The small slip of paper quivered in Carol’s hand. She pressed her nose against the glass and watched the busy foot traffic through the growing cloud of breath on the window. The cab driver waited patiently for several moments before loudly clearing his throat. Carol wiped the glass with the sleeve of her father’s jacket. The flannel still smelled of firewood. He used to spend hours chopping in preparation for stormy days just like today. The cab driver coughed loudly and glared at Carol through the rearview mirror.

“Oh, I know what you want,” Carol said as she rummaged through her pockets and handed the driver two cough drops that had been fused together several years prior.

“See there, you got two for one! It’s always cold and flu season, huh? I’ve got a hanky too if you need it.”

The driver slowly turned in his seat, disregarding Carol’s outstretched arm and fading smile, and said gruffly, “$24.50 and counting.” His half gloved finger tapped the meter as he turned back around to face the windshield. Carol blushed and searched her duffle for her change purse.

Carol waved enthusiastically as the yellow cab sped away from the airport. She stood watching its taillights disappear into the traffic, trying to build up the courage to turn around and step in from the cold. Her hands grew clammy as she felt the ticket sticking to her pudgy fingers.

She tugged her overstuffed UW Badgers duffle bag behind her as she stepped up to the counter. She took a deep breath and pulled her mouth into a wide smile.

“Hi there!” Carol said as she beamed at the young, uninterested woman behind the terminal desk.

“Can I help you ma’am?” The woman’s mouth smacked open and closed. Carol watched, momentarily mesmerized by the pink wad of
and Jeopardy. After Alex Trebek waved his goodnights to America, it was lights out. The only fluorescent glow in the house would come from Carol’s bedside table. Carol would go back to her room, but instead of sleeping she stayed up to count and admire her plates. She had memorized each and every detail of those sixty-two plates and dreamed of the people and places they depicted. Just before she turned off her bedside lamp, she dreamed of the pyramids on her favorite plate.

Her father had brought it home for her after a long hunting trip up north. She had sobbed when he left but he promised to bring her back something special to make up for his time away. The evening that he finally returned, after two long weeks, there was a new plate sitting on her bedside table. He had bought it from a local flea market and it had the words, “The Great Pyramid of Giza, Egypt” scrolled in big looped type on top. She stared at the beautiful pointed wonder, towering above the hot desert sand. Carol knew that if she were to ever leave Tomah, that was where she was going to go.

Carol sat in the tight terminal chair and hugged her duffle in her lap. She unzipped it and peeked inside. The plate was still there, unharmed. She smiled and thought about the hot sand and how big those pyramids were going to look in person. They had always seemed so small sitting up on her wall.

There was a loud bing and LaQuisha’s voice came over the speakers, “Flight 1132 to Cairo is now boarding. Flight 1132 is now boarding.” Carol’s growling stomach leapt up into her throat. It was finally happening, she was going to be boarding her first ever airplane. Her hips fought against the armrests as she tugged herself out of her tiny seat and headed over to where LaQuisha was now scanning tickets.

“We meet again!” Carol giggled girlishly, she had long ago learned to laugh to get rid of the nervous butterflies in her stomach. LaQuisha stared blankly as Carol continued to laugh, her face turning pink.

“Remember? I asked you about the meal?” She nudged LaQuisha as if this insignificant interaction somehow made them new friends. She leaned in to whisper, “By the way, did you ever find out what that meal was? I was going to go get a snack but ran out of time and I am already a little bit hungry.” Carol was smiling, hoping their acquaintance would earn her a little bit of inside information.

LaQuisha held out her hand, “Boarding pass.”

“Oh, okay. I see. Don’t want to play favorites. That’s okay.” Carol
handed over her pass and gave her a big knowing wink.

The plane was a lot smaller than she had imagined. Her wide hips bounced in between armrests as she struggled to find her seat. When she finally found her spot, Carol unzipped her duffle and pulled out her plate before squeezing the bag into the overhead storage. She decided to tuck the plate into her oversized brazier for safe keeping during the flight. There was a young man already seated next to the window. Carol plopped down and let out a long, exaggerated sigh, adjusting the circular bulk that protruded from beneath her flannel.

“Wowee this thing is small, huh?” The man turned and stared at Carol’s malformed breast before turning his attention to the tarmac. “Oh, this is just my plate. Don’t worry, I’m all woman under there.” Carol smiled with her eyes wide and nudged him with her elbow, “I’m Carol!” He gave her a polite half smile before his attention was directed back to the men loading the luggage outside.

