

Ave Maria

"Seat 31-F? Right down the end of the plane, the window seat on the left."

"Thanks."

Jeff Cooke managed a smile for the stewardess, but didn't feel remotely happy. He was having second thoughts about the wisdom of taking this flight when he could have had a seat in the business section on the next day's early morning flight. He *should* have been flying business on this trip, but he'd arrived minutes before the scheduled departure time and had been bumped into economy class because the business section of the plane had been unusually full. Damned Chicago traffic. He'd left the hotel with plenty of time to spare, but the almost continuous construction work between downtown and Midway airport had caused the journey to take far longer than he'd expected, even on a Sunday. Of course the airline staff were very nice about it and apologized profusely. They gave him the choice of a "Comfort Class" (the airline's euphemism for "economy") seat on today's flight or a guaranteed place in business tomorrow, with a free round-trip voucher thrown in either way. Unfortunately, he had to get to St. Louis today in order to get his connection to San Francisco. There was an important board meeting he had to attend on Monday morning, so flying tomorrow wasn't an option. He'd reluctantly taken the Comfort Class seat, and wondered ruefully when he'd get the chance to use the freebie ticket for anything other than more business travel.

He walked slowly down the aisle, trying not to look out of the portholes that showed the wings of the aircraft. Other passengers were busy cramming their baggage into the overhead bins, and he had to stop frequently. He glanced toward the back of the plane. It didn't seem long enough to contain 31 rows, and the further he went, the clearer it became that his was the very last row. His seat was the window seat on the right of the plane, with one seat next to it. On the other side of the aisle there were three seats per row.

Approaching his row, Jeff looked out of the window and became confused. Why couldn't he see the asphalt of Midway airport outside, with other planes and busy support vehicles speeding from plane to terminal and back again? All he could see was a smooth, convex, cream-colored surface. Then realization dawned: he was looking at the starboard engine. He'd forgotten that the MD-80 was a twin-engined aircraft with the engines attached to the rear of the fuselage, not hanging beneath the wings as on the larger aircraft he was more used to flying in. And he'd be sitting next to the engine for the duration of the thankfully short flight to St. Louis. Great. He squeezed himself into the window seat and placed his attaché case under the seat in front. Then he stared fixedly at the tray table in front of him, taking carefully measured breaths and trying to relax.

The problem was, of course, Jeff was terrified of flying. 32 years old, PhD in molecular biology, president of one of the Bay Area's most successful biotech companies, and he was scared to fly. Jeff was probably more qualified than anyone else on the jetliner to describe the physics and mechanics of flight. He understood the materials science that enabled the wings to stay fastened to the aircraft's fuselage, in spite of the tremendous forces exerted on them during flight. He could explain to any reasonably bright high

school student the principles of lift and drag, and why a plane rises into the air and stays there, as long as the engines provide enough thrust. A couple of years ago, he'd even bought some books on jet engine technology, so he knew intimately how the gasses that combust in the engine's power plant turn the turbo fans to provide the thousands of pounds of thrust required to sustain flight at nearly 600 MPH through the rarefied air of the upper atmosphere. He could explain all this, and call on frighteningly complex looking equations to back him up. Once he was sitting in a plane, though, be it on the ground or six miles up, he couldn't convince himself that all the science in the world would make a damn bit of difference. Every time he flew he expected the plane to fail to rise into the air on take-off and shoot off the end of the runway, into a river or onto an unfortunate freeway. Even once airborne, he fully expected the aircraft to fall from the sky and plummet back to earth, either because of engine failure, or just the simple fact that it should never have been up there in the first place.

