

Dead weight

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The empty seat is one of the few positives to have come from Liam's suicide. It's a grim reminder, sure, but having adjusted to the sight of an empty 18B, Cal and Danny – Liam's best friends – can't help but feel like they've hit the jackpot. They stretch out and enjoy the extra leg room; request a hot meal for their friend, whom they say is in the bathroom; and because of the space between them, they're able to keep their belongings within arm's reach for the duration of their long-haul flight to London.

They try to avoid talking about Liam. A 32-hour journey across the world is taxing enough without having to unpack the emotional impact of losing a friend, but that said, both Cal and Danny can appreciate how much easier the journey would've been had they remembered to cancel Liam's ticket in the time that has passed since his death.

Ah well.

Shit happens.

Etc.

They try to avoid talking about Liam, but Cal can't help himself. He manages to keep his mouth shut until the plane is somewhere over Indonesia, but the words rise in his throat alongside the waxen sausages and rubbery eggs the airline considers a light British breakfast. He cracks. Turns to Danny and says, 'I wish Liam was here. He would've loved this.'

'Yeah,' says Danny.

'I mean, the old Liam would've loved this. Before, you know, he...before he...back when he was happier, yeah?'

'Yeah.'

'Do you think we're doing the right thing? By going away?'

Danny frowns. 'What?'

'Like, is it disrespectful? To Liam? Is it too soon?'

'Liam's dead. It can't be disrespectful.'

'It might look weird though,' persists Cal. 'To everyone at home, I mean. Us going on holiday so soon. Has anyone messaged you?' He asks because people have been messaging him, asking what the fuck is wrong with him. Who flies to Europe a fortnight after their best friend tops themselves?

'Nah,' lies Danny. 'I haven't heard shit. Besides, Liam is supposed to be with us. We're honouring him. This is what he would've wanted.'

'How can you know that?'

'Know what?'

'That it's what he would've wanted.'

'I just do.'

Cal wants to believe Danny. He wants to believe him so badly, but he can't be sure because Liam stopped telling Cal what he wanted a long time ago. In the rare moments Liam did seem to open up, the conversation always came back to two words: I'm okay.

Cal glances sideways at Danny but his friend is staring straight ahead, moving a plastic glass of beer to his lips, the tray table, back to his lips. Froth clings to his bristly blonde moustache. He wipes it away with a muscular forearm. Cal is grateful for Danny's strength, his toughness. He trusts Danny when he says that everything will be okay.

Everything's okay, thinks Cal.

We're honouring Liam's memory.

This is what he would've wanted.

I'm a good friend.

For now, he buries thoughts of Liam beneath crumbs of complimentary crackers, which pile up in the spot where Liam's bony arse should be sitting. He and Danny take turns brushing them to the ground.

Out of sight.

Out of mind.

Cal is in 18A – the window seat – and as the plane passes over what he thinks is Vietnam, he attempts, unsuccessfully, to get a handle on his emotions. Not because of Liam; rather, he's watching Star Wars and a giant space laser has wiped out the planet Jedha and all its inhabitants. Though Cal has as much experience with interplanetary warfare as he does with processing grief, something about the scene hits him where it hurts.

But that's what happens on planes, right?

Like, a heightened state of emotion or something. As if each passenger's feelings escape and mingle in the recycled air before being inhaled by the collective. A viral load of vulnerability, a potent cocktail of excitement, of possibility.

Cal wipes his eyes and glances, again, to his left. He sees that Danny, in 18C, is having no issue keeping a lid on things. Instead of watching a movie, he's pulled up the in-flight messaging system and is typing away to the passenger in 13F. Cal strains his neck to look over the rows but can't make anything out in the dimmed cabin. He leans over and taps Danny on the shoulder. Asks him what he's doing.

'I'm talking to that blonde girl from the food court,' says Danny.

'The one with her parents?'

'Yep.'

'How do you know where she's sitting? And how do you know if she's eighteen?'

'I don't know if she's eighteen. But I do know that she's five rows ahead of us, three seats across, and pretty quick on the reply.'

'Dude. No.'

