

Seats 12A, B, and C

by Isabel Lindsay

Forty thousand feet in the air, three pairs of shoulders tremble in a line. Left aisle. Seats 12A, B, and C. Sister, sister, mother.

JACKIE, seven years old, is thinking about God.
AUBREY, eighteen years old, is thinking about God.
STELLA, forty-three years old, is also thinking about God.

JACKIE is thinking about God because she's confused as to why she cannot see him. They're in heaven; that part, at least, is obvious. Two weeks ago, at school, her best friend Laura gave her a complete run-down on the daily life of God. She would know; her family was the kind that Aubrey called the frosted family: done up to perfection, like a wedding cake. Laura went to church every Sunday. "Isn't it boring?" Jackie once asked.

"So boring. The only good part is the cracker they give you."

"The cracker?"

"My mom calls it a cracker. It's actually a body."

"How can a body fit in a cracker?"

"I don't know." The entire thing baffled Jackie completely. She'd thought for years that God was the biggest thing on Earth, if not the universe; the idea that he could fit on a cracker implied that he was actually quite small.

Either way, as Laura had explained, God lived in the clouds. He and the other people in heaven had parties every day and a prayer service each night. The important part to remember was that God sat on a golden throne, watching above the angels. If he wasn't sitting on the throne, Laura warned, it meant he was on Earth taking care of business; healing the sick, comforting the sad, et cetera. Then all the heavenly people and the angels joined hands and waited for him to return.

Jackie, in a moment of wondrous, wide-eyed clarity, asked if the "golden throne" God sat on was

actually the sun. Laura considered this, then said, "Could be. It's supposed to be the most beautiful thing anyone's ever seen."

The sun was baked golden when they'd left Mexico that morning, but now she isn't sure where it is; they're above everything. The clouds are a mattress beneath them. Jackie fidgets. Her dad presented her with a stuffed dolphin on their first day of vacation, and she hasn't released it since; its face is getting squashed in her shaking hands. There's something wrong with the world, she thinks. People aren't supposed to be above heaven. Yet here they are.

AUBREY is thinking about God because he's what she thinks about when she thinks about Maggie. She's always thinking about Maggie. Since their first messages to each other, friendly exchanges on a web forum, she's thought about her, miles between their screens.

A week ago, Aubrey clutched her chest, feeling as though it would cave in, crumble, until she shrank inward in a crush of collapsing bones and disappeared completely. In her hand was a phone, and through it, across the country, was Maggie. "I don't really want to talk about it," Maggie had said. "Every time I do, I want to break something, and there isn't much left in my room to shatter."

"How long will you be gone?" Aubrey had asked, and the weakness in her voice had mortified her.

"For the rest of the month."

She and Maggie had never met, but over the phone, Aubrey could feel the skin of her ear against the receiver, imagine the way her hair fell across the pale, sharp slope of her shoulders. Through almost every picture Maggie sent, Aubrey could piece together the fragments and build a world she'd never seen. Maggie's bedroom was blue and covered in floral wallpaper. The roads beyond her house rose in winding, smooth dark curves along the massive Oregon mountains. The pictures sent chills down

Aubrey's arms: the dark swell of the looming peaks across the horizon line, the lush, green flourish of grass. Her own backyard was yellow and burnt, with old plastic flamingos stuck in the lawn and a new scratch on the fence every day from the neighbor's furious pitbulls.

"It's honestly kind of funny," Maggie had said. "That they think it'll change me, I mean."

"I don't think it's funny at all," Aubrey had replied. Then there had been silence.

