

Eagle Dreams

Granny Agga took Buryl, when he was five, to feed the pigeons in Central Park, which was a long trip from their apartment in Queens. They made that roaring subterranean journey once or twice a month, like a pilgrimage, for the next three years. When Granny Agga got sick, Buryl feared for her, but all he could say was, “What will the pigeons do? Who will feed them?” And who will take me to the park, he thought, but he didn’t say such a thing out loud.

“Other people,” Granny Agga said softly, through the hiss of her oxygen cannula. “You’ve seen the other kind people, with their bags of bread, feeding the birds.”

“But Granny,” Buryl said, as his throat tightened, “They’ll wait for *us*. *Our* pigeons. They’ll be expecting *us*.”

“Our pigeons will fly high up in the sky to look for us,” she said. “When they don’t find us they’ll fly even higher.”

“Will they?” Buryl whispered.

“Oh yes. And when a pigeon flies high enough, it is lost to the Earth and becomes an eagle.”

Buryl closed his eyes and imagined the grey birds clustering and cooing around the park bench, faint iridescent blue-green ruffles around their necks, pecking and jostling for the bread crumbs.

Granny coughed and then said, “All birds can become eagles if they dare.”

Granny Agga died when Buryl was eight, and he didn’t return to the park until he was in high school. He bought a bag of bread chunks from a

vendor near the obelisk, and sat on a bench nearby, and the pigeons came again, as if he had never been away.

Before he graduated, Buryl's father got him a job doing pickup work at an Astoria garment factory, and much later he became a custodian, promoted from general gopher when he turned 30. His father, gone now for years, had been a janitor at Steinway Pianos, but they had no positions available when Buryl came of age. The garment factory job was alright, though, since most of the workers were women, and he still hoped to make friends with one of them.

Life continued to be a simple routine, and on almost every weekend, he rode the subway into Manhattan to watch the pigeons in the park. He tossed bread chunks to them as they clustered around his bench, and he imagined them taking off, one by one, turning into eagles soaring above the factory in Queens. He dreamt of flying over the city himself one day, maybe after getting married.

One winter, at the garment factory's annual Christmas party, the company raffled a trip to Mexico and every employee was given one free ticket. Miss Ariel Baxter reached into a rotating plexiglass drum and pulled out the winning ticket. She held it up above her head and beamed her notorious smile at the crowd and then read out the number. Buryl was slightly drunk, but he was fascinated by Miss Baxter, the President's Executive Secretary, and when she read the number on the ticket, each digit sounded like a proposition.

To his utter surprise, the ticket was his: Buryl the custodian had won the Mexico trip and everyone clapped and congratulated him. Doug from Scheduling said, "You'll fly down there on a jet, Dude!" And Buryl began to dream of his first plane ride. "Maybe you can visit the cockpit," Doug said, and Buryl pictured the pilot and co-pilot in their special flight chairs, turning to welcome him into their secret cabin.

Kennedy Airport was so large and confusing that Buryl barely noted how he managed to find the gate and board his flight to Acapulco. It was a 737, and once in his seat he read all the materials in the seat pocket, savoring every detail about the plane. The "equipment," they called it.

Take-off was exhilarating, and he marveled at the invisible hand that pressed him back into his seat as the airport buildings rushed past, and

then the unfamiliar sensation of extra weight as the plane tilted up and began to roar into the sky. The other passengers seemed unaware of the excitement of take-off, but Buryl thought of Granny Agga and how excited she would be if he could describe to her what it was like.

When the stewardess came to take his drink order, he asked if he could visit the pilot's cabin.

"The cockpit?" she said, a little surprised. "Well, I don't know. You'll have to ask the purser."

A few minutes later, a young man in a blue uniform came to his seat and asked Buryl what he wanted.

Buryl told him and the purser responded bluntly, "Absolutely not; no sir. Passengers aren't allowed there."

"Never?" said Buryl.

"Well, once in a while, but only rarely, some lucky kid might get to visit the cockpit, but it's against policy."

"But ..."

"No way. Now please — just sit back and enjoy the flight."

After an hour or so, a strange thought came to Buryl. He had seen pilots on television and movies, and they flew a wide variety of airplanes, but the basic moves were the same. A thrill ran down his spine as he imagined telling the purser that he, Buryl, was a pilot himself, and he just wanted to see how this plane differed from the ones he had flown.

He mulled this notion for a while, and it began to seem more and more reasonable. The purser was bound to take a different attitude with another pilot. The purser probably wasn't even a pilot himself. Surely it wasn't just kids who got to visit the cockpit. But what if the purser didn't believe him? Then Buryl would feel like a misbehaving kid himself, and he would spend the rest of the flight in shame and embarrassment. Still, it might work.

