

Vanity

5 He had stuffed his suitcase into the empty overhead bin, having purchased early-boarding rights from the airline, and had settled into his nonreclining seat, 32-B, when he had to stand up again to let the passenger in 32-A get past him. 32-A accompanied almost every move – taking off his rain-coat, placing his crossword-puzzle book on the seat – with an unpleasant, guttural grunt. 32-A was a short man, of a certain age, stooped but solid, with hair dyed inky black. Apparently indifferent to mere appearances, he displayed traces of dandruff on his rumpled suit. Dandruff had also made its way onto his soiled and unpressed lime-green necktie. Harry Albert, who, by contrast, dressed rather elegantly and could still turn heads for his handsomeness, gave the man a nod, but 32-A did not nod in return. When 32-A finally sat down, he said, “Whoof.”

10 Harry nodded and, between staged laughs, said, “That’s right!” trying to be friendly. However, 32-A did not seem interested in Harry’s amiable agreement and pulled out a battered copy of that day’s *Minneapolis Star Tribune*. He turned to the business page and commenced to read. From time to time he uttered subvocalizations¹. Grim-faced, the flight attendants announced that they had “a very full flight.” They proceeded to help passengers force their luggage into the already crammed overhead spaces. They gave instructions in the use of seat belts and oxygen masks, and eventually the plane was airborne.

15 Going through the cloud cover, the plane bounced and rattled. A few passengers laughed nervously. One overhead compartment popped open. A little girl screamed. The captain announced that there would be no beverage service, for now: too much turbulence.

20 “Bumpy flight,” Harry Albert said.

“Unhrh,” 32-A replied.

25 Well, he wouldn’t bother to introduce himself to a man whose only conversational gambit consisted of nonverbal animal-like rumbling. Trying to doze, Harry heard 32-A making more peculiar sounds, like a dog having a nightmare. It would be impossible to doze off with this guy growling next to him. Feeling despondent, Harry reached for his paperback copy of *Schindler’s List*, which someone had recommended.

32-A glanced over and grunted again. Finally he spoke up. “I was one of those.” He had traces of a middle European accent, nearly gone, mostly dead but still living, a ghoulish accent.

30 “One of what?” Harry asked.

“I was a Schindler² Jew,” 32-A said.

35 Harry Albert felt a slight electrical shock. “I’m honored to meet you, sir,” he said. He held out his hand and introduced himself to the man, who replied with his own name, “David Lowie.” Or at least it sounded like Lowie. Harry didn’t think it would be polite to ask 32-A (or, no: a person shouldn’t think of a Holocaust survivor as 32-A) to repeat his name, so he refrained. Nor could he address his seatmate as David, presuming on an intimacy that did not exist. Mr. Lowie? Well, for the duration of an airplane flight, who needs names? Anonymity was the rule.

Apparently his seatmate didn’t think so. “Harry Albert?” the man asked. “What’s your last name?”

“It’s Albert.”

40 “Rrrgggr,” the man replied dismissively. “That’s an English name. But it sounds like a first name. Ha ha ha rrrgh.” He coughed into a stickily soiled handkerchief, crusted with dried extrusions.

“Yes,” Harry said, as the plane bounced around. A woman one row in front of him, on the other side of the aisle, was anxiously reading while holding her husband’s hand. Okay: it was a turbulent flight but not life-threatening. “Could I ask you,” Harry said, turning to his seatmate, “what Schindler was like? Did you ever talk to him?”

45 “Talk to him? What a question. No! Never. Don’t be nuts. You didn’t even *look* at him.”

“You didn’t look at him?”

¹ uttered subvocalizations: (here) formed silent words with his lips

² Oskar Schindler (1908-1974)

"Of course not. I kept my head down. I could hardly tell you what he looked like. You didn't look at any of the Germans. If you were smart."

"Why not?"

50 "Why not? I see you don't – Well, *because*. It's, um. Because obviously. Because you didn't look at them, Schindler included. Not any of them. You know, I was going to be in that movie. Spielberg, that *fellow*, not a tall man, flew me to the grave site. In Jerusalem! With the camera set up, shooting, take one take two, I put a stone on the grave, me. Filmed. Lights, camera, action."