STELLA is thinking about God because when she was only five, she and her grandmother went to visit family over in Arizona, and the plane had smelled back then of disinfectant and peppermint. She'd wanted the window seat, despite her grandmother's objections. She'd always liked sitting by the window when they traveled, and though it was her first time on a plane, she wanted to see the world for once in its entirety: every human, standing side by side, on their great, spherical home. Thinking back now, she wonders what her grandmother would've thought of all that, her granddaughter thinking the plane would go so high she'd be able to see all of Earth, for one; not to mention the idea of seeing individual humans as well, all holding hands in solidarity. Maybe it was a good thing, the kind of childlike wonder she'd always tried to keep. A kind of hope that everyone wanted the best for each other, and if you looked hard enough, you could see them all trying to care.

It was the kind of optimism she'd expect in Jackie, who seemed entranced by the view, no signs of apprehension. To be safe, Stella prayed internally, mostly for Jackie and Aubrey, partly for herself, that no turbulence would reach them. It had been such an incredible feat, watching her daughter embrace life with such confidence and strength. Stella often thought she must've gotten it from her father, though contributing any positive characteristics to Blake made her want to claw her own eyes out. The ridiculous stuffed thing Blake had offered as a peace offering at the beginning of their vacation hadn't left Jackie's arms since he handed it over—meanwhile, Stella, reduced to idiocy, had to stand and smile as it happened.

The entire thing had been their idea. It wasn't as though her ex-husband deserved any gifts, all things considered. Nearly three years of stiff, noncommittal

contact since the divorce, barely any effort paid to see Aubrey or Jackie—then, on a random Tuesday morning, an invitation to a resort in Mexico? Stella had almost hung up the phone.

"I want the girls to meet Angelica," Blake had explained at the time. "We're getting serious, and I want her to be in their lives."

You're barely in their lives, Stella had shot back mentally, tightening her grip on the phone. And how presumptuous of him, to assume they had no summer plans. As if his ex-wife and daughters were just itching to jump on a plane and meet his new girlfriend.

She hadn't brought Blake or Angelica any gifts. After the dolphin incident, embarrassed to arrive empty-handed, she'd been all too willing to pay for their meals, drinks, even tourist trinkets. Every time, though, Blake would wave her away, as Angelica hung on his arm, beaming with white-teethed loveliness.

On the second day of their vacation, Blake had wanted to take Aubrey and Jackie for "daddy-daughter" time, an idea that Stella would've bristled at on the best of days, let alone when it implied *she'd* be responsible for Angelica as the three of them were away. She was unable to refuse, however, as Jackie practically jumped into her father's arms, and Aubrey moved with her usual forced nonchalance. The two women both stood, waving placidly, as if they were carbon copies, or one the prototype and the other newer model. Old and new loves. Meant to spend the evening in harmony.

Angelica made it all too easy, of course. "Come with me to the markets," she'd said, and hauled Stella from stall to stall full of sundresses, white flip-flops, golden bangles, oversized sunglasses, the same overpriced beachy paraphernalia that reminded Stella of her home in Florida. Stella could find no reason to refuse, when Angelica seemed so genuine, so hopeful to become friends. She would try on a few outfits and insist Stella do the same, as if they were old college roommates or teenage girls. If the whole thing hadn't made Stella feel like a mother helping her daughter shop for school, maybe she would've enjoyed herself. That said, at one store, Stella emerged from the changing room in a turquoise gown that spread in plaited ruffles down to her knees.

"Oh, beautiful," Stella had said, and meant it. "Perfect for you."

"Stop, you're too sweet to me," Angelica had

blushed good-naturedly. “I’d walk out of here with it, but it’s just too pricey, especially with all the spending I’ve done so far.”

“Then let me,” Stella said, and immediately blanched at her eagerness. Angelica, too, seemed surprised; only for a moment, however, before her face split into a gorgeous beam.

“Oh, you really are the best, it’s no wonder Blake loves you so much! I can’t, though. Really. I’d feel just terrible.” She shook her head, still smiling, with all the earnestness and decency on Earth. “The guilt would just kill me, I’d never be able to wear it.”

“Where are the angels?”