In the four years since Jeff had started ParaTech with two friends, he'd discovered ways of dealing with his phobia, and keeping it at bay. It became obvious in the company's early days that there would be a fair amount of long-distance travel. Sure, a lot of the companies the fledgling ParaTech needed to deal with were located right there in Silicon Valley: workstation vendors whose computers they used to run complex molecular simulations, suppliers of basic biotech equipment like plate readers and gel materials - they were all on ParaTech's doorstep. To sell the company's ideas and technology, however, Jeff and his colleagues had to look further afield, to the Eastern and mid-Western States, as well to Europe and Japan. Unfortunately for Jeff, he was the natural candidate for the sales job. Mark Easton was a great manufacturing guy, and he was invaluable in setting up their production line when the venture capitalists had been persuaded to invest enough money into the start-up, and Michael Bennett could count the pennies and make sure they didn't overspend in the company's fragile early days. But the technology was Jeff's baby. He'd invented the gene-splicing techniques that ParaTech was now refining and exploiting in their products while he was working on his PhD thesis. Now they were selling them to labs involved in the Human Genome Project all over the world, and Jeff was still the scientist with the depth of understanding to explain the benefits of their technology to other experts in the field.

Jeff had invented ways to handle his fear of flying. The main discovery was that if he sat at the front of the plane, with all the machinery of wings and engines well behind him, and if he didn't look out of the windows, then he could almost convince himself that he was just travelling in an especially noisy train, and not suspended precariously six miles above the earth's surface in a thin aluminum tube, with no obvious reason for remaining there. Take-off and landing were still troublesome; there's no denying that your body is travelling vertically at large acceleration during those segments of the flight, but deep breathing exercises suggested by his physician alleviated the worst of the panic and nausea. Indeed the doctor had urged Jeff to see a therapist who specialized in phobias such as his, but Jeff claimed he was too busy. The truth was that he'd never dealt with shrinks before, and wasn't going to start now. In fact, by sheer will-power and determination, two qualities that Jeff possessed an abundance of, flying had become quite manageable, as long as he could be sure of a seat in the business section.

He fastened his seat-belt, even though they hadn't even left the gate yet, and stretched his

long legs, one on either side of his brief case. He'd thought that leg-room would be a problem back here, but TWA's policy of having fewer seats in the tourist class cabin meant that even a six-footer like Jeff could travel in comparative comfort. He closed his eyes, placed his hands on the thighs of his business-suited legs and practised some deep breathing. Better. His heart palpitations receded. He allowed himself a smile. Anyone looking at this well-dressed (the suit was dark-blue and expensive, though not ostentatiously so), well-groomed (though a few gray hairs were creeping in now), fit-looking man would find it hard to believe that he experienced panic over something that hundreds of thousands of people managed every day with no harm befalling them. Mark and Michael teased him about it, saying if you've gotta go, you've gotta go. Still, he didn't want to go; life was just fine as it was, and besides, he didn't believe there was anywhere *to* go. Once the flickering candle of our lives was extinguished, the future was just darkness, a blank non-existence. That's what he'd believed since leaving home and the well meaning but misguided dogma of his parents and the priests at school and the church.

On opening his eyes again, he was startled to see he'd been joined by another passenger. He shouldn't have been surprised: they'd told him at check-in that the flight was fully booked. Maybe the shock was from the fact that she'd managed to place herself in the seat next to his without his being aware of it. She was an old lady, small, but not particularly frail looking. Her skin was dark, as though she was of Latin or maybe Middle Eastern origin. He thought that she looked about 60, but might easily have been 90. There were a few wrinkles on her face, but she didn't have the parchment skin of many people who spend their lives in a hot climate. Her nose was small and slightly hooked, and her lips were thin and pale, but kind, not mean. Jeff wondered if she'd been attractive as a younger woman. Possibly: certainly the overall effect of her face now was one of gentleness and contentment. The rest of her small body was clothed in black- she wore a black dress with white raffia around the neck, a black woolen shawl and a black silk scarf covering her hair. He thought she might even be a nun, but if so, she didn't remind him of any of the ones he'd met as a child. His memories of them were of cruel, mean spirited women, devoid of kindness and compassion.