The pilot came onto the loudspeakers and announced they were just passing over Alabama at 33,000 feet, and the voice sounded friendly and competent, and much more accessible than the purser, so Buryl made his decision and pressed the stewardess button.

The purser was even more unfriendly this time, and dismissed Buryl's opening question with a wave of his hand. "I told you sir, no one is allowed

in the cockpit during the flight. If you want a tour of the plane, you'll have to contact public relations at the airline."

"But I didn't mention before," Buryl said, fighting to conceal the catch in his voice, "that I'm a pilot too, so it's not just some random passenger asking."

The purser put on a skeptical frown and shook his head. "No exceptions," he said.

Buryl blurted out, "But I've flown planes, and you haven't. I outrank you!"

The purser stared at Buryl for a long moment without speaking. Then he said, rudely inserting a pause after each word, "You may not visit the cockpit, sir, and that is final." Then he turned and marched up the aisle without waiting for Buryl to reply.

It took a while for Buryl to calm down. He wasn't used to being filled with anger and adrenalin, but he tried to watch the in-flight movie for a while, and before they were over Texas he dozed off.

Buryl awoke when the purser shook his shoulder.

"You really a pilot?" the purser said. There was a strange quaver in his voice.

Buryl nodded, thinking the purser must have had second thoughts.

The purser leaned close and whispered, "What kind of equipment?"

"Well," Buryl mumbled, taken aback. He hadn't thought much about it. He just wanted to see them actually flying, see what it's like in a real cockpit instead of just another movie on TV. "Different kinds," he said.

The purser looked supremely unconvinced, and glared at him. But then he said, "OK. Come with me."

Buryl's heart swelled with excitement as he followed the purser up the aisle to the cockpit. The purser unlocked the door and pushed Buryl through into the dark cabin, encrusted with buttons and switches and a windshield bigger than a city bus.

"Do what *he* tells you," the purser said, even more curt and unfriendly than before. But now Buryl saw why.

The pilot was on the floor, face down. Buryl knew it was the pilot because he was still wearing his captain's hat, but there was a dark pool of blood where he lay. The co-pilot was also on the floor, sitting cross-legged

with one hand cuffed to a piece of equipment, looking up at Buryl, wide-eyed. Standing by the captain's body was a short, angry man in a brown nylon parka, holding a gun.

"You fly a plane?" the man with the gun said.

Buryl saw the purser glaring at him suspiciously. Buryl's heart pounded, and he glanced again at the four people in the cockpit, one after another. Each time he looked at the short man he saw only the gun, which was now pointed at his chest.

"Why did you kill the pilot?" Buryl said.

"He tried to kill me, stupid fuck," said the hijacker.

"Then get the co-pilot for gods sake! Uncuff him!"

"He refused me, so he's being punished." The hijacker waved the gun at the purser, and then at the co-pilot, who shrank back against the bulkhead. He pointed the gun at Buryl again. "He can't be trusted. You fly the fucking plane."

Buryl's mouth was dry. Me fly the fucking plane? He gasped and gestured at the co-pilot. "But we need him now! He should fly it."

The hijacker took a step closer and raised the gun so Buryl could see down the barrel. "You're a pilot. Fly the goddam plane or I'll shoot you in the face."

Buryl leaned back, away from the gun, hitting his head against the cockpit wall. "But I've never flown an airliner."

The hijacker reached out and put the gun barrel against the tip of Buryl's nose and said very quietly, as if the purser and the co-pilot weren't supposed to hear, "So what? Fly the way you fly any fucking plane. It's just bigger. You wanna die?"

Buryl didn't reply because he was holding his breath, feeling the steel on his nose. He twisted his head to get away from the gun but the gun barrel followed, cold and hollow against his skin.

The hijacker lowered his gun, pointing it again at Buryl's chest. "Shut up and sit over there." He held the gun against the back of Buryl's head as Buryl climbed over the center console into the pilot's seat. The seatbelts were in a tangle, so he lowered himself down on top of them. Before him was a forest of bewildering controls, dials, and displays, a blur of meaningless shapes, and the gun continued pressing on his head.

He looked up, out the windshield, but there was nothing to see—only grey flowing fog against a dark sky.

Buryl put his head down and pulled up on the yoke, as he had seen pilots do in the movies. The plane groaned into a sudden steep climb and a beeper began to sound as the autopilot forced it back to level flight.

Buryl thought, I didn't do that. The plane knows what to do.

He hung onto the yoke with both hands and felt the pedals moving slowly beneath his feet. It probably looked like he was flying the plane, and it was beginning to feel like he was, too.

The cockpit quieted down and the plane droned on through the sky toward Mexico.

