

“WE ARE HURLING INTO SPACE”: 1933

Elizabeth M. Bisgood

Twelve Strangers in the Night

Elizabeth M. Bisgood (1905–1988) graduated from Smith College, married twice, traveled the world, and raised a family. She nevertheless found time to publish a number of articles and short stories as well as a novel, *At the Edge of the Shadow* (1956), under her later married name Elizabeth Rodewald. Her article “Twelve Strangers in the Night,” a poetic evocation of air travel published in 1933, gives a vivid sense of how different commercial aviation was some seventy-five years ago. When Bisgood flew east from California in a Ford tri-motor, it required a couple of days to make the trek. Each person sat alone, at a window seat, in the lumbering, twelve-passenger plane, trying to read or sleep since engine noise made conversation impossible. Some gripped their armrests in white-knuckled terror, and even seasoned flyers were unable to be entirely blasé: they were united in a shared sense of the sheer eventfulness of flying. Modern airliners—bigger, heavier, much quieter, and capable of avoiding most bad weather or flying above it—have made such communal emotions rare. Suppressed or altogether gone is the sense of being at one with strangers that Bisgood so aptly captures.



Do you remember how we stared at those people in the airport who were waiting around with us? We tried to make out which were the ones who were leaving and which were being left behind. Even looking carefully in their faces we couldn't tell. Perhaps some faint bravado might be there . . . but it would be more likely to be resolutely hidden. The nervous ones are sure to be the ones left behind. You looked nervous, as I should have looked had you been on the point of climbing in behind those roaring engines stirring up great quantities of air with their flash of propeller. I am sure that, when those heavy, threatening clouds lifted

from the mountains and we were hurried on board, you never noticed who went with me and who stayed below to see our plane circle the airport and then disappear over the dark hills. I would like to tell you. Then I might feel a little that you were here, perhaps in the seat behind me, ready to smile and talk in deaf and dumb language should I turn my head.

I can only see the backs of their heads. I can see them getting out their books and settling down to read, or looking out of the windows at the propellers and the city below us. Some of them, and I suspect that they are the more experienced air travelers, have settled themselves to sleep. They are all men, eleven of them. I can see only the face of the man across the aisle from me. At any other time he would look very undistinguished, but now his face is illumined with fear. He screamed in my ear as we took off that he had never been up before. His knuckles on the arm of his chair are white, and he is watching the mountains slide away from under us with horror and fascination. I am sure he is looking for landing places. I touch his arm and point to the cotton for his ears and the chewing gum. Already he is a little green, and I am afraid he may be sick.

We are flying very low. Ahead, everything looks white. It is probably fog. No, it's not fog, it's snow. Snow driving in long straight lines at our propeller and separating to meet again at our tail. The clouds are resting heavily on the top of the plane and below us the mountains are reaching up their rock-boned fingers to catch at us. There is only a narrow space between element and element for us to fly. And it is getting narrower every second. Ahead, the snow is a white curtain pulled closed. Above are blankets of forbidding clouds. Below, ominous rocks wait. The man across the way is rigid with fear. Any course seems terrifying to him. As we dive up into the soft mass of cloud he looks at me, shakes his head, and closes his eyes. Now that we are in the cloud all sense of motion is stopped. We seem to be suspended in a universe of cotton wool. Perhaps we are a toy aeroplane filled with stiff figures and packed in cotton for shipping.

Now the man has opened his eyes and is very surprised. We are over the Mojave Desert. Ten thousand feet up over what looks to him like a world of landing field shimmering in the heat of the sunshine. The

contracted muscles of his throat loosen, he lifts his hand from the arm of his seat and dries it carefully on his handkerchief. He takes a long breath and turns to smile at me. The tension drops away from us all.