“So what’s your name?”
“Pete,” he replied without looking up.
“Do you have any guns on you?” Carol’s expression was deadly serious.
“Excuse me?”
“You got a loaded gun, Pete?”
“What the hell are you talking about?”
Carol exploded into laughter, her belly bouncing up and down as she wiped a tear from her eye. Pete’s eyes grew wide as he stared at her.
“Pistol Pete! Get it?” She slapped his leg, “Oh you probably get that all the time.”
Pete very gingerly brushed off the leg Carol had come in contact with, “No, I don’t.”
“Well I find that hard to believe.”
“Believe it.” Pete turned to face the window, muttering about always getting stuck next to something or others. Carol sighed, and reminded herself of the long flight, she had time to win him over.

The plane slowly filled as sleepy passengers found their assigned seats, filing in like obedient school children. The flight attendants ushered people through with their perky smiles and kind voices. They seemed to be the only ones fully awake, except for Carol.

The airplane jerked forward as it began its trek across the tarmac and onto the runway. A few passengers turned to look at Carol with disdain as she squealed and clapped her hands. Her eyes darted around
the plane, expecting to see the other passengers’ excitement, but she only received glares. Carol leaned in to Pete, her plate pressing against his arm.

“What a bunch of grumpy Gus’s, huh? I’m glad I’m next to you and not one of them.” Carol imitated one of the irritated passengers, furrowing her brow and crossing her arms, complete with a loud “Harrumph!” She laughed and elbowed Pete in the ribs. He didn’t return her smile. Before Carol could try to wiggle a smile out of him, one of the flight attendants began the safety demonstration.

“Oh lord, where’s my seatbelt?” Carol glanced from side to side, but there was no sign of her seatbelt. The flight attendant had finished the seatbelt demonstration and was moving on to the oxygen masks. Carol saw that Pete’s seatbelt was securely fastened and he didn’t even seem to be paying attention! *How could he have figured that out already?*

“Pete, where did you get your seatbelt?”

“It’s attached to the seat,” He said bluntly.

“No, no, no, I don’t have one. Mine didn’t come with a seatbelt. Miss! Miss! My seat didn’t come with a seatbelt!” Carol started waving her hands wildly at the flight attendant who had nearly finished her presentation at this point.

“You’re sitting on it,” Pete said in a tone that led Carol to believe he was annoyed.

“I don’t mean to sound rude, Pete, but I think I would know if I was sitting on them,” If he could be annoyed, so could she.

“Stand up,” He sounded even more annoyed now. *Might as well humor the poor guy.* Carol reluctantly stood and sure enough, there it was.

“Lucky guess, I suppose,” she said proudly. Carol struggled to pull the two halves of her seatbelt together. She heaved and hoed, breathing heavily as she leaned against Pete, “Now I..just..gotta...get...a good...angle,” Carol spoke in bursts and flopped around as if she were having a seizure.

“Got it!” She turned to Pete as she breathed her sigh of relief. She nestled herself into her seat and buttoned the top two buttons of her flannel.

“Thanks for that seatbelt tip by the way,” Carol said quietly.

“Sure.”

“You must know a lot about planes, huh?”

“I guess so”
“Hey, do you know what kind of food they might be serving? Because I was going to go and get a snack in the airport, but—“
“Tm just going to read my book for a while. Okay?” He reached forward and pulled a book out from his briefcase and began reading.
“Oh, sure thing. You’ve got your book. I’ve got my plate. We’ve both got our things to do,” Carol said quietly as she pulled her plate out and wiped the glistening sweat from its surface. Pete leaned back into his seat.
“But if you get any ideas about the food—“
“Please!” Pete shouted, startling her, “I’m sorry, I just want to read.” Pete waggled his book at her, his fingers keeping his place. Carol nodded and smiled, miming a zipper over her closed lips.
“Thank you.”
The plane lurched forward and started to gain considerable speed. Passengers were pushed to the back of their seats as the plane moved faster still. Carol gripped her plate and cradled it against her flannelled bosom like a small child. She closed her eyes and felt the wheels leave the paved concrete. She thought of her father, and the comfort he gave her in simply holding her hand. He was the only one who could ever make her feel safe. Instinctively, she grabbed for Pete’s hand as she peeked out the window in time to see the flashing lights of the airport sink farther and farther away in the rain.
“Oh sweet mother Mary, baby Jesus, here we go Pete, we’re airborne!”
Carol could feel Pete’s hand wriggling inside of hers, trying to escape.
“Pete. Pete? PETE!”
“What!” Carol’s head was pressed deep into the back of her seat. Her breathing was quick as the plate she held with one hand against her chest rose and fell in rapid time. Her other hand had Pete’s fingers in a vice.
“Pete, what if we crash?”
“We’re not going to crash. We just took off.”
“Yeah but what if the plane goes down? What if someone planted a bomb on the plane?” Carol’s voice grew louder as she emphasized the word bomb. The other passengers started to perk up from their slumber.
“No, no, no, there’s no bomb. The plane is fine.” Pete said it quickly, almost too quickly for Carol’s taste.
“I know you know about the bomb, Pete!”
“What? What are you talking about! There’s no... bomb,” He whispered the last word and he widened his eyes at her angrily.
“Why did you whisper it? Pete, is it your bomb? Do you have the bomb??”
Pete grabbed Carol’s shoulders and pulled her face close to his, “There. Is. No. Bomb.” He said through clenched teeth.