She turned to smile at him. Her eyes made him start. They were the most brilliant blue. Vibrant and full of life, they looked as though they belonged to the face of someone much younger. He thought she might speak; instead she just continued to smile and met his gaze with her intense eyes. Eventually she turned her head away, and the spell was broken. She slowly closed her eyes and laid her hands in her lap, on which was resting small black leather purse. Jeff wondered if maybe she got nervous flying too, but decided no; she was serene, calm, and centered.

The chief stewardess was running through the standard safety talk, as though it might possibly make a difference if they were to crash. She'd said the speech so many times that she didn't even bother to insert pauses between the individual words or sentences. They were reduced to a meaningless slur, and Jeff would have had trouble following it if he

hadn't heard it so many times that he knew the drill by heart.

The aircraft reached the start of the runway, and their stewardess (called Lorie and wearing an "I Love TWA" button) asked Jeff to open his window blind "for take-off", before sitting down herself in the small galley behind Jeff and the old lady. He'd closed the blind earlier so he didn't have to see the engine casing inches from his head, vibrating on its fragile mounting as the plane thundered along the runway. He complied with Lorie's request, and looked at the engine now. It must have been five feet in diameter, and weighed several tons. At the low thrust required for taxiing, the engine emitted a slow, deep resonant sound that growled at him once every second or so. Jeff wondered if this was normal. The first time he'd visited England on business, back in 1989, a Boeing 737 had crashed on to a freeway just outside Birmingham, shortly after taking off. That had been due to a fragment of the engine's turbofan coming loose and flying off at high speed, piercing the thin skin of the engine casing and causing an explosion. Jeff shuddered and tried not to think about it.

The MD-80 started to roll forward on the runway. The pitch of the engines rose to a scream, and the volume became almost deafening. The captain released the brakes and the plane surged forward. If Jeff had been less enveloped in fear, he would have found the acceleration of the aircraft exhilarating, like driving his Porsche 911 round the winding roads of Northern California. That was different, though: he had control of the car, and he controlled the danger. Here he was at the mercy of the gods, in whom he didn't even believe. As usual, Jeff became convinced they wouldn't make it. The plane gathered speed as it roared down the runway, but showed no sign of lifting into the sky. The captain would forget to lower some vital flap, or it would skid, sending the 150 passengers hurtling off the runway and to their certain fiery deaths. At what must have been the last possible second, the great metal bird ascended dramatically, pressing Jeff into his seat and forcing his heart down to meet his stomach. There was a "clunk" as the under carriage was raised, and the ground fell away from beneath them. He loosened his grip on his thighs, but kept his eyes closed and tried to breath steadily.

By fifteen minutes into the flight, Jeff had relaxed sufficiently to allow his mind to think about something other than aviation disasters. He went over in his mind what he'd say to the board tomorrow. It was good news. Mid West Genetics had been impressed by the processes that Jeff had explained to them in his hi-tech computer animated presentation, and they were keen to sign up as a licensee. ParaTech were in the enviable position of holding patents - Jeff's patents - on a number of technologies that everyone in biotech wanted access to. They had built a better mousetrap, and the scientific world was beating a path to their door. Indeed ordinarily MWG would have come to them for the presentation, but Jeff offered to fly to Chicago as it gave him the chance to meet up with an old friend from his Stanford days who was lecturing at Chicago University. That had been worth it; they'd enjoyed each other's company and had a great evening listening to the blues and rapping about old times.

Occasionally Jeff stole a look at the old lady on his left. She seemed to be sleeping peacefully, and when Lorie brought the token meal service of peanuts and drinks, she

didn't bother to wake the old woman to see if she wanted anything. Indeed, she didn't even seem to notice her presence.

Ten minutes from landing, the captain's voice emerged from the PA system.

"Well ladies and gentlemen, we've just been advised by St. Louis air traffic control that the storm we mentioned earlier hasn't abated any, so it looks like we're in for a bumpy approach. Please take your seats and fasten your safety belts. Crew please prepare for landing and cross-check."