The man behind me taps me on the shoulder and shouts in my ear to know whether I mind if he smokes. I shake my head and light a cigarette myself. I offer my neighbor one but he declines and points to his stomach. The heat has made the flying quite bumpy. I am sure now he will be sick, so I look out of my window. The slow unrolling of the desert below us is lovely . . . the sand looks coral-colored and is streaked with black. The sun through the dust gives it an iridescent gleam. The smoothness seems unbroken, although in places it sweeps up to small mountains. The co-pilot creeps along the narrow aisle, shouting to each of us that in ten minutes we will be in Winslow and to watch on our right for a meteor crater. In a minute I see it, a handful of sand scooped out of the desert by some enormous fist. A hole full of blue shadow.

Now we are spiralling down, the earth rushing up to meet us. We seem to brush the top of a tree, of a house, of a cow, of a fence, and then with three soft bounces we are on the ground. The unity of us cracks. We are eleven men and one woman, getting ready to get out of a plane for ten minutes. As the plane taxis up to the hangar we really look at each other for the first time. We smile and talk a little and offer each other cigarettes as we walk about on the sand. My neighbor would like to roll on the ground in his joy to be in the secure hand of gravity again. He stamps his feet. He takes great breaths of air and does not look at the plane at all. When we go aboard again he is the last to get in. As we taxi across the field he looks with real love at the hangar . . . he couldn't look more desolate if he were leaving behind him all that he ever knew and loved.

II

Later: We have lost the sun again and are flying low over sand and bare rock with the clouds pressing down on us. Away on our left are trees bordering a canyon. They look very silly, and the canyon is nothing but

a small crack in the wide drift of sand and stone. I can see a river twist its way from one edge of the horizon to the other. We have had lunch served on tiny tables that fit into the arms of the chair. A picnic kind of lunch, but very good, with chicken sandwiches and hot coffee. My neighbor didn't want any, but everyone else seemed to enjoy having something to do. We all made it last as long as possible, even to dragging out the after-luncheon cigarette until it burnt our fingers. Then I slept and woke up to find that we are just coming into Albuquerque. . . .

We are leaving Albuquerque. The flat country drops away from under our wheels and leaves us suspended in the air. It keeps on dropping faster and faster until it seems to hit some bottom and lies below us, spread out in a circular quilt of neatly colored fields. Three colors of brown: dark loam, rich and wet; smooth stretches of chestnut earth brushed with copper light; and, framing the more fertile earth, a pale border of dry baked soil. These are checkered with astonishingly green fields that gleam as though they were polished malachite. There it lies under our wings, the flat planet of the old maps. Over it the sky is a round blue bowl, empty of wind or cloud, in which we seem to hang. Only the slow progress of field following field gives us any sense of motion. The noise by now has become so much a part of us that it is merely a lifelong deafness, cutting us into isolation. We are comfortable, remote, and without time. A minute or an hour are words of another life. We are waiting up here, while the countryside slowly rolls past, for the time when the earth will begin to lift itself towards us and place its broad and substantial back under our wheels again. Twilight is spreading across the fields, melting the sharp pattern of boundaries into each other and spinning a gossamer mist of sunset color which it lays, like a mantle, across the shoulders of the land. It is almost time for Amarillo now. I am sorry, this has been so lovely. . . .

At Amarillo I smelled new grass. It was the cool of the evening, and the air was fresh with growing things. Now evening is melting into night, and a few stars are showing through the clouds that still trail their colors into the darkening sky. The ground below us has absorbed all the darkness and lies black and strange, while we up here can still see to read. My friend across the way has just written me a note on his magazine.

“Is night flying dangerous?” he asks, and I have scribbled, “No.” But how do I know? I have never flown at night, am really entirely unprepared for it. I am wondering about it, wishing you were here and planning to sleep . . . but deep in the core of my courage I realize that what with you would have been high adventure may, without you, be trial by terror. I switch my light on and begin to read. I pull my resolution around me like a heavy cloak and do not even glance sideways out of the window. . . . I only read, matching each word, each sentence, and each page against the inevitable moment when my rising fear will blot over the book and force my unwilling eyes to watch the night.