'It's harmless,' says Danny, pointing at his screen. 'Check it out. We're playing trivia.'

'Better hope the questions are at a high-school level.'

Danny raises his eyebrows. 'I'll teach her everything she needs to know.'

'Get fucked,' says Cal. 'You're cooked.'

'Why? Ms Jacobs taught me and she was way older.'

Cal groans. 'Still clinging to that Ms Jacobs story?'

'I'm only using her as a standard unit of measurement. Don't tell me you've forgotten how hot she was.'

As much as he wants to, Cal can't argue with Danny. Ms Jacobs had been their geography teacher at school and, well, yeah, she was hot. No question. They ran into her at the pub a couple of years back – maybe three months after graduating – and spent the night drinking together. Cal and Liam watched on as she and Danny flirted with each other, touching arms and legs and laughing at every dumb joke. They went to get drinks for the table and were gone for ages; too long, Liam argued, for them to be having sex, but Danny eventually returned and told them that he'd fucked Ms Jacobs in the toilet. He didn't seem surprised either; more like, it was only a matter of time. He sounded like a man who had come into himself, rather than his teacher. He's sounded that way ever since.

'She must be at least forty now,' says Cal. He'd been as excited as anyone about Danny and Ms Jacobs, but now it weirded him out.

'Age shall not weary her, nor the years condemn. We will remember her.'

'The ANZACs? Really?'

Danny bows his head. 'A minute's silence, please.'

Cal sighs. He knows Danny won't relent unless he joins him, so he bows his head and retreats to his memories of that night at the pub, of the conversation he had with Liam around a heavy wooden table in the red-brick courtyard. It was a conversation that began and ended with

Liam in tears. He told Cal that he needed to get out of there; out of the pub, out of Sydney, out of fucking Australia, if that's what it took.

He told Cal that he needed an escape route.

Room to breathe.

He asked Cal if he understood and Cal didn't know what to say. Did he understand? No. Did he want to understand? Again, not really. What he wanted was to have one night out without it turning to shit because Liam couldn't pull himself together, but how do you say that to a friend?

Cal now knows that the answer is this: you don't.

But with five schooners in his bloodstream and summer in the air, Cal told Liam the truth. He'd do anything to put things right, to live in a world where Ms Jacobs was nothing to them but a geography teacher and Liam felt understood, or less alone, but Cal knows the ten-hour difference between Sydney and London is the closest he'll ever come to going back in time. And ten hours just isn't enough.

Sixty seconds tick by. 'Lest we forget,' says Danny, pouring a drop of beer on the seat between them. 'For those who couldn't come. And those who made me.'

'Gross,' says Cal, pretending to reach for a sick bag. 'Happy now?'

'Very.'

The two boys return to their screens; Danny to his conversation with 13E, Cal to his bullshit movie, which insists that hope and light can be found in even the darkest of times.

Hope.

Ha.

Cal doesn't deserve hope. He couldn't give it to Liam, so how can he claim it for himself? The priest had spoken about hope at Liam's funeral. Cal and Danny drove hours from Sydney to be there, in the town where Liam, a border, had grown up, and they crossed the baked earth of the church yard in solemn silence. They wore Hawaiian shirts – Liam's favourite – and shook their heads at how ridiculous, how forced it all felt.



“For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord. Plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.”



Words from a god that Liam had never believed in, from a god that had never believed in Liam. What future? What hope? The priest told those in the packed-out church that they mustn't lose hope; in the Lord, in each other. He gave them permission to feel anger towards Liam for doing something so stupid, but sitting in that back-breaking pew, Cal felt nothing but guilt.

For knowing something was wrong, but not knowing how to help.

For knowing he should say something, but lacking the vocabulary.

For allowing Liam's heart to break long before his neck.

These thoughts, those memories, they batter Cal's defences constantly, determined to find a way through like the predatory sunlight behind the plane's window shade. Cal opens it and golden light floods the cabin, forcing Danny to cover his eyes.

'What the fuck? Cal, I'm working here.'

'You don't actually think you're going to get lucky, right? The mile-high club is a myth. It doesn't happen in real life.'

'This has always been your problem,' says Danny. 'Have some confidence for once. Some faith.'

