

Harriet and MaryAnne were not the most beautiful women in attendance that evening at Jack's Black Smile, the boxy, noisy, brick-walled bar on Wallaby street, but they were certainly the kindest, since unlike the other women with whom Edgar attempted a conversation, Harriet and MaryAnne did not immediately walk away. As Edgar teased out their names and drink preferences, Marcus looked on with unexpected admiration for his friend. In high school, Edgar had possessed the self-assurance and charm of a lint catcher. At least some of the changes of the last fifteen years had been for the better.

"Let's see. Rum and Coke for MaryAnne and a Coors Light for Harriet," Edgar said.

"Other way around," Harriet said. She was a tall woman in her mid-thirties, with broad shoulders and a perky upright blonde ponytail. When she smiled her large pink gums flashed with the delighted overexposure of an exhibitionist. Harriet laughed loudly and happily, though not easily. In this, she expertly walked the line; she was neither too discerning to be unkind nor too lenient to be unsatisfying. When Marcus learned that she was an elementary school teacher, he felt a pang of envy for Harriet's students who—besides having their entire lives ahead of them—also had this friendly, robust woman to model their desires after.

"I like women with men's names. I think it's endearing,"

Edgar said, handing the tumbler with its plump quarter-lime garnish to Harriet.

“It’s not a man’s name,” MaryAnne said.

“Harry,” Edgar said.

“No one calls her Harry,” MaryAnne said. Her features were small and dark, her eyes owlishly hooded, and the sight of her thin lips on the bottle made Marcus think, inexplicably, of a plug of black licorice.

“Marcus, did you know that MaryAnne is a stewardess? Maybe you were on the same flight,” Edgar said.

“Flight attendant,” MaryAnne said.

“Marcus flew in from San Jose this afternoon. Is that where you came from?”

“I came from Dallas.”

“That would have been a crazy coincidence,” Edgar said.

“Crazy,” MaryAnne said, and pulled on her beer.

“Do you still like flying? After all this time? I think I’d lose interest,” Edgar said.

“She hates it,” Harriet volunteered.

“I like flying fine,” MaryAnne said. “It’s the passengers I could do without.”

“They can be pretty bad, huh?” Edgar said.

“Tell them about the woman who put her baby up in the overhead bin. Her baby!” Harriet shrieked, laughing.

“She didn’t know any better,” MaryAnne said. “It was her first time on an airplane.”

“Who’s never been on an airplane?” Edgar said, shaking his head. “What else? You must have a ton of stories.”

MaryAnne didn’t reply. Marcus could feel her apathy; it was as prominent and visceral as rage, and though long ago he would have moved toward the bright sunlit delight of Harriet, after all that had happened to him recently, he felt a kinship to the obscure, ensnared dimness of MaryAnne. For the first time since arriving at the bar, he spoke.

“What’s the worst thing you’ve ever done to a passenger?”

She turned to look at him. Whether gauging his seriousness or simply registering his presence, Marcus couldn’t tell.

“There has to be something,” he said.

“I’m not the vengeful type.”

“You put sour milk in that guy’s cof-fee,” Harriet sang.

“Right. Something like that,” MaryAnne said. “Sour milk.”

Edgar laughed and pulled Harriet toward the jukebox. “Come on. Help me pick some songs. If I have to listen to ‘I Heard It Through the Grapevine’ one more time I’ll burn this place down.”

“And what’s the worst thing a passenger ever did to you?” Marcus said. He could see Edgar and Harriet negotiating

the crowd toward the glass and metal stump of the jukebox and then, upon reaching it, their bodies converging to address it.

“I don’t know,” MaryAnne said.

“There has to be something.”

“I don’t remember.”

“You’re saying no passenger ever did anything bad to you,” Marcus said.

“No. I’m saying I don’t remember what the worst thing is.”

“How is that possible?” Marcus said. He had come to believe that the worst fault was the one thing we always remembered, and confronted with this discrepancy he didn’t know whether to be grateful or skeptical. He motioned to the bartender. The chalkboard posted a drink special, a beer and a shot for five dollars, and he ordered two.

“So. How do you know Harriet?”

“Look, I appreciate the effort,” MaryAnne said, rolling the new silver bottle between her palms, “but you don’t have to do this.”

“Do what?”

“I understand. You’re playing wingman for your friend. Well I don’t need to be distracted. I’m capable of entertaining myself.”

“I’m not trying to distract you,” Marcus said.

“Right. Of course not.” She downed the shot then

raised the bottle of beer to the sweet black stain of her lips. After a while she stopped and wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. “You find me deeply, deeply interesting,” she said.

“Hey, I don’t know what I said that offended you, MaryAnne—”

“That’s it, use my name, it’s more sincere.”

“—but you seem to be having a conversation that I’m not having.”

“I’m sorry,” she said. “You’re a good guy. Okay? You’re a great guy. The world is full of great guys.” She tapped him on the arm, once, twice, and then walked away.