sky. Then, suddenly, the sky was blue again, and everything was as it was before. No damage to the biplane, no charred clothes, no pain in my lungs... just a simple charter flight over the Willamette River and back to the airpark in Vancouver, Washington.

"That can't possibly have happened," I murmured. "What?" the stranger asked.

"Nothing..."

"Lady..." He spoke like a gentleman to a noblewoman in the age of chivalry. That one word brought me to look him straight in the face. His features and coloring bore no resemblance to the other man on my mind, the tanned, brown-eyed, brown-haired Brent. This stranger was a study in contrast. "Do you know anything about telepathy?" he asked.

I felt a shiver up my spine... and shrugged it off. "Brent believed in it," I said. "The Hotereens in his novel were all telepaths. And he—acted as if those characters were real. When I said he shouldn't have killed off the queen—"

"Killed her off?" He sounded alarmed.

"He had her die in a battle with the raven demon that gave Randamir his evil magic. She summoned the Raven so it couldn't protect the sorcerer from Randolin. She had ordered the bard to slay the usurper because he was the only one who could do it."

The stranger closed his eyes and drew a deep breath. "What's the matter?" I said.

"It was all so sad."

"You agree he shouldn't have had the queen die?"

"Brent didn't kill the queen," my neighbor said. "It was that foul demon..."

"That's what Brent claimed. The saddest thing of all..." I paused when I noticed the look on the man's face. Grief? Frustration? I couldn't guess, but it wasn't pleased.

"Go on," he said.

The other passengers, wearing headphones or reading magazines, were in their own worlds. And I might never see this man again. "Brent was going out of his mind. He insisted that story was true."

"Was it?" the man asked.

"Of course not! Hoteree was a *fantasy land* Brent used to escape an abusive childhood.

He carried that escape into adulthood. He—tried to convince me people contacted him telepathically from another dimension. I recommended a good therapist. Brent said I couldn't take his dreams away. He *left* me. After that, we talked now and then, but—he never opened his heart to me again... I should have seen this coming. Brent once told me, 'When I've earned my own plane, I'm outta here.' I never asked what he meant, but since then, every time I looked at the pewter feather he wore on a chain around his neck, I had this feeling he was chained to the sky—that he was going to fly away..."

The sun was hot through the window. My buttocks and legs stuck to the seat through my long sarong. What had happened to the air conditioning? I saw beads of perspiration on my neighbor's face, which he wiped with a third handkerchief. Was he just too warm, or was something bothering him?

Disliking airliner food, I shared my sack lunch with my new acquaintance. Afterward, he settled back into his seat and closed his eyes. I reapplied my lipstick, brushed my red hair, and tied it back in a loose ponytail. When I spoke to the man beside me, he gave no response. His shallow breathing suggested he was asleep. The long black hair that fell down his chest looked like Randolin's. With a shiver, I reached into my purse for a psychology book I thought would aid my mourning process. I couldn't concentrate on it. Brent hadn't objected to therapy in general, but to my insistence that his escapism was a problem that needed fixing. How much was I to blame for his giving up on everything? "Did I do the right thing?" I asked aloud.

"Mm?" I heard beside me.

"I didn't mean to wake you."

"Quite all right," the man said, stretching into his dignified posture and blinking at me.

"What could I have done? Pretend Brent wasn't in danger of losing it? I—think he loved me, but—he loved his dreams more." Feeling a tender sense of loss, I blinked straight into the man's eyes. "What's become of him?"

The loud speaker interrupted, announcing our approach to LAX. I learned my new acquaintance was also transferring planes.

I pulled the man's hand-embroidered handkerchiefs out of my purse, apologized for soiling their beauty, and took a close look at them before giving them back. My mouth fell open when I saw the blue one featured *horses with antlers*. The cloth slipped onto the floor.

"You're hiding something," I said, sure my face had turned sheet-white. "You knew Brent. Or know him." A glance at his black leather bag, and I felt it was the same one Brent had carried manuscripts in. "Did you find his stuff? Or steal it? This must be

a setup. Why else would you sit by me?" An unnamed, irrational fear rushed through me.

"Please!" the man insisted. "I mean you no harm. I can explain when you're ready to listen." His green eyes, kind and hurt, looked familiar to me. I forced my heart to slow down, tried to make sense of it all.

After the plane landed, the man stooped to pick up the fallen handkerchief and something from under his seat: a jacket, from which he unwrapped an old-style mandolin with a rounded back. He strapped it to his shoulder.

My stomach fluttered.

He had said he was an entertainer.

The passengers began to leave. "Please," I said. "What's your name?"

The man tugged at his hair as if unsure how to answer. I was startled to see a detailed pewter feather on a chain around his neck. Suddenly, I felt airborne—as if the plane were taking off again. No, as if *Brent's* plane were taking off, with just me and—

"Where did you get that necklace?"

"From a friend who recently emigrated from your country to mine." He smiled. Could he mean... *Brent*?

If Brent went to live in his country, and he in turn—I shook my head. *No way.*

He slung his jacket over his shoulder, picked up his bag, and said, "You may call me—Randy."

Dizziness hit me. *Randolin*. A backward country: Medieval Hoteree. The pale green eyes, the long, black hair, even the mandolin, matched everything I had read about that bard.

Impossible! I grabbed his shoulder for balance. "You—remind me of someone." I felt as if I were in a tailspin.

"A friend, I hope."

No, just a character from an unpublished book.

His hand caught my waist before I could fall. Looking at the flight attendants, he said, "I think we should go. The servants are eyeing us with impatience." He smiled again. "Lady Patricia." He knew my name! "I have long desired to meet you. And to see the fabled New World with my own eyes. Brent sends you his love."

End

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Previously published in The Writers' Mill Journal Volume 5, 2016.