Cal shakes his head, his gut trying to calm the inner-turbulence that's become so familiar. 'How can you have faith?' he says. 'Liam's dead, Danny. He killed himself. We're his best mates and we're going on a fucking holiday.'

'It's what he would've wanted.'

'I feel like we need to talk about it or something.'

'What's to talk about? It's done. We can't change that. Maybe it was his time.'

'Don't you feel guilty? Like, I don't know, like we're somehow responsible? Like we could've done more?'

'I'm okay,' says Danny, pulling his headphones out of his pocket and stuffing a bud in each ear. 'Seriously. I'm okay.'

'Yeah? Man, I don't know if I am.'

Danny shrugs and points to his ears, mouths that he can't hear what Cal is saying. With the conversation seemingly over, Cal tries to climb over Danny and into the aisle, but Danny punches him on the way through and gives him a dead leg. Swearing, Cal limps to the toilet at the back of the plane.

It's occupied.

He stands awkwardly by the door, stretching his back, his legs, moving aside for the steady stream of flight attendants. One of them offers him an extra packet of crackers and as he's crunching through it he sees 13F, the blonde girl, making her way up the aisle towards him. He freezes.

'Hey,' she says. 'Your friend. Is he okay?'

Cal figures she's referring to Danny's shit chat. 'He's not a bad guy,' he says, hands fumbling at the cracker packet. 'I think he thinks you're older than you are and, you know, you're obviously very pretty, and yeah, I'm sorry about him. Our friend died and it's been a hard couple of weeks. I think he's lonely, to be honest. Yeah. Lonely. Which I guess is why he's been messaging you.'

'What? What messages?'

'On the screen? The in-flight messages?'

'I've got no idea what you're on about. If he's talking to someone, it's not me.'

'Then why are you asking if he's okay?'

She jerks her head back down the aisle. 'Because he's sitting there crying for some reason. And I saw that you guys were together earlier. In the food court. I thought you'd want to know.'

Cal nods, points to the cracker packet, to his full mouth.

'I'm Bel, by the way.'

He forces himself to swallow. Coughs. Splutters. Dies inside. 'I'm Cal.'

'And I'm twenty,' she says, smiling. 'In case you were wondering.'

Cal's cheeks glow bright red in the light of the newly vacated bathroom. He and Bel flatten themselves against the wall to allow the man

to pass and Cal, flustered, gestures at Bel to go first. She thanks him, but doesn't invite him in, proving beyond all doubt that the mile-high club is a myth. Once she's finished, she holds the door open and tells him that she's sitting in 12F. Again, in case he was wondering.

Wanting to give Danny a chance to collect himself, Cal kills time in the bathroom before taking the scenic route back to his seat. He walks past row twelve, grinning at Bel, and checks out Danny's mystery pen pal in row thirteen before looping around to his own seat. He parries Danny's punches as he clammers across to the window.

'Alright?' says Cal, fastening his seatbelt.

Danny nods; red eyes, big grin. 'Never better. This chick is really cool. Way more mature than you'd think.'

'Oh yeah?' Cal isn't surprised, given the man sat in 13F looks to be approaching fifty. He considers telling Danny, but they've a long flight ahead of them and it feels like forever since he's had something to smile about.

Instead, Cal lifts his window shade and peers through the portal. The sky has split in two: light behind them, darkness ahead. There are no stars, no smoking engines. Nothing. Not even another plane, though Cal knows there must be hundreds out there, all flying north for the winter. They'll be carrying people like him and Danny. People armed with backpacks, Birkenstocks and battle-hardened livers.

Or maybe they won't be.

Maybe, instead of people like him and Danny, the planes will be carrying people like Liam. Cal has seen the numbers, knows them off by heart. He does the math and figures it would take around 134 planes, depending on the seating configuration, to carry everyone who has tried this year. Seven for those who have succeeded, five reserved for the men alone.

That's where Liam will be, Cal figures.

Seatbelt fastened, a beer in his hand, the plane hurtling to the ground as the men around him – the dads, the brothers, the sons – all tell each other the same thing: I'm okay.