The baby’s contorted face was red and shining with moisture. Its cries were wet with pooling saliva and vibrated, gargling out from the back of its throat. Ana’s wide fearful eyes fixed on the inconsolable infant. There was nothing she could do. Mainly because this was not her baby, but presumably that of the tutting, bouncing, fumbling woman with the sloppy bun, in the seat beside her. What was this woman doing? Did she know what she was doing? Ana’s eyes move quickly to the lady’s free hand to identify its occupation, she’s reaching, fingers outstretched tipping forward with her body, attempting to unzip the oversized baby bag stuffed under the seat in front of her. Groans and heckles are heard from seats surrounding them.

“Good Afternoon Everyone, Happy Tuesday, Welcome to flight 215 non-stop heading to New York. I’m Pamela and before we take off –“

Ana looks ahead at the young, thin, dark-skinned woman who speaks in the handheld microphone, her false smile and brilliant white teeth in glaring opposition to the toothless tortured soul squirming in the arms of the woman beside her. Two flight attendants begin down the aisle to their rehearsed places. Ana watches as they approach. The first does her best to not make eye contact and only peeks out the corner of her eye at the child. The frazzled mother has begun to sprinkle cursing between her tutts.

“Tut tut tut- shhh shhh- shit.”

The second flight attendant passes by but keeps her back turned to them with her arm up, possibly legitimately checking the over head bin across from them but more than likely this is a pro move. Ana can see the silver strands of gray tucked in the woman’s tightly wound bun. She’s clearly the veteran of the crew. Impervious to it all. Tired of the human race as a whole. That’s what years of customer service does to a person.

With no hope of help from them, Ana looks back to the child whose cries are now broken up with coughing on the excess spit. She really didn’t want to get involved. Ana closes her eyes for a second and breathes in a deep breath through her nostrils and exhales slowly out of her mouth, just like her therapist showed her.

“Can I, um, help in any way?”

The mother looks at Ana for the first time maybe realizing she was there and Ana unconsciously presses herself into her seat. She purses her lips and reverse whistles, as if attempting to hoover the words she spoke back into her mouth and out of existence. The mother’s eyes are pink around the rims with the expected new-parent exhaustion but with a glint of excitable confusion. She looked like a person who realized while in line that the cashier has failed to ring up a few items but has bagged them anyway, looking at the total and fighting the internal moral battle, was this a test? Was it a gift? Is karma rewarding her or setting her up?

“Yes! Please.” The mother says, like a woman confidently sliding her card and deciding to take her chances. “I just need her paci from her bag. I know I packed five of them because you lose them like crazy.” Ana looks down at the bag but pink cloth suddenly obstructs her view. “Do you mind holding her?” The mother says, having completed the transfer mid sentence. Ana instinctively held her arms out to secure the child unknowingly at first holding it at a distance from her body, as if handed a plastic bag filled with spilled soup. She had even sucked in her stomach as if her body was rejecting even the idea of the child or any child. Ana’s eyebrows raise but she grows a smile of politeness as she wonders why this woman would hand over her child so willingly. Ana looks to the other rows of passengers, does anyone else see this? Of course they do. But the glare from the man with the Bose headphones makes Ana think, he thinks, she’s involved. She doesn’t even know this baby. Can’t he see that? Ana looks at its flailing little limbs and puts the baby in her lap, pulling its swaddle a little snugger and then holding the baby to her chest.

“Shh, shh, shh” Ana says, gently brushing a finger against the baby’s cheek. The mother is rummaging through the bag, pulling out the contents, piling blankets and loose diapers onto her own lap.

“I can’t imagine when she starts actually moving around. We lose them so quickly now and she doesn’t even hold her own head up yet.” The woman laughs still searching. The baby’s cries are quieting and its left in a strange in between gasping and calming phase. “It’s my first time alone with her. We’re going to New York so she can meet her dad. He’s been there for business for the past 2 months.”

“I don’t care.” Ana thinks to herself, she bounces the warm damp baby and looks again at the mother’s hands wondering why she wouldn’t put the pacifiers in the outside pocket so they were easily accessible. Ana looks down at the baby whose tiny lips puckers and mimics a sucking motion. It squints and turns its head. “Rooting” is what Ana identifies this as. She remembers from psychology class. It’s one of the survival instincts. “She’s hungry.” Ana thinks but should she tell this woman? Shouldn’t this woman be able to tell? It is her child after all.

“My mother-in-law has been staying with us.” She continues to ramble. “She was there for the birth and has been helping out since day one. I haven’t been alone with the baby for more than a few hours at a time. We’re so blessed.” The mother says.

“We’re preparing for takeoff. Please secure all items under your seat.”