“What’s that, baby?” Stella smoothed Jackie’s head, inhaling shakily. She’d promised herself she’d stop thinking about them both as soon as the plane took off—when she was in Mexico, sure, she was allowed her typical ex-wife, washed-up-mother bitterness, but as soon as they were on their way back to Florida, it was back to solid motherhood and goodwill. No anger towards Blake and his revolting middle-aged tan, nor Angelica with her slim figure and broad sunhats. She wished the best for them.

“The angels. Aren’t we in heaven?”

“Imagine,” Aubrey said from her own seat, so quietly Stella almost didn’t hear. Her headphones were on, as always, practically her fifth limb, and she’d barely said a word in hours. The entire trip had been overflowing with inexplicable teen angst, the kind Stella knew nothing about, nor could she control. It was no matter of hers, then, when Blake had made an offhand comment during dinner on their third day of vacation and Aubrey had immediately stormed out of the hotel dining room. Such was parenting.

“Heaven?” Stella smiled, still stroking Jackie’s hair. “I don’t think we’re high enough for that yet.”

“I thought once you reached the clouds, you were there. Laura told me God would be waiting on a throne,” Jackie insisted, twisting her dolphin agitatedly. “Mom, what if I eat too much in heaven or jump up and down too much and fall through? What if the clouds can’t hold me?”

All existential questions from children considered, Stella didn’t think it was so unreasonable. “There would be more clouds underneath to catch you,” she said, smoothly. “And they’re extra strong. God won’t let anyone fall from heaven, sweetie.”

“Except the devil,” Aubrey said, not looking up from her phone.

Stella hit her lightly on the arm. “Please don’t say things like that.”

“When are we landing?”

“There’s still an hour left.”

Aubrey grunted and turned away. The ironic thing about teenagers, Stella thought, was that some of them are clear about their pull from you; some of them hide it until it strikes you like a slap in the face. What was previously just common squabbles between her and Aubrey suddenly became such a strong, bitter distaste that for months Stella was sure she’d been replaced; once a good-natured, earnest relationship turned sour from—what? They used to talk about everything. Aubrey was smart as a whip, came home from school nearly every day with something new on her mind. They’d get into debates, occasionally; Stella still believed school uniforms were proper, while Aubrey detested them, and she’d once asked for a nose piercing, which Stella shut down instantly. But for the most part, it was happy. Now she couldn’t do anything right. While packing for the trip, Stella had asked innocently if Aubrey wanted to go shopping for razors, asking when was the last time she’d shaved her legs. Aubrey had given her a look of such complete disdain and condescension it froze the air between them for days. It was because of Aubrey that Stella agreed to go to Mexico to meet Blake and Angelica. Not that Stella would ever credit Blake for being a good father—but, perhaps something in his distance would compel Aubrey to talk to him, spill secrets he didn’t ask for. A kind of reverse psychology thing. Stella wasn’t so prideful to admit that maybe her attempts at connection just weren’t what Aubrey needed. Maybe a step back would help. Or, on the other hand (and this was preferable in Stella’s eyes), maybe Aubrey’s time with Blake would be odd and uncomfortable, and she’d realize how much more trust she had in Stella, the one who’d been there for her all along.

Neither scenario had occurred, anyway. Aubrey ignored both her parents with equal enthusiasm. Or, rather, its lack thereof.

Jackie, unwilling to get off-topic as always, looked worriedly out of the window again. “I wanted to see God,” she said.

Stella sighed and pulled her daughter closer. “I think it’s best we not see him just yet.”

*My dad's tan is terrible
You'd hate the weather here
The music they're playing at the restaurant sucks
This whole thing sucks*

The last time Aubrey spoke to Maggie, she'd practically torn her room to shreds trying to find the one shirt she remembered her dad gifting her when he still lived in Florida—it was red, striped, likely too small on her now, but would at least serve as a talking point. The whole thing was wildly amusing to her; her dad had left when she was fifteen, moved in with his new, absurdly young girlfriend when she was sixteen, and then decided a family trip would be the best decision for all of them now that she was eighteen, a full adult. She told the whole thing to Maggie, and the two of them had nearly fallen apart with giggles.

