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For Uncle Chippy  
(1929–2013)



## HOW IT BEGINS

*Come on, come on, come on . . .*

Pam stares up at the seat belt light, willing it to click off. She's not going to be able to hold it in much longer, can almost hear Jim's voice scolding her for not going before she boarded the plane: *You know you got a weak bladder, Pam, what in the heck were you thinking?*

Truth is, she hadn't dared use one of the bathrooms at the airport. What if she found herself face to face with one of those futuristic toilets she'd read about in the guidebook and couldn't figure out how to flush it? What if she accidentally locked herself inside a stall and missed her flight? And to think Joanie suggested that she spend a few days exploring the city before taking the connecting flight to Osaka! Just the thought of navigating Tokyo's alien streets by herself makes Pam's already clammy palms sweat – the airport had been bewildering enough. Rattled and greasy after the flight from Fort Worth, she'd felt like a sluggish giant as she slogged her way towards Terminal 2 and her connecting flight. Everyone around her seemed to crackle with efficiency and confidence; compact bodies swarmed past her, briefcases swinging, eyes hidden behind sunglasses. She was aware of every extra pound she carried as she squeezed onto the shuttle, colouring each time someone shot a look in her direction.

Thankfully there had been plenty of other Americans on the flight to Tokyo (the nice boy sitting next to her had patiently shown her how to work the video system), but on this flight she's painfully aware she's the only . . . what's the word – the one they always use on the detective shows Jim likes? Caucasian, that's it.

And the seats are far smaller; she's squashed in like a canned ham. Still, at least there's an empty space in between her and the business-type fellow sitting in the aisle seat – she won't have to worry about accidentally nudging him. Although she'll have to disturb him when she squeezes out to use the bathroom, won't she? And Lordy, it looks like he's falling asleep, which means she'll have to wake him.

The plane continues to climb and still the sign glows. She peers out of the window into darkness, sees the red blipping light on the wing emerging through cloud, grips the arms of her seat and feels the aircraft's innards thrumming through her.

Jim was right. She hasn't even reached her destination and already this whole enterprise has been too much for her. He'd warned her that she wasn't cut out for long-distance travel, had tried to convince her that the whole thing was a bad idea: *Joanie can fly home anytime she likes, Pam, why bother travelling halfway around the world to see her? Why'd she want to teach Asians anyway? Aren't American kids good enough for her? And besides, Pam, you don't even like Chinese food, how in the heck are you going to cope with eating raw dolphin or whatever it is they eat over there?* But she'd stuck to her guns, chipping away at his disapproval, surprising him when she wouldn't back down. Joanie had been gone for two years and Pam needed to see her, missed her terribly, and from the photos she'd seen on the Internet, Osaka's gleaming skyscrapers didn't look that different from those of normal American cities. Joanie had warned her that she might find the culture perplexing at first, that Japan wasn't all cherry blossoms and geishas smiling coyly from behind fans, but Pam assumed she'd be able to handle it. She'd stupidly thought it would be some sort of fun adventure she'd be able to brag about to Reba for years afterwards.

The plane levels out and finally the seat belt sign pings off. There's a flurry of movement as several passengers jump up from their seats and start rummaging in the overhead compartments. Praying there won't be a queue for the bathroom, she unclicks her belt, steels herself to edge her bulk past the fellow in the aisle seat,

when an almighty booming sound rockets through the plane. Pam immediately thinks of a car backfiring, but planes don't backfire, do they? She yelps – a delayed reaction that makes her feel faintly stupid. It's nothing. Thunder, maybe. Yes, that's it. The guidebook said it wasn't unusual for storms to hit—

Another bang – this one more like a gunshot. A chorus of reedy screams drifts from the front of the aircraft. The seat belt light flashes on again and Pam fumbles for the belt; her fingers are numb, she can't remember how to tighten it. The plane drops, giant hands press down on her shoulders, and her stomach feels like it's being forced up into her throat. Uh-uh. No. This can't be happening. Not to her. Things like this don't happen to people like her, ordinary people. *Good* people. A jolt – the overhead lockers rattle, then, mercifully, the aircraft seems to calm itself.

A ping, a babble of Japanese, then: 'Please remain in your seat with your seat belt tightly fastened.' Pam breathes again; the voice is serene, unconcerned. It can't be anything too serious, there's no cause for her to panic. She tries to peer over the backs of the seats to see how everyone else is reacting, can only make out a series of bowed heads.