When they reached Acapulco Airport the tower radio switched on and a chime sounded. Buryl looked around the cockpit for a loudspeaker, and then saw the pilot's headset on the console. He put it on. A Mexican Air Traffic Controller spoke some instructions. They were in English, but Buryl didn't know what they meant.

The hijacker said, "Tell them Cuba Libre is flying this plane."

Buryl did so, and the voice from the tower cut off abruptly, and then another voice came over the radio, speaking in a slow conciliatory tone.

Buryl listened, then looked at the hijacker, and said, "They want to know what's our status."

"Tell them they've got my demands. I texted the airline after we took off. Clear the runway."

Buryl repeated the words into the mic.

Buryl sat listening and then said, "The pilot's dead."

After another pause, he said, "I'm Buryl. I'm an amateur. I'm not the hijacker."

After a longer pause, Buryl listening intently, he looked at the hijacker, but saw only the purser frozen against the cabin door, his mouth open, eyes wide. "Uh, yes," Buryl said into the headset mic. "But not an airliner."

"Put it on the speaker, dammit!" the hijacker shouted. "What the hell are they saying?"

Buryl looked around the instrument panel and the dozens of switches, mostly labeled with cryptic initials. "I don't know how," he said. Then his voice broke into a wail. "I can't find the right switch!"

“Oh shit,” said the hijacker, turning around one full circle and pointing his pistol at the purser and the co-pilot, and then, briefly, at the pilot, whose body hadn’t moved.

“Flaps?” Buryl’s voice seemed higher than it should be. He had no idea how to do anything with the flaps.

Buryl listened for a minute or more but the tower was silent.

“What’s he saying?” said the hijacker.

“I don’t know. Nothing. It went silent.” Buryl’s voice shook.

In growing panic, Buryl tried a few experimental movements of the yoke and pedals and levers but they only made the plane lurch roughly, yawing and pitching. Now and then he heard more commands from the headset, but they meant nothing so he grimly moved the controls this way and that, randomly, and called out “Roger.” He thought, if the hijacker knows I’m faking, he’ll shoot me.

In the distance, through the cockpit door, he could hear the passengers in a panic, screaming and wailing. When the plane dove and recovered again, the terrorist, too, began to freak out.

Buryl listened to the tower instructions. “What’s the thrust lever?” he said. “Yes, but ...”

He pushed the right-hand foot pedal. The plane yawed violently and pitched up.

“OK,” he said into the mic. “The levers. The big levers in the middle.”

He pulled his feet away from the pedals and said, “OK. I won’t. I’m sorry.” Everyone’s furious with me, he thought.

The plane was over the airport, but they said it was too high to land. Buryl tried to perform the commands coming over the headset but they made no sense to him. Then the plane pitched forward again, into a steep dive, and came down too fast, too far from the runway.

“I *am* pulling up!” Buryl yelled into the headset. He leaned back in the pilot’s seat, hauling the yoke back as hard as he could.

A recorded woman’s voice repeated “Too low. Pull up. Too low. Pull up.” Buryl closed his eyes and wondered how birds could possibly fly when everything falls so fast. “I *am* pulling up,” he cried again, as plane tilted up and the tail-section smashed into pavement. The fuselage swung around broadside into the Arrivals Building, ripping off the left wing in a gout of flame and tearing metal.

Incredible forces flattened Buryl against the yoke, jamming his head into the instrument panel. The pilot's seat, torn from its moorings, pinned him there. In the smoking wreckage to his right, the terrorist was folded grotesquely against the console, choking on his own blood.

"I thought you — were a fucking pilot," he groaned.

Buryl couldn't feel his body and there was only one breath of air in his lungs, but he gasped, "Small planes," knowing how stupid it sounded.

Waves of heat beat into the cabin from the cockpit door.

Buryl's left hand grasped for the yoke, pulling up, pulling, but the yoke no longer moved. His right arm began to lurch feebly up and down, rhythmically, flapping.

The purser was shaking his shoulder. "You really a pilot?" he said, his voice grumpy and bored.

Buryl squinted at him, confused. The dream was still vivid. Behind the purser the in-flight movie was still playing. It was hard to believe he was really on a plane, flying to Mexico by himself.

"You said you're a pilot," the purser said. "Is that true?"

Thinking of his dream, Buryl was reluctant to continue the lie, but without thinking he said, "Small planes."

The purser shook his head. "OK. Follow me."

They walked up the aisle to the cockpit, and the purser unlocked the door and pushed Buryl inside. The cabin was bright with sunlight flooding in through the windshield, and the pilot and co-pilot were sitting at the controls. There were no terrorists.

"Here he is," the purser said. "Passenger 131, Mr. Buryl Garsetti." He paused while the pilot turned around and then added, "Claims to fly small craft."

