

Ring of Survivors at the Bellfield Community Centre

1011 words

When the plane went down it was all over the news, as you'd expect. You could just make out the side of my fear-stricken face in one of the photos in the newspaper. *When the plane went down*...that's how they prefer to say it here at the second annual gathering of the survivors of EF247, a ring of chairs inside the Bellfield Community Centre. All planes that go up, go down. Ours straight up *crashed*. But that's what we say here. And here we all are.

Nobody died. Peter, about my age, broke his leg in three places and limps badly now. Helen has nightmares, she says, looking down at the polished floor. People take turns in saying what they've been up to since we last met, then talking a little, if they want to, about *when the plane went down*. I look around the hall. It's chilly and light and far too big for our means. I suspect this is what an AA meeting looks like, except here you can get a plastic cup of wine from the fold-out table near the door. There are remnants of recent occupancy – indoor soccer goals pushed into one corner; some butcher's paper Blu-tacked to the walls. To my right, up by the high windows, there's some ribbon with sparkling letters hanging off. It reads *HAPP BIR HDA MA*... Mark? Mary, Mathius, Mahmood. A performance troop maybe, The Happy Birthday Marionettes? Matthew, Mable, Mae. Mankind. Happy Birthday Mankind. You who brought us language, religion and the aviation industry. The very things that unite and divide us here today.

Joanna is the most religious of the religious ones here. Wouldn't you know it with a name like that. She who was healed by Christ, way back in the Gospel of Luke and again two years ago. She's talking about how clear she now sees. Now she is crying. 'Thank God,' etc. She is the one who emails everyone and pushes this whole meeting thing. Maybe it's a recruitment drive in disguise.

It's Tracy who arranged the hall, through her connections. She doesn't say a lot but she encourages the others. I like her. I give her knowing looks across the ring as Joanna wails. She sees me but doesn't smile or wink or anything. She may not be a cynic-in-arms as I had hoped. Not outwardly, at least.

Sean and Ramona were both single and in their mid or late thirties when the engines failed. Now they're married to each other. That got some news coverage all of its own. I'm not surprised they married; we all felt a connection at the time, in those first minutes of elation at being alive. In the memory of some it seems we exited the wreck arm in arm. I remember it was certainly orderly, surprisingly quiet. Helen, I think, and this guy Athas, and me, offering our hands to others for balance. It was a small plane, a Dash 8, and almost empty. There are eighteen people here today and that was all of us. I had two seats to myself. I could see clearly the lake racing up to swallow us.

Besides Sean and Ramona there is Graham and Everett, who went into business with each other for a while; you might say a more binding commitment than marriage. They started a counselling group but it didn't make money. A few of the group went on a holiday together (by plane!). That's a whole other test of relationships. The expectation of fun, sustained.

The pilots, Steve and Breanna, and the crew, aren't here. I don't know about Breanna and the crew, but Steve returned to work after a few weeks off, flew a couple more routes then chucked it in. Anxiety. He was here last year and we all shook his hand. Nobody mentions him today.

Then Carmen speaks. It's the same spiel as last year, but worse for having been spoken again. After the wild first few weeks, Carmen contacted the airline about her possessions. They hadn't returned her purse, which was an heirloom and also worth a fair bit of money, she says. It wasn't destroyed, she says. She saw it bounce down the aisle and it

was still there when she exited for the slide into the lake. She didn't grab it at the time because she was following the instructions of the crew to the letter. 'Two years later,' she says, 'still nothing!' She is incensed. She has a lawyer on the job now. I want to ask her whether she has considered letting the miracle of survival prevail over the lawsuit, but I don't want to know the answer. To my right another sparkling letter floats down from the ribbon near the high windows.

Leaving, Athas takes me aside. He has a wonderful manner, genuine, gentle. He hands me a business card with his mobile on it, something something engineering. It feels heavy in my shirt pocket. There's a rubbish bin near the shops across the road where I'm parked.

I finish the whole flask before starting the car. I drive direct from the meeting to see my daughter, Rosie, and my first grandson, brand new. There is a brown fluffy bunny on the passenger seat and a bottle of champagne for Rosie and Finn and me. Passing through the streets of Thornbury, I hear noises: Engine sounds, cutting in and out. A whirring. A clunk clunk clunk. I see the sky veering impossibly, the road inclining on an axis, spinning. White knuckled, I stop the car and wait for the world to right itself.

Eventually, it does. I stay in place with the heat coursing through my skin and the deep, deep cold beneath. I sit and wait until I finally come to realise that perhaps it is I – not Joanna the Saved, not Carmen the Robbed – who hasn't yet escaped the wreckage. But I am here now, sitting, sweating, breathing. A brown bunny sits beside me awaiting the arms of a baby boy. I have these things to celebrate.