Taking Flight

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Precariously balancing her backpack and flute, Elle Cage headed to her gate. In her rush to escape the ever-irritated travelers in airport security lines, she had failed to properly tie her left shoe. The aglets darting around her ankles like hornets stung, but she couldn’t bring herself to stop in any pathway. As she approached the information board, she tried to pinpoint what she needed without slowing down. Her life’s motto? Never get in people’s way.

Elle wouldn’t consider herself selfless or a doormat. She just found herself happiest when people minded their own business, so she did her utmost to do exactly that. Unsurprisingly, she had been labeled an introverted doormat at times. At her core, though, Elle cared so deeply about everyone’s story, thoughts, and feelings that she struggled with large groups and small talk. Her passion lay in storytelling: an art perfected on the personal level before it has the potential to go global.

Amidst the hustle and bustle of the terminal, Elle was an observer. A woman in heels, a pencil skirt, and disheveled blouse flew by her, and Elle couldn’t help but wonder what might cause a woman so well-dressed to be in such a messy rush. Across the way, a mother tried to manage three children. One was so small he could barely walk, and one was throwing a temper tantrum. The exhausted mother was trying her best to keep those two safe and calm, while the third kid carried as many bags as she could. Amidst all this chaos sat a large, worn suitcase. It seemed to have two sets of initials embroidered on it, like it might have been a wedding gift. She couldn’t tell if the mother had rings, so she pondered to whom the initials might belong and where they were right now.

Elle continued down the terminal. As she approached a series of moving walkways, she wished that the kids playing on them would move out of the way. It was quite rude of them to interrupt everyone else’s travel. A twinge of irritation pulled at the corners of her mouth. However, a sudden burst of self-awareness on their part seemed unlikely, so she took the slower path. Sinking into a chair at her gate, she felt relieved to be on schedule. She gingerly placed her flute case on the floor between her feet, ensuring it wasn’t a tripping hazard. As she slipped her backpack off, her long, dark, curly hair was caught in one of the straps. The weight of the bag pulled her head, and she felt a twinge in her neck. After half a minute of struggling, she managed to free most of her hair, only sacrificing a few broken strands. A teenage boy across the way caught her eye, and she felt embarrassed that he had witnessed that struggle.

She unzipped her backpack and fumbled around to find the right book. She had a few with her, along with a laptop and other bits and bobs. The soft, worn corners helped her identify the one she needed: her first journal. Opening to the first page, she saw Elizabeth Cage, which her grandmother had written in fancy handwriting — the kind they just don’t teach anymore. Her 14-year-old self, however, had scratched out “Sweet Elizabeth” and written “Elle” above it. She smiled and ran her hand over the thick line, feeling how decisively she had edited her identity. Only her parents ever use her full name now.

“Flight 204 to Chicago, Illinois, will be boarding shortly,” said a garbled voice through the overhead speakers.

Elle found comfort in familiar pages written by a familiar hand. She still felt a connection to the girl who changed her name, even though so much more had changed since. Typically not one to reread, Elle made an exception for this particular journal. Even though she knew the ending every time, she kept feeling drawn back to it. There was something reassuring and comforting about watching herself experience, process, recover, and grow. Although this version of herself had no idea what was coming her way, Elle would never hold that against her. The experiences she had written about years earlier were just as important as more recent ones.

The judgmental teenager who had seen her struggle already was now, she noticed, very keen to get a look at what she was reading. She didn’t like this invasion of privacy. Now profoundly on edge, Elle securely zipped her journal back into her bag. It looked like her phone would have to keep her busy with mindless games until boarding.

“Coffee. Black.”

The gruff voice of the man sitting next to her brought her back to reality. She wasn’t sure what she’d been daydreaming about, but she was sure it was more pleasant than this man’s personality. Elle politely asked for water and accepted it graciously. Her neighbor wasn’t so kind.

“Rough day?” Elle asked. She wasn’t sure what possessed her to initiate a conversation with this man, but her mouth was already going.

“Huh?” He grumbled, surprised that she had spoken to him.

“I asked if today’s been a rough day for you.” She looked him in the eye before settling back into her seat.

“Um...” He shifted awkwardly.

“You were pretty rude in asking for your coffee, and you don’t seem too comfortable.”

“Look, I’m wearing a suit for the thousandth day in a row and sitting on a plane next to a much too talkative stranger. How do you think my day’s going?” He scoffed.