The pilot smiled at Buryl. "How long you've had your license?" he said.

Buryl glanced at the purser and then said, "Just a few years. Small planes." Then, as if to clarify an important point he added, "I've never flown an airliner."

The pilot laughed and waved at the co-pilot. "Pleased to meet you, Mr. Garsetti. I'm Captain Fisher, and this is my First Officer, Dave Shapiro."

The co-pilot turned around, nodded at Buryl, and then turned back to his controls.

Buryl stared at the array of instrument panels that covered all available surfaces, switches and levers and knobs of every size and shape. His mind was racing. "Thanks for inviting me in," he said, wishing he could think of something more interesting to say.

"Well," said Captain Fisher, "We're not supposed to have any guests in the cockpit these days, you know."

The purser interrupted. "I told him that, sir, and he kept insisting."

Buryl thought, I didn't insist. I just asked two times.

The Captain ignored the purser. "Security rules are much more stringent now," he said. "You understand."

Buryl nodded, unable to stop scanning the complexities of the multiple dashboards and panels. "This is, well, just fantastic," he said.

"What do you fly?" asked the Captain.

Buryl's mind froze. "Uh, what equipment?" he said, glancing again at the purser.

"Cessna? Piper? Experimentals? Any interesting models?" said the Captain.

"Well, I, uh," said Buryl, and realized that there wasn't a single airplane he could name, other than the brands Captain Fisher had just mentioned. Without much hope, he said, "Piper, I guess."

The Captain frowned, very briefly, and then smiled and said, "No particular model, though, right?"

The purser straightened up and leaned forward. "Sir, this is ridiculous. My fault. I apologize. Mr. Garsetti, you should get back to your seat right now." He started pulling on Buryl's sleeve. Buryl's face had gone bright red and his heart was pounding again like it had done in the dream.

Captain Fisher raised his voice. "Purser. Let go of Mr. Garsetti and return to your post."

The purser released Buryl's sleeve and took a step back as if he had been struck. "But Sir, obviously he —"

The Captain pointed at the cabin door without saying a word. The purser closed his mouth, looked at Buryl and then at the co-pilot, who was still busy, and then turned and exited the cockpit, latching the bulkhead door with unnecessary firmness.

Buryl was mortified. "I'm sorry," he said. "I just really wanted —"

The Captain was smiling again. "No worries. Our purser is a stuffy

son of a bitch with no sense of humor. You're here now, so we might as well show you around, OK?"

Buryl nodded.

The Captain pointed out the windshield at the blue sky. A bank of blazing white clouds far below was sliding past in slow motion. "It's a much better view from the cockpit, wouldn't you say?"

Buryl laughed a little, for the first time in a long while. "It sure is," he said.

In Acapulco, after landing, Buryl made his way slowly up the aisle with the other deplaning passengers. At the door, the Captain was nodding at everyone as they passed, and when Buryl reached him, the Captain handed him something. "We used to give these to the kids after a visit to the cockpit. It's just a toy, but I thought you might like one."

Buryl took the toy, a silver plastic pair of wings with the airline company logo in the center. He beamed at the Captain and mumbled "Thank you," as the crowd pressed him off the plane onto the jetway.

The airport was much smaller than JFK, but louder and more confusing. Buryl managed to find his luggage, and a free shuttle to his hotel, and eventually entered the Hotel Krystal Beach, 20 minutes drive from the airport. On the shuttle bus, Buryl had pinned the plastic airline pin to his windbreaker and thought about the reaction he would get when he told Doug from Scheduling about it.

In the lobby, he allowed a hotel porter to haul his suitcase up to the front desk, and when he gave the porter a five dollar tip, it was apparently a very generous one in Acapulco.

The Mexican woman behind the counter wore a red and yellow dress and flowers in her hair. She beamed at Buryl and said, "Bienvenido a Acapulco, señor. How can I help you?"

"I have a reservation from Astoria Textiles," he said.

She typed into her terminal and then said brightly, "Yes sir, Mr. Garsetti. Your room's all ready for you, with an ocean view."

Buryl looked around the grand lobby. It was filled with tropical light, and the warm air had a tang of sea salt that he had never noticed back in Queens. The guests were all dressed in bright colors, some in bathing suits, others in shorts and T-shirts. A mariachi band was playing just outside a

set of multiple doors that were all open onto a tiled patio with umbrellas and a free-standing bar.

The desk clerk handed him his magnetic room key. "Are you a pilot?" she said, nodding toward the plastic pin on his jacket.

Buryl looked down at it and thought for a moment. "No," he said, "I'm not a pilot. It's just a souvenir from the plane." He picked up his suitcase, walked a few steps, and turned back to the woman behind the counter. "I could be," he said, but she was already engaged with another guest.

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