"My mom is going to tear that Angelica girl apart. I've only met her a few times, but she's fucking tiny," Aubrey had snorted. "Jesus. Can you imagine all five of us around a dinner table? Singing Kumbaya? It'll be a week straight of bullshit." She'd dissolved into giggles again, then added, "We have a cell plan, don't worry. I can still text you every day."

The silence on Maggie's end had extended until Aubrey checked to see if she'd accidentally hung up. Then Maggie spoke, and the words came slowly at first, then quicker, then slow again. And the name—the name—slashed its way down Aubrey's chest.

"*St. Catherine.*" Aubrey wanted to spit the words out of her mouth. "Can they do that? You're almost eighteen. You'll be an adult in two months. They can't send you away."

"They can. They will." Maggie's voice had gone dull, so different from the casual way she'd answered the phone, and Aubrey wondered, in a sudden panic, if she'd even planned on relaying the news, or if she would have simply vanished and let Aubrey lose her mind with terror over what could've happened. "It'll straighten me out, they said. You think that was them trying to make a joke?"

"Can't you do anything? Aren't those camps illegal nowadays, or something? Can't you come here?" Aubrey asked, swallowing. Then Maggie had laughed.

"Oregon and Florida aren't really neighbors," Maggie had said, dryly. "And I'd have to come back, eventually. They're my parents, you know?"

They often spent entire nights complaining to each other about their parents, but Aubrey couldn't bring herself to mention it. She said nothing, as the claws of shame tore the inside of her throat raw.

"It's just what they think is best. It won't do jack shit, obviously, but I don't want to make a big deal out of it. And I mean—" Maggie cut herself off, then continued, more forcefully than before. "I mean, I love you, Aubrey, obviously, but we're both going to school soon, so we can be free then, right? And we can do whatever we want, with whoever we want."

"I don't want to do whatever with whoever. I only want to talk to you."

"Well, this summer was awesome, I'm really glad we found each other online, but we were never actually gonna meet, were we? I mean, considering the distance and all?"

They'd ended the call fifteen minutes later, after a long, automatic string of words Aubrey could barely hear herself say—*stay safe, be careful, I hope it's over with soon, good luck at school, yes of course we'll still be friends, I love you.* Then Stella had burst into the room with an armful of laundry—she never fucking *knocked*—and squawked that Aubrey's room was a mess, immediately beginning to throw her things around like they were all bits of trash.

St. Catherine's Counseling Choice was a camp for kids whose parents, as Maggie put it, "were terrified their children would return from university as drug dealers and homosexuals." There were no phones allowed. It was a month long. As soon as she was done, Maggie would then move away to her school, also in Oregon, away from her parents, but still just as far from Florida.

After weeks of staying up on the phone, giggling, crying over their families, Aubrey had made Maggie promise they'd meet up at least once over the summer. Maggie confirmed the promise solemnly.

This plane ride is taking too long. Wish we'd crash into the ocean, Aubrey texted. She sent the message and watched the *not delivered* notification chime from the top of her phone.

Once, Laura told Jackie that God was the best thing in the world because he gave you anything you wanted.

Jackie squeezed her dolphin as she looked out of the window, her leg shaking uncontrollably. She

wasn't sure how much longer they had, but if they landed without seeing God or his golden throne, it would ruin two things for her: she'd no longer have anything to tell Laura, and she wouldn't get the chance to tell God what she wanted. And if he didn't hear, then he might never know.

Jackie imagined that talking to God would be like when her mom brought her to the fire department for Christmas to see Santa; she'd sit on his lap, he'd smile and stroke his beard. Laura definitely mentioned a beard. Yet Laura hadn't been above the clouds, Jackie thought firmly, straining her eyes. If she saw God, she'd finally have one thing she could teach Laura about, instead of Laura teaching her.

