

GABRIEL
GARCÍA MÁRQUEZ

BON VOYAGE, MR. PRESIDENT

AND OTHER STORIES

Sleeping Beauty and the Airplane

She was beautiful and lithe, with soft skin the color of bread and eyes like green almonds, and she had straight black hair that reached to her shoulders, and an aura of antiquity that could just as well have been Indonesian as Andean. She was dressed with subtle taste: a lynx jacket, a raw silk blouse with very delicate flowers, natural linen trousers, and shoes with a narrow stripe the color of bougainvillea. 'This is the most beautiful woman I've ever seen,' I thought when I saw her pass by with the stealthy stride of a lioness while I waited in the check-in line at Charles de Gaulle Airport in Paris for the plane to New York. She was a supernatural apparition who existed only for a moment and disappeared into the crowd in the terminal.

It was nine in the morning. It had been snowing all night, and traffic was heavier than usual in the city streets, and even slower on the highway, where trailer trucks were lined up on the shoulder and automobiles steamed in the snow. Inside the airport terminal, however, it was still spring.

I stood behind an old Dutch woman who spent almost an hour arguing about the weight of her eleven suitcases. I was beginning to feel bored when I saw the momentary apparition who left me breathless, and so I never knew how the dispute ended. Then the ticket clerk brought me down from the clouds with a reproach for my distraction. By way of an excuse, I asked her if she believed in love at first sight. 'Of course,' she said. 'The other kinds are impossible.' She kept her eyes fixed on the computer screen and asked whether I preferred a seat in smoking

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penguin books

or non-smoking.

'It doesn't matter,' I said with intentional malice, 'as long as I'm not beside the eleven suitcases.'

She expressed her appreciation with a commercial smile but did not look away from the glowing screen.

'Choose a number,' she told me: 'Three, four, or seven.'

'Four.'

Her smile flashed in triumph.

'In the fifteen years I've worked here,' she said, 'you're the first person who hasn't chosen seven.'

She wrote the seat number on my boarding pass and returned it with the rest of my papers, looking at me for the first time with grape-colored eyes that were a consolation until I could see Beauty again. Only then did she inform me that the airport had just been closed and all flights delayed.

'For how long?'

'That's up to God,' she said with her smile. 'The radio said this morning it would be the biggest snow-storm of the year.'

She was wrong: it was the biggest of the century. But in the first-class waiting room, spring was so real that there were live roses in the vases and even the canned music seemed as sublime and tranquilizing as its creators had intended. All at once it occurred to me that this was a suitable shelter for Beauty, and I looked for her in the other waiting areas, staggered by my own boldness. But most of the people were men from real life who read newspapers in English while their wives thought about someone else as they looked through the panoramic windows at the planes dead in the snow, the glacial factories, the vast fields of Roissy devastated by fierce lions. By noon there was no place to sit, and the heat had become so unbearable that I escaped for a breath of air.

flour
is she a girl

flour

Outside I saw an overwhelming sight. All kinds of people had crowded into the waiting rooms and were camped in the stifling corridors and even on the stairways, stretched out on the floor with their animals, their children, and their travel gear. Communication with the city had also been interrupted, and the palace of transparent plastic resembled an immense space capsule stranded in the storm. I could not help thinking that Beauty too must be somewhere in the middle of those tangled hordes, and the fantasy inspired me with new courage to wait.

By lunchtime we had realized that we were shipwrecked. The lines were interminable outside the seven restaurants, the cafeterias, the packed bars, and in less than three hours they all had to be closed because there was nothing left to eat or drink. The children, who for a moment seemed to be all the children in the world, started to cry at the same time, and a herd smell began to rise from the crowd. (It was a time for instinct.) In all that scrambling, the only thing I could find to eat were the last two cups of vanilla ice cream in a children's shop. The waiters were putting chairs on tables as the patrons left, while I ate very slowly at the counter, seeing myself in the mirror with the last little cardboard cup and the last little cardboard spoon, and thinking about Beauty.

The flight to New York, scheduled for eleven in the morning, left at eight that night. By the time I managed to board, the other first-class passengers were already in their seats, and a flight attendant led me to mine. My heart stopped. In the seat next to mine, beside the window, Beauty was taking possession of her space with the mastery of an expert traveler. "If I ever wrote this, nobody would believe me," I thought. And I just managed to stammer an indecisive greeting that she did not hear.

32 She settled in as if she were going to live there for many years.

putting each thing in its proper place and order, until her seat was arranged like the ideal house, where everything was within reach. In the meantime, a steward brought us our welcoming champagne. I took a glass to offer to her, but thought better of it just in time. For she wanted only a glass of water, and she asked the steward, first in incomprehensible French and then in an English only somewhat more fluent, not to wake her for any reason during the flight. Her warm, serious voice was tinged with Oriental sadness.

When he brought the water, she placed a cosmetics case with copper corners, like a grandmother's trunk, on her lap, and took two golden pills from a box that contained others of various colors. She did everything in a methodical, solemn way, as if nothing unforeseen had happened to her since her birth. At last she pulled down the shade on the window, lowered the back of her seat as far as it would go, covered herself to the waist with a blanket without taking off her shoes, put on a sleeping mask, turned her back to me, and then slept without a single pause, without a sigh, without the slightest change in position, for the eight eternal hours and twelve extra minutes of the flight to New York.