Ana looks up at the indifferent voice coming from the vet attendant and before the woman walks away Ana narrows her eyes at her. Now she wants to speak? Now that the flames have settled and people are being treated for third degree burns does she feel the nerve to come over and say “don’t play with matches”? Seriously lady? “I got it under control.” Ana says with her eyes and breathes in through her nostrils and out through her mouth, just like her therapist told her, still cradling the tiny body of a stranger that she’ll hopefully never ever see again.

“You got her to stop.” The mother smiles at Ana. “Maybe she doesn’t need it.”

“It might help her with the takeoff. Like gum does for us. So her ears don’t pop.”

“Shit. I forgot gum.” The mother taps her palm to her forehead. “Baby-brain.” She laughs.

“I think you can only use that excuse when you’re pregnant.” Ana thinks, annoyed. “Did you check the outside pocket?”

“I didn’t pack the bag. My mother-in-law did. So-“ She unzips the front pocket of the bag and pulls out a bulging plastic zip lock. “Amen.” She says triumphantly. She shoves the items from her lap into the top of the baby bag and shoves them down to zip the top closed. She then takes one of the five pacifiers and leans over looking down at the calm child. She’s so close that Ana can only see her hair and can smell the strawberry shampoo and faint smell of spit-up. The mother wiggles the pacifier between the plump baby lips. Its mouth mechanically responds sucking furiously at the false nipple. The mother sighs and Ana wonders for a second if she’s invisible, if maybe this woman has forgotten she exists. The woman sits back, fluid, as if all the muscles in her body have relaxed, smiling warmly, dreamy with love. This woman’s dreamy state makes Ana realize how tense all of her muscles actually are. Why was her body reacting so adversely?

“You calmed her down so quickly. Are you a mother?” The woman asks.

“No.” Ana says flatly. “Do you want her back?”

“Yes, of course. Thank you.” She reaches over and she and Ana perform the delicate transfer of infant to owner. “Everything is just so new.” The mother says looking over the momentarily peaceful, little girl, whose face is gradually turning back to normal skin tone.

“Prepare for takeoff.” Knuckles tighten, hands are held, prayers are said and they lift.

“Your first?” Ana asks.

“Yes.”

“Your last.” Ana hopes, silently.

“One month into motherhood.”

“Congrats.” Ana says, feeling that this is socially the right thing to say but is troubled by the insincerity. She looks beyond the mother and child out the tiny oval window at the trees and watches as she rises above the highest branches, the world grows smaller, buildings and streets becoming 2D like paper cut outs. The baby lets out a whimper. Ana looks down at it and sees it’s turning its face away from the pacifier. The mother is looking out the window.

“Do you think she’s hungry?” Ana suggests. It’s obvious that the child is hungry. It truly is a blessing the mother-in-law is sticking around because this woman clearly has no idea what she’s doing.

“Oh, maybe.” She says looking down as if remembering the baby was there. She’s panicked by the signs of distress her child is beginning to show. No one wants it to get to that level of hysteria again. No one. “I should probably feed her.”

“You think?!” Ana says in her mind, nodding a polite smile at the woman.

“You don’t mind do you?” The mother asks.

“Hm?” Ana asks as the woman has already begun opening her shirt. “Oh.” Ana says trying not to sound surprised. “Of course I don’t mind.” She blushes. She’s a feminist. Girl Power, right? She knows this is beautiful and natural and society has sexualized boobs and blah blah blah but she really did not want to see this woman’s chest. Ana quickly turns away and grabs the binder from her carry-on. She opens it randomly, she’s read it 100 times, because she wrote it but with all of her might she’s going to pretend to read it now, anything to avoid the image in her peripheral of this woman as she uses her hand to aim her nipple at the baby’s face.

Ana’s life hasn’t always been this glamorous. Just a few short months ago before she got a fancy agent to buy her economy class tickets for flights to New York, Ana had to buy her own economy class tickets for flights, which she didn’t do often because money was tight. She moves her eyes across the page reading the same sentence again and again, not like she used to when this was merely a first or fifth draft, with her critical eye and red pen, but out of determination to normalize the woman with her shirt open. She remembers writing this sentence. It was almost three months ago, when she was in her second favorite coffee shop sitting on a high barstool with a fresh hot coffee beside her. This coffee shop was down the street from her real life grown up job which is really what gave it such a high ranking on her list of favorite coffee shops, otherwise it was average, eclectic décor that looked like it came from yard sales and consignment shops, and sup-par service from the stoned baristas. It was a slower day at the shop, mellow eighties music played on the over head speakers, and the only chatter came from a Japanese business man who was easy for Ana to tune out due to her lack of understanding the language. The coffee aroma and the steady tapping of her fingers on the keyboard was the rhythm that drove her forward. The satisfying almost victorious tap with both thumbs on the spacebar after each word she captured on the screen. Ana was never quiet able to master any real instruments but this steady rhythmic tapping of keys, keys to words, words to worlds, was the song of Ana’s soul. She had always loved typing, even before she could spell. As a young girl she would sit at the desk in her grandparents room, cross legged in her strawberry short cake night gown and ruby red Dorothy slippers and she would feed the typewriter a sheet of blank white paper, manually rolling the mechanics as she was shown and would then type. She would type with purpose and intent. She was never like those children who wildly pressed the keys just to see the lettered arms rise and to see how fast they could. No, Ana had respect for the machine. She knew it held power and magic. When she typed, she always had a point. Which she found ironic later on in life, before she had the gift of language she never experienced writer’s block. It was on that day, in that coffee shop, at the moment when her soul was at peace that her cell phone buzzed.

