

Base Fare Odyssey

By T. C. Weber

Bill and Amy were among the last passengers to board the airplane. They had no seat assignments, just the words 'REAR SECTION' on their tickets. Their hands were empty—they'd been forced to surrender their compact suitcases at the gate since their fare didn't cover carry-on bags.

"Maybe we should have paid the carry-on fee," Amy said as she edged past unsmiling passengers buckling into cramped seats. "Now we'll have to wait at baggage claim anyway."

"\$50 apiece?" Bill said behind her. "Are you kidding?"

They reached a half-parted red curtain just aft of the wings. A flight attendant glanced at their tickets and gestured beyond. "Rear Section, this way. Be sure to attach the harnesses once you've found a space."

"Harnesses?"

"We can't take off until all passengers are secure."

Beyond the curtain stood a crowd of sullen-looking passengers, crammed together like bowling pins. There were no seats. Everyone was on their feet, strapped into black harnesses suspended by cables from the ceiling.

Amy turned back to the attendant. "Excuse me, ma'am. Where are the seats?"

The attendant let out a huff. "You didn't pay for the seat upgrade."

"I thought maybe that was for an extra two inches of leg room."

"Ma'am, I need you to find a place so everyone can board."

Amy and Bill found two empty spots near the back of the plane. The harnesses were simple enough—arms through the loops, fasten straps around each thigh, and a clip on the chest. The overhead cables were already attached to the back.

“How long is this flight?” Amy asked Bill.

“Three hours.”

“We have to stand in these things for three hours?”

A few more passengers boarded, then a voice over the speakers reminded them to stay buckled in at all times. The engines revved up to a loud whine and the jet accelerated down the runway. Amy lost her balance—so did Bill—but the cables kept them upright. The bottom straps dug against their thighs.

“My nuts,” Bill grimaced.

The plane leapt off the ground and ascended at a steep angle. A toddler hanging in front of them squealed in delight. The woman next to the toddler screamed and shot out arms to clutch her child.

“Do you think we’ll get beverage service?” Bill asked Amy as they swayed on their cables and struggled to keep their feet on the floor.

“I wonder if they have those little plane-shaped crackers,” she responded, then pressed her lips together in doubt.

Half an hour after takeoff, the plane started bouncing and shaking. Swaying on their cables, Amy and Bill knocked against each other and against their neighboring passengers.

A bulky man next to Bill put up fists. “Bump into me again. I dare you.”

Bill cringed. “Sorry, it was an accident.”

“We are experiencing some turbulence,” the voice said over the speakers. “It looks like this will continue for some time, so please remain buckled in.”

A passenger behind them threw up a half-digested lunch on Bill. A few flecks of bile-infused hamburger landed on Amy. The rancid smell made her throw up too, and soon everyone was vomiting.

A loud bang came from outside the aircraft, and it tipped to the left. The harnessed, vomit-covered passengers lost their footing again. The woman with the toddler screamed and screamed.

“Would you shut up, lady?” the big man next to Bill yelled.

“We are experiencing mechanical problems,” the voice said over the speakers, “and will have to make an emergency landing.”

A man’s voice behind Bill and Amy grumbled, “Next time I’ll pay extra for a plane that’s passed inspection.”

The airplane descended, bouncing and shuddering. The cabin began to smell like burnt oil.

Bill and Amy couldn’t see what was happening outside, since all the windows were down. They grasped each others’ hands, faces rigid in fear.

“Do you think this is it?” Amy asked Bill.

“Better not be. We haven’t seen how Game of Thrones ends.”

The plane continued to descend. Then it smacked against the ground, knocking the harnessed passengers off their feet and swinging them around. It bounced back up in the air, hit ground again, and sped forward, shaking and rattling. They slowed and finally lurched to a stop. The passenger behind Bill threw up on him again.

“We have arrived at our alternate destination,” the voice said over the speakers, surprisingly calm. “Passengers will be responsible for finding their own transportation from here. As always, thank you for flying with us.”

Bill and Amy were among the last to exit the plane. It rested in the middle of an endless corn field, wings and lower fuselage spattered with leaves and dirt. A long swath of devastation trailed behind them.

Aching all over, Amy pulled her smart phone out of her pants pocket and called her mother to let her know they’d be late.

Her mother spoke first. “Oh, have you arrived already? How was your flight?”

In the distance, a cow mooed.