By the slanting beam of my little light I can see my friend’s hand. And by his hand I can see that my anticipation is already reality with him. He holds the arm of his chair with bone-white fingers. The nails are buried into the soft leather. The purple veins are hollowed out of his skin like the dark rivers that ran across the sand this afternoon. Not a muscle, not a hair moves. But I can feel the hurried beat of the pulse I cannot see. Or is it my pulse? This must stop. I shall read my book again.

III

They have turned out the lights! Why? What does it mean? Where are we . . . and where are we going? I think we were all dozing when this abrupt, unsolicited darkness woke us as, in our other life, a shot from a cannon might have done.

The stars have gone. The half moon is gone too. There is not one sign of familiar light to place us in this terrible void of time and space. Now all we know is the roaring of the engines and the wild white flame of the exhaust shooting past our ears. We are going faster and faster. We are hurtling into space, into the darkness, doomed by this desperate, suffocating speed. The night is a shell around us . . . the blackness, a wall at which we are flying and against which we must inevitably crash. No earth, no sky, nothing in all the world but this roaring speed, sweeping through everlasting dark, trailing wild white flames.

Are we in a projectile shot at the hidden moon? Has the earth relaxed her blessed hold and sent us flying into a universe of endless space

and endless time, doomed to trace an endless circle in the dark of eternity? We cannot see each other at all. Not even the outline of a head. Except for those flames, I cannot see a thing, not even the line of the wings on the sky. I strain in the dark to see my neighbor's face. It is impossible. Were it not for this strange, strong current of feeling, I might be alone in the plane. But each pulse in the plane is beating in my pulse. Without being able to see anything, I know at what moment, precisely and accurately, any one of my fellow prisoners turns to force his eyesight into the unfathomable blackness, trying to see, either above or below him, some ray of light . . . some touch of the known. As surely as one of them relaxes his hold on his chair to dry his sweating palms, I know it. At the moment that I, choked by the rushing night, put my hand against my throat hoping to still the wild beat of its pulse, at that moment my fingers lay on the throats of eleven other lives. Were anyone to cry out, the cry would tear its way from my lungs even though my lips had let no sound escape. We are one unit. The breath of one is the breath of all. Our hearts pound at a single, heavy pace. The fate and the fear of any one of us is the fate and the fear of the other eleven. When at last this infinite dark becomes finite . . . when we know everything or nothing . . . ours will be the knowledge of a single mind. I am closer to these eleven men than it is possible for me to have ever been to anyone or anything in that remote life, that lovely life of light and order and familiar things, that you and I lived together. And yet I don't know one name and in a week could only recognize one face.

Something very strange is happening. We see nothing, nothing at all, yet something is happening that wasn't happening a moment ago. We sit upright, stiff and braced . . . waiting . . . waiting . . . waiting for what we do not know. Now suddenly it happens! A light shoots from the dark and fastens on us, answering lights flood downward from our wings, poles of light, stiff and angular. They are blurred at the edges. They are landing lights. Before we can warm ourselves in this release we feel three soft bounces and with a roar of the engines we know that we are on the ground. Life flows back into us as we taxi to the airport. Hastily, and with fingers still numb from fright, we collect our things and take the cotton from our ears. We look about us. The door is flung open, and

we creep out, blinking and disheveled. With one turn of the head all twelve of us look at the sky. We have been flying in the fog. There we stand in a little knot under the waterfall of light that sweeps down from three enormous searchlights.

“Bad weather ahead . . . flying in fog . . . train to Kansas City . . . this is Wichita . . . go on by plane next day, weather permitting . . . your tickets are taken care of by the company . . . taxi is waiting. . . .” Helpful, polite voices are speaking around us. Gradually we hear them. We become alert. We look at each other amazed. I see eleven mussy, undistinguished men. They see a woman who badly needs to powder her nose and have her coat pressed.

The plane has landed. The lights are on.

We are strangers again.

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