"Were you – ?"

55 "I got a good dry-cleaning business in Milwaukee," the man said. "Several stores. Successful! A new one out in Brookfield, maybe one in Waukesha. We're looking into it. My life doesn't depend on being in a Hollywood film. I got left on the floor."

"I'm sorry?"

"I got left on the floor. What's the matter? This phrase, you never heard it? When they cut you out?"

60 "Oh," Harry said, "the *cutting-room floor*. You got left on the cutting-room floor."

"This is what I said."

"No, you said you got left on the floor. I'm sorry. I didn't know what floor you were talking about."

65 "What'd you think I was talking about? The second floor, lingerie, where you buy ladies' undergarments? This is – Well, you're a kid, no wonder you don't know anything. So. I went over there, a nice hotel, free food, the Holy Land, Jerusalem, he shoots me, I am directed, but where am I in the film? Nowhere. Not that I *mind*."

"I'm sorry. You should have been in it."

70 "You're telling me. They flew me to Jerusalem. Coddled, there and back. A seat in first class both ways. So tell me. They don't want me in their film. What's wrong with me? My appearance? *Anything*? No. I don't think so."

Harry looked more carefully at his seatmate's face, which was of a formidable ugliness. Of course, ugliness was no one's fault despite what Oscar Wilde had said about the matter. Lowie's elderly expression was one of sour, downturned-mouth disgust mixed with a very precise rudeness. However, he was a survivor, so hats off.

75 "You see anything wrong with my face?" The man was persistent.

"Not a thing," Harry Albert said. "Clearly they made a mistake, leaving me on the floor. I mean you. Not me. You. Slip of the tongue."

80 "You, they *didn't* leave on the floor. With your looks, a handsome English prince like yourself, they never leave you down there. Guys like you? *Always* in the movie, upstairs, presidential suite, the best treatment, silk sheets. Palace guard out in front, beefeaters, room service. You, they put in the golden carriage. *Horses* pull you. People waving, want your autograph. Guys like me, never, unless we fight for it, compete, in a free market. How come therefore they fly me to Jerusalem if they're only going to waste my time? This remains a puzzle. Even my wife can't solve it. So why are you flying to Vegas?"

"A business conference," Harry Albert said.

85 "What do you do?"

"Manufacturer's rep. Medical devices."

"Well, good. That's a good business. The economy can *never* hurt you if you sell to sick people. The sick are always with us, I assure you, Harry Albert. Always will be. A full supply of the sick. *Hoards* of sick. More of them always, too, including the old, like, what do the kids call them, zombies."

90 "And you?"

"What about me?"

"What're you going to be doing in Vegas?"

95 "Oh. Me? I'm meeting my wife. She got there yesterday, a cheaper flight, one night on her own, and she's been playing the slots. I had work I had to do, talk to a banker here in Minneapolis, therefore I'm leaving today. She's been playing the slots, did I mention that? And tonight and tomorrow and the next day, we're going to the shows. The shows in Las Vegas are the best in the world! The nightlife. It's – Am I explaining? Even a child knows. Do you like nightlife?"

Harry Albert liked nightlife very much but suddenly felt that a certain tact might be necessary. "Yes,"

he said.

100 "And the showgirls?"

"Showgirls? Meh," Harry Albert said.

"Meh?"

"Yeah, meh. I like the costumes sometimes," Harry Albert said.

"Costumes, yes, sequins and glitter, but they're not the point. What's with the 'meh,' if I may ask?"

105 "I can explain." [...]

"You don't like them? Prince Albert, I believe you said you were indifferent to showgirls."

"Well, I'm gay."

"So are the girls. Everyone smiles in Vegas. Everyone is happy and carefree, except for the losers of life savings. You have to know when to stop. Common sense. I don't see the problem."

110 "You don't get it," Harry Albert said. "I'm queer."

The plane bounced, and 32-A sat back. "You're a queer?"

"Yup."

"You don't look like it. What's the point in that? Please explain."

"Excuse me?"

115 "Why would anyone want such a thing? No showgirls for you? Just showboys? With nice hair? Tap dancers? Playing the gold piano?"

"Could be."