She ignored it for awhile. When she was in the groove a lot of things had to wait. She really needed to get these words out while she could because once her alarm went off she’d have to pack up, walk down the street, clock in, and switch over to the right side of her brain for work mode. She only sat back to sip her coffee once she finished a paragraph. It wasn’t the end of the scene but it was the end of a thought and she took a moment to ponder her own character’s revelation. Sometimes her character’s surprised her. She remembers taking a sip of coffee and moving the cursor to the beginning of her days work, preparing herself to read over it. She then grabbed her phone and unlocked it. She had received a text notification from her boyfriend Vince. As soon as she read his name her chest tightened.

The text read: “When you get home tonight. We need to talk.”

She really should have known then that it was the end. In her experience, talking leads to never speaking again. She may be able to create worlds with her words, she may be lavish with her imagery and poetic in her style. She may be able to create unique characters with complex feelings and thoughts and relationships but when it comes to real complex feelings, thoughts and relationships, Ana was rather clueless. She was terrible with words when it came to expressing herself. She spent lots of time in therapy just sitting in silence. When it comes to emotionally charged discussions that follow the expression “we need to talk” she normally did little of the talking and most of the listening. Editing and re-editing all of the responses in her head but never submitting a complete rebuttal which led the other person expecting that she didn’t care enough to contribute, which led to her giving in to that expectation, resigning herself to apathy and leading to the slow erosion or quick collapse of the relationship, depending on the stability and sensibility of the ex-man in question.

It was today, again, a day she was filled with a swell of confidence that Vince decided to send her another emotionally charged text. She was waiting in the line before the line for TSA and she held in her right hand the ticket she didn’t have to pay for and in her left her rolling carryon. She looked around at the winding queue of 60 to 70 people, families, couples, lonely people, some in flip flops, some in suits, all different, some live so far from any experience she might be able to imagine, some more privileged, some less exciting, all currently sharing this air, this space, all in transit, sharing maybe nothing in common except their location and the time of day. Instead of it making her feel insignificant it made her feel rich with appreciation for who she was and where she was. This is the beginning of what she’s always wanted for herself. She is heading to New York to meet her agent and plan her book tour. Her. Book. Tour. She smiled beaming with self importance, singing “Confidence” from the Sound of Music, picturing herself as the Julie Andrew’s version of Maria. “Besides what you see, I have confidence in me.” It took all of her self-control to not hum aloud, and again with perfect timing in full contrast of her vibe, her phone buzzed in her pocket with a grounding reality. The text was from Vince. They had just left each other only minutes ago. He drove her to the airport and they kissed lightly on the lips and he hugged her before she waved and walked into the airport. Seeing this notification, Ana didn’t lose her smile but her lungs constricted. She read the text:

“ I won’t be here when you get home. I’m moving out. I already started packing my things a few weeks ago but you’re so self centered you haven’t seemed to notice.”

Ana lets out a light laugh, “I thought you were just picking up after yourself for once.” She thinks her response.

She continues reading, “ I’m sick of coming second to your job, your “dream”, your friends, your family, your pets, your “alone time”. You seem to always need alone time. So you might as well be fucking alone. You’ll have plenty of quiet time to “write” without me in the house.”

“True.” Ana thinks raising an eyebrow.

“After our conversation 3 months ago, I really thought you were going to change. I bared my soul to you. I told you what I needed for this to work and you tried for maybe a week or two but then you went straight back to ignoring me and pushing me away anytime I tried to be close to you. I don’t know if you realize how patient I am with you. How fucking forgiving. You and your anxiety, and your lacking libido, and your control issues and your fucking cats! Good luck finding someone willing to try as hard as I have to love you. You make it almost impossible!“

Ana stared down at the message taking a few steps forward scanning the contents to make sure she hadn’t missed anything. When she looked up, she was almost to the end of the security line where she was going to have to present her ticket to the TSA agent. She scrolled back to the top of the screen, deciding not to respond maybe until she lands in New York. She took two screen shots and then switched conversations to a group text with her best friends. “I just got dumped.” She text and then sent the two photos. She then quickly shoved her phone into her purse and pulled her ID from the outside pocket.