Just as the speaker clicked off, the plane shook violently as it penetrated the dense clouds that were visiting heavy rain, thunder and lightning on the whole of east Missouri.

"There you go!" chimed the captain "We'd like to ask the cabin crew to return to their seats at this time, and we'll try to get you down on the ground just as soon as we can. Thank you."

Lorie made her way to her seat behind Jeff and his quiet companion. The stewardess had to steady herself on the luggage racks as the plane shook again. The captain dimmed the lights in the cabin. Little light was available through the windows because although it was still early evening, the sun couldn't penetrate the dense moist clouds.

Jeff checked his seat belt, closed his eyes and started breathing slowly and steadily. The plane lurched violently to one side as it flew through an air pocket, and Jeff snapped his eyes open. It was no good; he couldn't pretend to be calm any more. His heart was pounding against his chest and his head throbbed. It wasn't helped by the statically charged air they were passing through, the large voltages on the skin of the aircraft filling the pressurized cabin with debilitating ionization. All Jeff could think of was the whine of the engine that filled his head, and how unlikely it was that the engine would stay attached to the aircraft if it kept making these violent movements. He felt certain they were all going to die.

A small, cool hand rested on his. It belonged to the old lady.

"Be calm; we're quite safe."

She smiled at him gently, encouragingly, but also a little sadly he thought. He managed a weak smile in return. There was a trace of an accent in her speech, but he couldn't place it.

A crashing boom filled the cabin, and simultaneously a brilliant blue-white flash illuminated it from outside. Jeff's first thought was "Bomb!" but as the sound faded, he recognized it as thunder, closer than he ever heard it before.

"My God," he thought, "all we need now is to be struck by lightning." He turned his head from the window and devoted his energy to stopping himself from whimpering like a frightened dog.

The old lady reached into her purse and pulled out a thin gold chain that held a row of small dark-brown beads. Jeff recognized it as a rosary, Catholic prayer beads, part of his superstitious upbringing.

"Help me say some prayers," she said, " it will help you feel better."

Jeff wanted to refuse her, but found he couldn't say anything at all. He simply stared at the chain in her hand as she fingered the first bead and began quietly, almost inaudibly, to say:

"Hail Mary, full of Grace
The Lord is with Thee
Blessed art Thou amongst Women
And blessed is the fruit of thy Womb, Jesus.
Holy Mary, Mother of God
Pray for our Sinners
Now and the hour of our death.
Amen"

She looked at him, her bright blue eyes seeming to implore him. The plane hit another air pocket and lurched to the right. Jeff was thrown against the window and the old lady fell against him. Someone up front shrieked, but mostly there was a stunned silence. Jeff wanted to scream himself, but fought against it. The plane's attitude became level again, and Jeff tried to regain some of his composure. His mind was filled with unspeakable fears, and all of his well-honed analytical powers of logic and deduction could do nothing to allay them. The woman completed another Hail Mary and looked at him once more. He spoke quietly, his voice almost cracking, so dry was his throat.

*Hail Mary, full of Grace
The Lord is with Thee*

Another explosion of thunder reverberated around the cabin, and the lightning almost blinded Jeff with its brilliance. Rivulets of sweat trickled from his forehead into his eyes. When the flash of light subsided, Jeff saw a strange after image of the old lady, her head almost appearing to be framed with an auroric glow. He blinked the stinging salty sweat from his eyes and the image faded. He clasped his trembling hand over hers, all pretence of control gone now.

*Blessed art Thou amongst Women
And blessed is the fruit of thy Womb, Jesus.*

A baby started to cry. Jeff didn't blame her. His ears popped with the increasing pressure as the captain expedited their descent through the storm clouds. There were no sudden jolts for a while, just a general shuddering as the aircraft cut through the turbulent air. The pitch of the engines rose and fell as the captain made constant adjustments to their course and speed.