The old man leaned back and puffed out his cheeks. "I've known people like you. And, let me say, I am open-minded. Every hedgehog has a law for itself, hedgehog law. For me, however, queer has no appeal. Your particular kingdom is closed to me. So, you get to Vegas, no showgirls, no pretty waitresses, what have you got?"

120 "Plenty," Harry Albert said.

"Please don't describe. A cute smile I suppose can be anywhere. But okay. Prince, listen to me. Like I said, open-minded is my motto. You got your book there, you're reading about Schindler, but this is America now, different hedgehog laws. So, okay, what am I – ? I'm saying, and this is very simple, so listen. These other people on the plane, screaming now, turbulence, they would say it too if they only stopped screaming. Which is: enjoy life. In your hedgehog royalty way."

125 "Thank you," Harry Albert said. "Trust me. I do enjoy it."

"You're kind of solid-looking. You don't look delicate, if I may say. Or *sensitive*, even, which, I might as well tell you, I despise. *Feelings*? No, not for me."

130 "I work out."

"You work out what?"

"In the gym. Circuit training. Also, I box. I'm a fighter." Harry Albert made a fist, and the old man nodded. "I have a good punch."

135 "That's right. You must. That's *right*." The old man had become quite vehement. "So there's something I want you to do, Prince." The old man reached into his pocket and drew out a business card. On it had been printed his name, the name of his business, Go-Clean, with its website, and an e-mail address. He handed it to Harry Albert. "First we shake hands. Not every day do I meet a member of the English royal family trained in pugilism."

140 "But I'm not –"

The old man held up his hand. "Don't deny. You're thinking: this old man, he's crazy, a Schindler Jew, suffering has made him insane, and I'm telling you, no, it didn't. Maybe a joker." He held out his hand, and Harry Albert shook it. "A joker is what it made me. A joker vacationer. An American going on vacation to Las Vegas, where my wife already is, that's what I am. An American like you. So what you do is, you go to your business conference and then night falls, and you enjoy the nightlife in your hedgehog way with your hedgehog friends, and you write to me, you send me a note telling me you're okay. Because now we are friends. You said you are honored to meet me."

145 "Yes, I am."

"And I am likewise honored to meet you, English royalty. Freed at last from the palace, like *Roman Holiday*. Even though you don't look like Audrey Hepburn. Maybe more Oscar De La Hoya. Are you vain,

150

like him?"

"Yes. But I'm not –"

155 "Like I said: don't bother to deny." The old man turned to gaze out the window. "We'll be landing soon. Where are the free peanuts? The free beverage?" He turned back to Harry Albert, and all at once a smile broke out on his profoundly ugly face, a transfixing smile. "This is a very annoying flight. Except for you. Prince, you're good company," he said. "You keep a person interested. Send me a letter. Tell me what it's like."

Sitting in his hotel room, satiated with pleasure, the other young man still in bed, prettily sleeping, Harry Albert opened his laptop and began to write.

160 *Dear David, he wrote, I promised that I would write to you and now I'm doing just that. I've had some lucky streaks in Las Vegas since I got here. The conference went well, I made some contacts, I met some people.* He glanced at the bed before turning back to the computer screen and the keyboard. *You could say I won.*

Business in my field is good. I don't have to worry about money.

165 For a moment he gazed out the open window at the lights of the city. He liked to keep the windows open with the curtains drawn back in case other visitors, in other hotels, happened to glance out, *Rear Window*³ style, in his direction. They would see him disporting himself in the company of others. Let them envy him. Let them envy his good looks, his luck.

170 *You asked me if I'm vain. And I sure am. I don't think about my looks too much, anyhow not much more than most people do, but it gets me results. When I get older, I'll have to drop it. My appearance will start to fail. But by then I'll be in love. I'm too busy for love right now. But by then, in the future, I won't care how pretty anybody is, and they won't care about my looks either, and we'll be fine.*

The point is, I love my life. So do you. I was pleased and honored to meet you.

Thanks for the conversation.

175 He signed the e-mail "Prince Albert."

A week later, back in Minneapolis, he received a reply, three words. *Don't kid yourself.*

The e-mail note was unsigned.

(2015)

³ *Rear Window*: a film by Alfred Hitchcock