“Business trip, then?” She smirked, hoping he wouldn’t notice.

“Young lady.” He shook his head and took a deep breath. “Do you have nothing better to do?”

“Well, I can’t exactly go anywhere.”

An uncomfortable silence lingered.

“Where’s your wife?” She asked, careful not to be too aggressive.

“At home. With the kids.”

“Kids? How old are they?”

“Yeah, two boys. They’re... damn, they’re both in high school now.” His scowl cracked a bit to reveal exhaustion. Elle thought she might see some sadness in there too.

“Don’t spend much time with them?”

“My damn work schedule keeps me traveling all over the country. I can’t even remember where I’m supposed to be half the time.” He reached for his briefcase under the seat in front of him. “Which reminds me...”

“What do you do?”

“Wow, someone’s nosy.”

“I haven’t picked a career, so I’m trying to learn as much as I can from other people’s experiences.”

“You’re smart, kid. I should’ve done that. I just listened to my parents, who pushed me into something that would make a lot of money.” He flipped through a mess of a notebook that may at one point have been a nice planner.

“The money doesn’t make up for the rest of it.” She was asking him a question, but she already knew the answer.

“Not at all. I barely know my sons, and my wife — she’s amazing. She’s too good to me. I’m a sales rep, and my company’s small enough that they need us out there pushing our products all the time. I make it home here and there, try to go to games and family events, but it’s not enough.” The sadness Elle had spotted before had taken over his demeanor.

“I’m sorry.” She paused. “I’m Elle, by the way.”

“Boyd. Oh, sorry — Jack. My name is Jack.” He forced a half smile, the awkward kind usually reserved for acknowledging people you walk past in a hallway.

“If you could go back and pick a different career path, would you?”

“Yes. I always hoped I could become...”

Jack Boyd launched into a monologue detailing his childhood dreams. At 5, he’d wanted to be a fireman. At 10, a professional athlete — “Any sport, as long as it got me a girl.” At 15, something in the humanitarian sector. The common thread throughout, as Elle noted, was a passion, a drive that everyone dreams of. This man had had that feeling several times in his life, and yet he felt he had to please his parents. The damage that parents can do, especially when they’re trying so hard to do their best, is astounding. It’s the quietly destructive ones that surprise everyone with the imprint they leave on their children.

“...til today. And now I’m here.”

“Can I ask you something?”

“Go for it.”

“You said that you love your wife—”

“She’s the best thing that’s ever happened to me. And then she gave me two amazing sons.”

“Does she know how much you love her? Do they?”

Jack opened his mouth to speak, but the announcements cut him off.

*“Ladies and Gentlemen, welcome aboard…”*

Elle slept for the majority of her flight. Once they landed, she and Jack Boyd parted ways, never to see each other again. Elle thought about her own parents — how she wasn’t the kid they’d expected, how they disapproved of her choices, how she left without a real goodbye or a real plan for her future. They were too much. She had to go.

O’Hare Airport was even busier in person than she had expected. Waiting for her luggage, she found herself jostled around by passengers anxious to surround the carousel, as though that would somehow make their bags come out faster. She waited further back where she could still see everything.

“If one more person bumps into me, I swear…” the woman next to Elle said.

“Here, stand on this side of the pole. People have been avoiding it.” Elle gestured to the space next to her.

“Thanks. It’s been a long day. I’m just trying to get to my boyfriend’s place.”

“No problem.”

“Where are you headed?”

“I’m not sure yet.”

“What do you mean you’re not sure?”

“I’ve had my life planned for me forever. I’m looking for something new.”

“So you just flew to Chicago? Without a plan?”

“Trust me, I’m just as stressed and concerned as you sound. I didn’t exactly have a ton of time to plan between my parents forcing me to change everything about myself and my decision to pack all my stuff. I’m not usually like this.”

“I understand that. I’m about to propose to my boyfriend, which he probably doesn’t expect.”

“Congratulations! Or, well, good luck! I’m very impressed.”

“Thank you,” the woman smiled. “Good luck to you as well. My bags are here.”

“Thank you,” Elle smiled.

Elle watched the woman collect her bags and head out the big sliding doors. She knew she was heading towards someone who loves her. She has a future with so much potential. What is Elle doing? Where is she going? Would anyone watch her exit and wonder? Maybe it was finally time to start taking up space.