She grasps the armrests again; the plane's vibration has increased, her hands are actually juddering, a sick throb reverberates up through her feet. An eye half-hidden behind a fringe of jet-black hair appears in the gap between the seats in front of her; it must be the small child she remembers being dragged down the aisle by a stern, lipsticked young woman just before they took off. The little boy had stared at her, clearly fascinated (you can say what you like about Asians, she'd thought, but their children are as cute as buttons). She'd waved and grinned, but he hadn't responded, and then his mother had barked something at him and he'd slid obediently into his seat, out of sight. She tries to smile, but her mouth is dry and her lips catch on her teeth and oh Lordy, the vibration is getting worse.

A white mist floats down the aisle, drifts around her, and Pam finds herself batting uselessly at the screen in front of her, fumbling for her headphones. This isn't happening. This can't be

happening right now, uh-uh. No, no, no. If she can just make the screen work, watch a movie, something reassuring – like that romcom she'd seen on the way here, the one with . . . Ryan somebody. The plane lists violently again – it feels as if it's rolling from side to side *and* up and down and her stomach flips again – she swallows convulsively, she won't be sick, uh-uh.

The businessman stands up, arms flailing as the plane heaves – it looks like he's trying to open the overhead locker, but he can't get his balance. *What are you doing?* Pam wants to scream – has the feeling that if he doesn't sit down the situation will get worse – the vibration is getting so bad it makes her think of the time her washing machine's stabiliser broke and the darn thing bucked across the floor. A flight attendant looms out of the mist, gripping the seat backs around her. She gestures at the businessman, who meekly falls back into his seat. He fumbles in his inside jacket pocket, pulls out a phone, rests his forehead against the seat in front of him and starts talking into it.

She should do the same. She should phone Jim, tell him about Snookie, remind him not to feed her that cheap stuff. She should phone Joanie; but tell her what – she almost laughs – that she might be late? No, tell her that she's proud of her, but – can they even get a signal here? Won't using her cellphone mess with the plane's navigational systems? Does she need a credit card to work the handset on the back of her seat?

Where is her phone? Is it in her fanny pack with her money and passport and pills, or did she put it in the bag? Why can't she remember? She reaches down for her purse, her stomach feeling like it's squashed against her spine. She's going to vomit, she just knows she is, but then her fingers touch the strap of her bag – Joanie had given it to her the Christmas before she left two years ago – that had been a good Christmas, even Jim had been in a good mood that day. Another jolt and the strap leaps away from her grip. She doesn't want to die like this – not like this. Not amongst strangers, not looking like this, with her hair greasy – that new perm had been a mistake – her ankles swollen, uh-uh. No way. Quickly – think of something nice, something good. Yes. This

is all a dream, she's actually sitting on the couch with a chicken mayo sandwich, Snookie on her lap, Jim dozing off in his La-Z-Boy. She knows she should pray, knows that this is what Pastor Len would tell her to do – if she prays, will it all go away? – but for once in her life she can't think of the words. She manages a 'help me, Jesus', but other thoughts keep intruding. Who'll look after Snookie if something happens to her? Snookie's old, nearly ten, why did she leave her? Dogs don't understand. Oh Lord, there's that pile of ripped pantyhose hidden in the back of her underwear drawer that she keeps meaning to throw away – what will they think of her if they find it?

The mist is thickening, burning bile rises in her throat, her vision blurs. A sharp *crack*, and a yellow plastic cup swings into her eye-line. More Japanese words – her ears are popping, she swallows, realises she can taste the spicy noodle mess she ate on the last flight, has time to feel relief that she no longer needs to pee. Then English: *something help fellow passengers something something*.

The businessman continues to babble into his phone, it's torn out of his hand as the plane bucks once more, but his mouth keeps moving; he doesn't seem to be aware he's no longer holding it. She can't get enough air into her lungs, it tastes tinny, artificial, gritty, makes her gag again. Flashes of bright light blind her momentarily, she reaches for the mask, but it keeps swinging out of her reach and then she smells something burning – like plastic left on a stove top. She'd done that once, left a spatula on the burner – Jim had gone on about it for weeks. *You could have burned the house down, woman*.

Another message . . . *brace, brace, brace for impact*.