It was an ardent journey. I have always believed that there is nothing more beautiful in nature than a beautiful woman, and it was impossible for me to escape even for a moment from the spell of that storybook creature who slept at my side. The steward disappeared as soon as we took off and was replaced by a Cartesian attendant who tried to awaken Beauty to hand her a toiletry case and a set of earphones for listening to music. I repeated the instructions she had given the steward, but the attendant insisted on hearing from Beauty's own lips that she did not want supper either. The steward had to confirm her

instructions, and even so he reproached me because Beauty had not hung the little cardboard 'Do Not Disturb' sign around her neck.

I ate a solitary supper, telling myself in silence everything I would have told her if she had been awake. Her sleep was so steady that at one point I had the distressing thought that the pills she had taken were not for sleeping but for dying. With each drink I raised my glass and toasted her.

'To your health, Beauty.'

When supper was over the lights were dimmed and a movie was shown to no one, and the two of us were alone in the darkness of the world. The biggest storm of the century had ended, and the Atlantic night was immense and limpid, and the plane seemed motionless among the stars. Then I contemplated her, inch by inch, for several hours, and the only sign of life I could detect were the shadows of the dreams that passed along her forehead like clouds over water. Around her neck she wore a chain so fine it was almost invisible against her golden skin, her perfect ears were unperced, her nails were rose with good health, and on her left hand was a plain band. Since she looked no older than twenty, I consoled myself with the idea that it was not a wedding ring but the sign of an ephemeral engagement. 'To know you are sleeping, certain, secure, faithful channel of renunciation, pure line, so close to my marveled arms,' I thought on the foaming crest of champagne, repeating the masterful sonnet by Gerardo Diego. Then I lowered the back of my seat to the level of hers, and we lay together, closer than if we had been in a marriage bed. The climate of her breathing was the same as that of her voice, and her skin exhaled a delicate breath that could only be the scent of her beauty. It seemed incredible: the previous spring I had read a beautiful novel by Yasunari Kawa-

bata about the ancient bourgeois of Kyoto who paid enormous sums to spend the night watching the most beautiful girls in the city, naked and drugged, while they agonized with love in the same bed. They could not wake them, or touch them, and they did not even try, because the essence of their pleasure was to see them sleeping. That night, as I watched over Beauty's sleep, I not only understood that senile refinement but lived it to the full.

'Who would have thought,' I said to myself, my vanity exacerbated by champagne, 'that I'd become an ancient Japanese at this late date.'

I think I slept several hours, conquered by champagne and the mute explosions of the movie, and when I awoke my head was splitting. I went to the bathroom. Two seats behind mine the old woman with the eleven suitcases lay in an awkward sprawl, like a forgotten corpse on a battlefield. Her reading glasses, on a chain of colored beads, were on the floor in the middle of the aisle, and for a moment I enjoyed the malicious pleasure of not picking them up.

After I got rid of the excesses of champagne, I caught sight of myself, contemptible and ugly, in the mirror, and was amazed that the devastation of love could be so terrible. The plane lost altitude without warning, then managed to straighten out and continue full speed ahead. The 'Return to Your Seat' sign went on. I hurried out with the hope that God's turbulence might awaken Beauty and she would have to take refuge in my arms to escape her terror. In my haste I almost stepped on the Dutch woman's glasses and would have been happy if I had. But I retraced my steps, picked them up, and put them on her lap in sudden gratitude for her not having chosen seat number four before I did.

Beauty's sleep was invincible. When the plane stabilized, I had to resist the temptation to shake her on some pretext, because all I wanted in the last hour of the flight was to see her awake, even if she were furious, so that I could recover my freedom, and perhaps my youth. But I couldn't do it. 'Damn it,' I said to myself with great scorn. 'Why wasn't I born a Faustus!'

She awoke by herself at the moment the landing lights went on, and she was as beautiful and refreshed as if she had slept in a rose garden. That was when I realized that, like old married couples, people who sit next to each other on airplanes do not say good morning to each other when they wake up. Nor did she. She took off her mask, opened her radiant eyes, straightened the back of the seat, moved the blanket aside, shook her hair that fell into place of its own weight, put the toiletry case back on her knees, and applied rapid, unnecessary make-up, which took just enough time so that she did not look at me until the plane door opened. Then she put on her lynx jacket, almost stepped over me with a conventional excuse in pure Latin American Spanish, left without even saying good-bye or at least thanking me for all I had done to make our night together a happy one, and disappeared into the sun of today in the Amazon jungle of New York.

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'I Only Came to Use the Phone'

One rainy spring afternoon, while María de la Luz Cervantes was driving alone back to Barcelona, her rented car broke down in the Monegros desert. She was twenty-seven years old, a thoughtful, pretty Mexican who had enjoyed a certain fame as a music-hall performer a few years earlier. She was married to a cabaret magician, whom she was to meet later that day after visiting some relatives in Zaragoza. For an hour she made desperate signals to the cars and trucks that sped past her in the storm, until at last the driver of a ramshackle bus took pity on her. He did warn her, however, that he was not going very far.

'It doesn't matter,' said María. 'All I need is a telephone.'

That was true, and she needed it only to let her husband know that she would not be home before seven. Wearing a student's coat and beach shoes in April, she looked like a bedraggled little bird, and she was so distraught after her mishap that she forgot to take the car keys. A woman with a military air was sitting next to the driver, and she gave María a towel and a blanket and made room for her on the seat. María wiped off the worst of the rain and then sat down, wrapped herself in the blanket, and tried to light a cigarette, but her matches were wet. The woman sharing the seat gave her a light and asked for one of the few cigarettes that were still dry. While they smoked, María gave in to a desire to vent her feelings and raised her voice over the noise of the rain and the clatter of the bus. The woman interrupted her by placing a forefinger to her lips.

'They're asleep,' she whispered.