Holy Mary, Mother of God

Pray for our Sinners

Suddenly, everything changed. Thoughts of panic, even thoughts of what Jeff was going to tell the board at tomorrow's meeting seemed very unimportant to him now. It was as though he'd caught a glimpse of his life through the wrong end of a telescope. It was very small. The house in Woodside, the fast car, the late nights at the lab perfecting some obscure technique, the succession of shallow relationships since Tony, all seemed so insignificant now. In fact, the memories of Tony seemed to be the only part of this existence that didn't suddenly appear devoid of meaning. There had been love there, but Jeff had driven him away by his obsession with work and success.

Now and the hour of our death.

Amen

The old lady squeezed his hand once more, and smiled with her eyes. A tear emerged from Jeff's. Suddenly, a peacefulness came to him, a warm tranquillity which he had never felt before. It started at the base of his spine and flowed up, through the vertebrae. It reached his neck and entered his head, suffusing it with the same wondrous feeling, filling his mind with an openness that replaced the closed intensity that he'd nurtured for so long. The lightness was almost shocking, and he had to catch his breath to stop from fainting.

The plane burst through the cloud ceiling. It ceased its vibrating and jostling from the eddying air currents. The engines' pitch stabilized and sounded steady and normal again. The only physical sensations now were the small controlled movements the pilot made to keep the plane's course in perfect track with the beam from the automatic landing beacon. There was still rain outside, streaming in rivulets along the outside of the window, but no thunder, or lightning, or buffeting by changes in air pressure.

Jeff looked across at the darkly dressed lady. Without his noticing, she'd removed her hands from his, replaced the rosary in her purse, and resumed her eyes-closed, relaxed posture. Jeff's mind was reeling. What had happened? His blind panic had been replaced by an opposite feeling of serenity. The perception of his whole life had altered. It now seemed spiritually barren, devoid of meaning. He knew that something else, something more lay in his future, but didn't know what. The panic almost returned, as he worried that he'd been given half the answer to a puzzle and couldn't begin to know how to discover the other half. But he relaxed again, as he realized he had the whole of the rest of his life to find out what path he was to take. And maybe even longer than that.

Soon they landed. Jeff was almost in a trance and was only dimly aware of the cheers and claps that erupted when the plane touched safely down on to terra firma. The plane taxied to the gate. He didn't speak to the old lady; there didn't seem to be anything to say. It was though a spell had been cast between them, and anything as trite as human speech would rupture its magical field. She got up to leave the airplane, taking no baggage with her, just her purse. He had to ask her one thing.

"What's your name?"

"My name is Maria. Maria Gracia. Live with peace." Again the brilliant blue eyes mesmerized him.

Jeff nodded dumbly and stayed seated. He felt quite drained, and didn't want to join the jostling line for the exit just yet. Soon he was alone at the back of the plane. Lorie approached him.

"Are you all right?"

"Yes, fine. I was just thinking about that old lady sitting next to me. She was quite amazing."

Lorie looked perplexed. "What old lady? You had the only empty seat on the plane next to you."

"What?!" He leapt up, grabbing his case and almost ran down the aisle to the front of the plane. The last few passengers were saying good-bye to the pilot, who looked as relieved as they did. There was no sign of Maria. He ran down the walkway, all the way to the terminal, but couldn't find her. He stood bent with his arms resting on his legs while he got his breath back.

Ave Maria, Gratia Plena

The line popped into his head. It was the first line of the Hail Mary prayer in Latin: Hail Mary, Full of Grace. He been forced to learn it as a boy. Maria Gracia, Mary Grace.

Jeff couldn't pretend to understand any of what had happened, and for once in his life his wasn't going to try. He understood that his life had changed in a dramatic way, and his whole system of beliefs and priorities had been turned upside down. He felt re-born, as though life had given him a second chance. He walked to a phone and mentally recalled Tony's number. He hoped that *he* would give him a second chance.