Her leg shook, and it rose to her knees, then arms, and the world seemed to shudder and jolt. She looked up at her mom, whose face had gone pale, and Aubrey's suddenly widened eyes, rising from her phone. The intercom came on, a staticky voice that Jackie couldn't comprehend. She looked instead at her mom, who was clutching onto her armrests and breathing rapidly.

Stella could not think clearly. The plane shuddered, making terrible bumps, and Stella remembered her first experience in the air, with her grandmother. Halfway through the flight, the plane hit turbulence that sent the cabin jolting back and forth with what Stella remembers as ferocious, violent intensity; she had jerked away from the window, screaming, thinking if she were too close she'd topple forward and fall right out. She remembers the fresh peppermint smell that intensified as one of the flight attendants went to her, smiling, a tall girl in blue heels: "It's alright, love. Just a few bumps. It's fine now, you see?" But a moment later, the turbulence started up again, and the flight attendant went to check on another passenger.

Stella had clutched onto her grandmother, whose head was bowed in prayer. The cabin shook, the world rolled beneath them, too far to reach, too close to show its entirety, and Stella hid her face and thought she'd never make her way back down.

"Stella," Aubrey said, peeling off her headphones. She grabbed her arm, but Stella wasn't looking at her. Her eyes were stuck straight ahead, wild, as if staring

through the seat before her and into the endless sky beyond. "Hey. Hey. Mom."

"What's happening?" Jackie's own breath quickened, and she felt tears forming as she saw her mom clutch her chest, unspeaking, looking as though she was about to spring from her chair and run. "What's wrong with her?"

"She's just—" Aubrey looked around, alarmed, though she didn't seem to know what to do or who to call. "I think she's just a little scared—"

The cabin shook again, and a few passengers yelped with surprise; their mother whimpered and began to tremble.

"Okay. Okay," Aubrey said. "Jackie, take Mom's hand, okay? She just needs to calm down a little."

Jackie dropped her dolphin and grabbed onto her mother's hand, squeezing tightly. She hesitated for a moment, then shut the window; with less sunlight blaring through, their mother blinked, then looked down, still breathing heavily.

"Everything's fine, Mom," Aubrey said, her voice calm and even. "It was just turbulence. We only have a little bit longer before we land. Everything's going to be okay. We're landing soon. Soon we'll be home."

"I needed to tell God something," Jackie said.

"What, Jackie?"

She clutched her mother's hand tighter. "I wanted to ask him if Dad could move up to Florida again."

Aubrey stopped her murmurs to stare at her, blinking in wide-eyed surprise. "Why would you want that?"

Jackie felt her bottom lip tremble. "Because I like being with him, and I like being with mom, and I want to be with them both, together."

"Dad asked me if I was excited about university because maybe I'd find a *boy*. Do you remember that?" Aubrey asked, her voice sharp, across their mother's silent body. "During dinner? Dad pretended to throw the dolphin that *he gave you* into the ocean and almost made you cry, because he thought it would be funny."

"What?" Stella said softly, her eyes still staring straight ahead. "He did what?"

"During our 'daddy-daughter bonding time.'" Aubrey glared down at the dolphin, which had flopped onto the floor. "He acted like a child. He told me as we left you and Angelica, *I wonder which one of them will kill the other first.*" Her face twisted in disgust. "I hate him. I don't want to be like him."

Stella turned to her and blinked, slowly, her eyebrows furrowed. “You’re nothing like him.”

Their seats began to tremble, and Stella screwed her eyes shut.

“Jackie, give Mom a big hug,” Aubrey said. Jackie reached over to her mother, who held her back, opening her arms so they could fold into one another. After a moment, Aubrey joined, squeezing herself around both of them, taking long, deep breaths. “Everything’s okay. Everything will be okay,” she said, and repeated it gently until the plane began to descend.