

Tiger, Tiger

An Arctic devil of a storm is whirling up ahead to the north. You watch it from your middle seat on Flight 459, leaning left to the window across the empty seat. The mammoth cloud is a muddy blue-black, shimmering in the final slice of Pacific sun sinking in the west. No lights below. *Must be over the Gulf of Alaska.* You drop your *Guns & Ammo* magazine onto the empty aisle seat to your right. *Hmm, you think, a little drizzle. I've seen worse.* You yawn and stretch your arms. You imagine Wendy in Anchorage. *She's probably on her way to the airport now, heading west on Route 1 and on to—*

The screech of grinding gears shoots up from the floor, jarring your boots, your seat. You jerk forward to grab... at anything—an instinct. The squeal sputters and fades. The engines hush down to a soothing hum. *It's nothing.* You exhale, ease.

“Beverage?” The flight attendant pulls the cart to your row. Her wiry red hair is slicked back in a spidery clip.

“No thanks.” You nestle back in the seat while your mind drifts, floats, dreams of Jessica waiting back home. You told her you're off to Vancouver, that your mother is ill, her heart again. *Well, it's true, you think, she is ill. But Jessica's too smart for that.*

You flinch, remembering the fight Jessica launched last night when you told her about this trip and, when both of you were spent with shouting, how she crawled into bed and turned her back. You joined her, propped on your elbow, and caressed her orange hair flaring like flames on the pillow. “You're always leaving me,” she whispered. “It's Wendy again.” You leaned back on the bed and sighed. *Dammit, you thought, constantly accusing me!* Your stomach clenched in knots. You wanted to tell Jessica every tender thing—how you'd be back soon, how you could start anew, with just her, Jessica... wanted to tell her you adore her, how small you feel when she's holding you, that you can't lose her, how, without her, you could die. But you didn't. You turned your back. *Why? Why?*

The girl behind you kicks the seat. *Stop kicking me!*

You squint to block the overhead lights, and the blame still biting at you—you the accused, the tried, the convicted. *How could Jessica know?*

The attendant pulls the cart close. “Trash?” Some of her frizzy strands have come loose. You shake your head.

You recall your first sight of her—*Jessica*—stepping out from that ruby convertible, her bushy mane of orange and gold rippling in the wind, and you, amazed, itching to get your hands in it. *But that was three years ago.* You sigh. *So much has happened since then, and now that we're—*

The plane slams into turbulence. You jolt forward. The seatbelt sign flashes red. The captain's voice quivers in the crackling air: “Return to your seats. Return to your seats.”