“Next.” The TSA agent said and Ana stepped forward with a smile. She has never been dumped before today. Normally, Ana would see the relationship heading in this direction and she’d end it before they could, because Vince was right, she did tend to be a little controlling. Once, after a really terrible first date she convinced a man to go on a second date with her just so that she could tell him that she didn’t think it was a good match. Ana now leans back in the stiff faux leather airplane seat and closes her eyes trying to identify the feelings that were lingering, waiting for processing, filing away and successfully suppressing. She wasn’t feeling heartbroken or crushed. She wasn’t really in any physical pain but there was a dull ache in her chest, as if after constricting, her lungs began solidifying the oxygen she was taking in and its sediments were collecting in the bottom of them. Or like someone had folded her lungs in half and the new crease in the tissue was delaying them from fully inflating with her breath.

Her friend’s no doubt were texting her with a relentless speed faster than both her texting speed and thought process. They were more than likely saying what a ‘Douchey move it was to break up a two year relationship over text message and then asking floods of questions about how it got this far, how could he wait until the day she was leaving for such a pivotal moment in her life and make it about him? What did she say back? Do they need her to go to the house and talk to him? Should they start plotting his death? Or go full Beyonce lemonade on him? After sending them the text Ana had put her phone away, only taking it out to text that she had boarded the plane to the people that cared enough about her to pray for her safety. When she was sitting at the gate with her Starbucks and her notebook in her lap, she felt a little lost but also at peace. She was in new territory but she felt it was territory she was meant to discover all along. In a building so charged with emotion, farewell kisses, extended hugs to last until the next time, lovers parting, families uniting, people headed to vacation, people traveling for work, troops being deployed with no return flight, it was a building filled with anticipation and fear. Here was a perfect place to receive a text that would change the trajectory of her life. She was leaving behind her old life and it made sense to shed the old skin and to weed out the people and pieces of her life that wasn’t going to fit into this next phase.

What was troubling her now was the dull ache she was feeling and it’s mysterious origin. It was two years, she should feel sad, maybe even devastated. She’s sure that’s how the woman beside her would be feeling if she had gotten that text. Ana was troubled by her lack of reaction. She cared for her boyfriend Vince. He wasn’t a bad guy and she knew she’d miss him. She’d miss sitting beside him on the sofa as he trolled people on x-box live and she wrote in her robe sharing a cider with him. She would miss his sarcastic comments he’d whisper in her ear at the movie theater. She normally hated when people talked through movies or asked questions but she always felt his added to the experience. They always had such perfect comedic timing and were often so wildly inappropriate that she would struggle to hold back her laughter during scenes where others were shedding tears. Sometimes when the lights went up other movie goers would try to identify her, needing to see and pass judgmental glances at the heartless monster who would laugh through such heart-wrenching plot and character development. Maybe it was to make sure it wasn’t just their own subconscious revealing their own callous sociopathy. Ana never cared, sometimes she would wave. She only ever apologized if the person looked really hurt as if her laughter had killed their last shred of hope for humanity and this generation. She always tried to keep her laughter contained. She was told her laugh was too loud more than once, that people could hear it before entering a room, or find her in a crowd of thousands because of it’s boisterousness. So she would try to contain it, if not out of respect for the audience than out of respect for the cinematic artistry. She might miss his smile, he had a great smile, but now that she was thinking about it she hasn’t seen him smile in quite some time.

“How long have you been married?” Ana asks the woman, who by now is in the process of covering herself.

“Only two years.” The woman says with a wide smile, almost euphoric probably high from whatever endorphins are released when bonding with a child like she just has and also probably because said child is now dozing off. “My first marriage, his second.” She continues offering information Ana didn’t ask for. She simultaneously is intrigued and regretful for engaging with this woman again. The last thing she really wanted was to be trapped in a boring conversation about some one else’s mediocrity.

“Two years, that’s how long me and my boyfriend have been together.” Ana offers the baiting information.

“Oh, that’s nice. My husband John and I, dated for about two years before he proposed.”

“My boyfriend dumped me today.” Ana says fighting a smirk. The woman’s eyebrows raise and her mouth drops open with instant sympathy. Ana bites the inside of her lip fighting the betrayal of a smile her face is trying to form. She found pleasure in the idea of shocking this woman with her personal details. She knew how it would play out. She’d play it cool speaking the true details of what should be a hurtful experience, stating them plainly while she watched the other person adopt the emotions fitting to the scenario, the emotions that Ana herself lacked for some reason. She was like an alien in this sense, observing and learning from their responses but never fully being able to replicate the behavior herself. “This is how humans behave.” She’d gather the information if anything to use in her writing later on.