There were a dozen sets of eyes staring at the two of them. Carol performed breathing exercises as if she were in labor. From the back of the plane, the flight attendants were scowling at them with concerned faces. Pete took a deep breath and said quietly, “Everything is going to be just fine, calm down.” Carol looked into Pete’s pleading eyes and let out the breath she had been holding. She held the sleeves of her flannel to her face and took several more deep breaths; breathing in her father’s fading scent. Carol slowly sat her plate down on her lap and gave Pete a smile. She watched as he flexed his freed hand.

“Sorry if I got a little outta hand,” Carol laughed at her accidental pun.
“You’ve certainly got a good grip,” Pete continued to flex and rub his hand.
“Yeah, that comes from my dad.”
“He must be a strong guy.”
“He was,” Carol said quietly, her smile now almost forced.
Pete opened his mouth but before he could speak, the plane shook its passengers viciously from side to side and Carol burst into exaggerated sobs.
“Carol, it’s turbulence! It’s perfectly normal!”
“We’re going down! We’re all going down! I don’t know how to swim. Pete, I never learned how to swim!”
“We’re not going down, we aren’t even above water.”

By now Carol had the attention of the rest of the passengers aboard the plane. Several people shouted at the two of them to shut up. Another passenger two rows away burst into tears and clutched a rosary that hung around her neck. The plane continued to jostle left and right, up and down.

“There’s so much I didn’t get to do! I never got that Cinnabon I wanted, there’s half a block of the good cheese in the fridge, I still have two episodes of Dancing with the Stars on my DVR! It’s gone, all gone!” The plane took a hard hit and the Egypt plate slipped off of her
lap and onto the plane floor. Carol stared in shock for several moments before she let out a long wail and buried her face into Pete’s shoulder. The captain’s voice boomed over the speakers as the plane continued to jerk from side to side more violently than before and a flash of light lit up the passenger cabin.

“This is your captain speaking. We are experiencing severe turbulence. As a precaution I ask that everyone please wear their oxygen masks and be sure your seatbelts are securely fastened.”

As soon as he finished speaking yellow masks dropped down from the overhead compartments and several passengers let out shrieks of fear. The entire plane came to life with panicked voices as the turbulence grew stronger and passengers grew increasingly aware of the lightning flashes just outside their windows. Pete grabbed his oxygen mask and put it on. Carol struggled to reach the broken pieces of her plate that were sliding around on the floor. Her hand outstretched to reach a large piece that had half of a pyramid on it.

“Carol, you need to put on your mask!” Pete yelled at her, but she didn’t care. She lunged forward in her seat, desperately trying to reach, wailing in lament.

“Carol!” Pete shouted at her over the sound of a loud explosion. The plane lurched forward and started to fall, like a raindrop right from the sky. Emergency lights flashed on and Carol felt her ears pop as they quickly lost altitude. She watched the pieces of her plate slide forward down the aisle in the nosedive. She screamed and frantically groped for her seatbelt.

“Carol! Let it go!”

“I can’t!” She was sobbing, gasping for air.

“You have to!” Pete held out her oxygen mask.

Carol could no longer see any pieces of porcelain; they had all slid out of her sight. She wiped her tears and smelled her father. Carol took the oxygen mask and reached to hold Pete’s hand as the sounds of screams filled the passenger cabin.