An image of an empty chair fills her head and she's flooded with self-pity so acute it hurts – it's her chair, the one she always sits on every Wednesday at Bible group. A sturdy, reliable, *friendly* chair that never complains about her weight, its seat pitted with wear. She always gets to the meeting early to help Kendra put the chairs out, and everyone knows that she always sits to the right of Pastor Len, next to the coffee maker. They'd prayed for her the day before she left – even Reba had wished her well. Her chest had filled with pride and gratitude, her cheeks burning from being the

centre of so much attention. *Dear Jesus, please take care of our sister and dear friend, Pamela, as she . . .* The plane shudders – and this time it's joined by a thuck thuck thuck as bags and laptops and other debris spill out of the overhead compartments, but if she keeps concentrating on that empty chair, then everything will be fine. Like that game she sometimes plays when she drives back from the store: if she sees three white cars, then Pastor Len will ask her and not Reba to do the flowers.

A rending sound like giant metal fingernails scoring a blackboard, the floor convulses, a weight pushes her head towards her lap, she feels her teeth knocking against each other, wants to scream at whoever is viciously yanking her hands above her head to stop. Years ago, a pick-up had pulled out in front of her car as she was driving to fetch Joanie from school. At that moment everything had slowed right down – she'd been aware of tiny details, the crack in her windscreen, the rust peppering the other car's bonnet, the shadowy shape of its baseball-capped driver – but this, this is happening too fast! *Make it stop it's going on for too long* – she's whipped and pummelled and beaten; her head, she can't keep her head up and then the seat in front of her rushes up to her face and then white light flares, blinding her and she can't—

A bonfire crackles and spits, but her cheeks are cold; freezing in fact, there's a real bite in the air. Is she outside? Of course she is! Stupid. You can't have bonfires indoors, can you? Where is she though? They always have a get-together at Pastor Len's ranch on Christmas Eve – she must be out in the yard, watching the fireworks. She always brings her famous blue cheese dip. No wonder she's feeling so lost! She's forgotten to bring the dip, must have left it on the counter – Pastor Len will be so disappointed and—

Someone's screaming – *you can't scream at Christmas, why are you screaming at Christmas? It's a happy time.*

She lifts her left hand to wipe her face, but can't seem to . . . that's not right, she's lying on her arm, it's twisted behind her back. Why is she lying down? Has she fallen asleep? Not at Christmas when there's always so much to do . . . she has to get up, apologise for

being so rude, Jim's always saying she needs to buck up her ideas, try and be a little bit more . . .

She runs her tongue over her teeth. They don't feel right; one of her incisors is chipped, the edge nips her tongue. She crunches down on grit, swallows – Lordy, her throat feels like she's been swallowing razorblades, is she—

And then the knowledge of what's happened hits her all at once, the force of it making her gasp, and with it comes a white surge of pain, blooming up from her right leg and shooting into her stomach. *Get up, get up, get up.* She tries to lift her head, but when she does, hot needles spike the back of her neck.

Another scream – it sounds fairly close to her. She's never heard anything like it – it's naked, raw, barely human. She needs it to stop, it's making the ache in her gut worse, as if the scream is directly connected to her innards, tugging at them with every wail.

Oh thank you, Jesus, she can move her right arm and she inches it up, probes her belly, touches something soft and wet and just plain *wrong*. She won't think about that now. Oh Jesus, she needs help, she needs someone to come and help her, if only she'd listened to Jim and stayed at home with Snookie and hadn't thought all those bad thoughts about Reba . . .

*Stop it.* She can't panic. That's what they always say, don't panic. She's alive. She should be grateful. She needs to get up, see where she is. She's no longer in her seat, she knows that for sure, she's lying on some sort of mossy, soft surface. She counts to three, tries to use her good arm to heave herself over onto her side, but she's forced to stop as a flare of agony – as sharp and startling as an electric shock – flashes through her entire body. It's so intense she can't believe the pain actually belongs to her. She keeps absolutely still, and mercifully, it begins to fade, leaving a worrying numbness in its wake (but she won't think about that either, nuh-uh).

She squeezes her eyes shut, opens them. Blinks to clear her vision. Tentatively she tries to turn her head to the right, and this time she's able to do so without that horrible, intrusive pain. *Good.* A bruise of orange light in the background casts everything in silhouette, but she can make out a thick grove of trees – strange

twisted trees, ones she can't identify – and there, just in front of them, a curved piece of twisted metal. Oh Lordy, is that the plane? It is . . . she can see the oblong shape of a window. A pop, a hissing sound, a soft boom and the scene is suddenly lit up clear as day. Her eyes water, but she won't look away. She won't. She can see the jagged edge of the fuselage, cruelly sheared from the rest of its body – where is the rest? Was she sitting in that part? Impossible. She couldn't have survived that. It's like a huge broken toy, makes her think of the yards around the trailers where Jim's mother used to live. They were scattered with debris and old car parts and broken tricycles and she hadn't liked to go there, even though Jim's mother had always been kind to her . . . Her vision is limited due to her position, and she ignores the cracking sound she hears as she cranes her head so that her cheek is resting against her shoulder.

The screaming ceases abruptly, mid-howl. *Good.* She doesn't want this time to be muddied with someone else's pain and noise.

Wait . . . Something's moving, just over by the tree line. A dark shape – a person – a small person, a child? The child who was sitting in front of her? She's flooded with shame – she hadn't given him or his mother a moment's thought as the plane dropped. She'd only thought of herself. No wonder she couldn't pray, what sort of Christian is she? The figure flits frustratingly out of her line of sight, but she can't inch her neck any further over.

She tries to open her mouth to shout; can't seem to make her jaw move this time. *Please. I'm here. Hospital. Get help.*

A soft thud behind her head. 'Ack,' she manages. 'Ack.' Something touches her hair, and she feels tears rolling down her cheeks – she's safe. They're here to rescue her.

The shush-pad of running feet. *Don't go. Don't leave me.*

Bare feet suddenly appear in front of her eyes. Small feet, dirty, it's dark, so dark, but they look to be smeared with black goop – mud? blood?

'Help me, help me, help me,' that's it, she's talking now. Good girl. If she's talking she's going to be fine. She's just in shock. Yep. That's all. 'Help me.'

A face looms towards her; it's so close she can feel the whisper of the boy's breath on her cheeks. She tries to focus on his eyes. Are they . . . ? Nuh-uh. It's just the poor light. They're white, all white, no pupils *oh Jesus help me*. A scream grows in her chest, lodges in her throat, she can't get it out, it's going to choke her. The face jerks away. Her lungs are heavy, liquid. Now it hurts to breathe.

Something flickers in the far right of her field of vision. Is it that same child? How could he have got all the way over there so quickly? He's pointing at something . . . Shapes, darker than the trees around them. People. Definitely people. The orange glow is fading, but she can see their outlines clearly. Hundreds of them, it looks like, and they're coming towards her. Drifting out of the trees, those strange trees, knobbled and bubbled and twisted like fingers.

Where are their feet? They don't have feet. That's not right.

Uh-uh. They aren't real. They can't be real. She can't see their eyes, their faces are inky black blobs that remain flat and unmoving as the light behind them blooms and dies.

They're coming for her – she knows this.

The fear ebbs away, replaced with a certainty that she doesn't have long. It's as if a cold, confident Pam – a new Pam, the Pam she's always wanted to be – enters and takes over her battered, dying body. Ignoring the mess where her stomach once was, she gropes for her fanny pack. It's still here, although it's shifted around to her side. She closes her eyes and concentrates on opening the zip. Her fingers are wet, slippery, but she's not going to give up now.

The whup-whup sound fills her ears, louder this time, a light floats down from above and dances over and around her and she can make out a row of disembodied seats, the metal struts catching the light; a high-heeled shoe that looks brand new. She waits to see if the light will halt the crowd's approach. They continue to creep forward, and still she can't make out any facial features. And where is the boy? If only she could tell him not to go near them, because she knows what they want, oh yes, she knows exactly

what they want. But she can't think about that now, not when she's so close. She digs inside her bag, yips with relief when her fingers graze the smooth back of her phone. Careful not to drop it, she ekes it out of the bag – has time to marvel at the panic she felt earlier when she couldn't remember where she'd put it – and instructs her arm to bring it up to her face. What if it doesn't work? What if it's broken?

It won't be broken, she won't let it be broken, and she caws in triumph when she hears the chiming do-do-do-dah welcome message. Nearly there . . . A tut of exasperation – she's such a messy bunny, there's blood all over the screen. Using the last of her strength to concentrate, she finds her way to the applications box, scrolls to 'voice recorder'. The whup-whupping is deafening now, but Pam shuts it out, just as she ignores the fact that she can no longer see.

She holds the phone to her mouth and starts speaking.