

“Passenger Hobbs to the check-in desk. Passenger Hobbs to the check-in desk, please.”

Niles Hobbs tightly creased his newspaper and placed it into his regulation size personal item. He knew that this summons would likely be coming, and he was still miffed that the airline had the audacity to discuss it with him at all. If the GED-toting imbecile he was about to encounter had any sense whatsoever, she would thank him for saving her job and offer to carry his bags onto the plane herself; not that he would allow her to do such a thing at a time like this.

“Good afternoon! Are you Mr. Hobbs?” the enthusiastic gatekeeper asked.

“None of the other eleven people in the terminal has budged since you called into the microphone, so you can safely be assured that it is indeed me.” Niles responded.

The gatekeeper chuckled politely, uncertain what expression was hidden beneath the mask of the man before her. “Uh. Right. Mr. Hobbs, are there more passengers in your party today?”

“It’s Dr. Hobbs. The party will be one today, miss.”

Having regained her composure, she pressed on. “Yes. I see. As you know, our flight will have very few passengers. We noticed that you happen to have purchased one seat in the middle of every first-class row. Other passengers have inquired about being moved up to the first-class cabin, and if the seats are otherwise unused the airline is willing to handsomely compens--”

This was the moment. Niles raised a gloved hand.

“No. The answer is no. This is a free country, and I purchased those seats to use or not use as I please..”

“I understand sir, however if--

“There will be no, ‘however’. In fact, I have some information for you. You don’t need to call the first class cabin to board first, as I will be waiting for all of these other people to board and then once they have cleared the area, I’ll be using my own sanitizing wipes to ensure the area is completely clean. No one making what a stewardess is can possibly be doing hospital grade sanitizing. I won’t either, given the restrictions, but I assure you I’ll be much closer.”

Before the woman behind the plexiglass could plead her case further, he had turned on his heel and returned to the single corner chair in the terminal he had been occupying moments before. From his carry-on bag, he removed a bottle of Mint Chocolate Soylent which he had purchased at a touchless kiosk in the terminal. He broke the seal, slipped one end of his silicone straw into the open bottle, and directed the other under the bottom flap of his facemask. As he

savored the beverage, he utilized his surgeon's attention to detail to observe those whose germs he would be sharing for the next three hours and fifty-one minutes.

Closest to him was a woman whose tightly braided cornrows were crowned by a pair of large headphones. Her head was inclined as if she were reading the lettering on her Stanford hoodie, but more likely she was asleep. She'd kept her things together and seemed clean enough to not be of serious concern for him.

He was more perturbed by the three manchildren gathered around a laptop with game controllers and talking as animatedly as they played. One of them, who seemed to be doing very badly, had gotten so intense that he'd removed his facemask entirely and would get in the face of his competitors at any moment of triumph. Niles thought about pointing this out to the gate crew, but decided that the damage of exposure had been done, and he'd simply have to clean around his seating area more thoroughly to account for this mouth breather.

Across the terminal, however, was the one person who Niles would be watching intently. He tried to embrace the impulse to have some degree of empathy for the mucus drenched face of a clearly upset little girl. However the thought of her exposed nostrils gushing snot across the plane as she boarded made him repress a shudder and absentmindedly reach for his travel size Purell. He also suspected that her parents would claim she was under the age required for a mask, and thus allow her runny nose to be a parade of microorganisms until she was seated on the plane. Hopefully she would be far enough back that she would not expose him to the virus she was clearly carrying. He couldn't say for sure that it was related to the global outbreak, but even a lesser virus would put his patients at risk. He secretly hoped she'd be close enough to the gamers that the mouth breather would consider following the social distancing guidelines more carefully.

After several calls of apologies for routine maintenance delays, the gatekeeper, now more subdued in her announcements, indicated that flight 1096 was prepared to board all passengers for their flight to Houston. He watched as the dozen or so people spaced throughout the gate area stood in their somewhat socially distanced line and made their way through the boarding door. One man in particular required the attention of all three gate agents, his wife and an older daughter to calm his aviophobia induced histrionics.

When the area was free of all other passengers, he sipped the last of his Soylent, resealed the bottle, and slipped it into his backpack. With a wave of his phone, the gate scanner beeped and greenlit his passage onto the plane. He removed a screen wipe from his pocket and gently removed any residual gunk the scanner may have contaminated his screen with. After all, he thought. One can never be too careful.

As he had done three times in the past two weeks since the pandemic had spread across the country, and as he had done in a smaller way on so many flights before, Niles pulled disinfecting wipes from a small pouch and began to wipe any surface that would be within six

feet of his second row seat on the flight. First the headrests, window cover and air vents which he felt were never clean enough. Next each of the three traytables and the seat belts on both ends. Finally, the arm rests, which he noted had the unmistakable smudges of a toddler recently running her boogery fingers along them. The microorganism parade had indeed passed through first class. That merited a second wipe.

A gum-chewing stewardess closed an overhead bin behind him with a snap and began to chide his insistence on ensuring his own safety. “Baby, I cleaned this whole section mah-self not fifteen minutes ago. We only had just a few people in first class on the way out here, and they wasn’t even on this side of the plane. You can take your seat nah, if ya please sir.”

Niles eyed her suspiciously for a moment. Her southern charm had not won him over. Niles pocketed the wipes, and then pulled out a lint roller from his trim black backpack. When he had worked his way through three now-filthy sheets, he handed them to her and remarked on how comforted he was that she had been so thorough. Her blue eyes revealed a pained smile that was hidden under her mask as she nodded curtly and went back to her station at the front of the plane. Niles took a moment to double check his handiwork, and then comfortably seated himself in seat 2E. He reached into his bag and placed a pair of airpods in his lap, awaiting the time approved for electronic use inflight. Just as he began to relax, he heard a heavy pounding of feet and wheeling down the gateway. A very large and out of breath man came into view. His stench, which arrived first, was a vile brew of poor hygiene, overpowering body spray and the remains of the cigarette that had almost made him miss the flight.

He was pleasant enough to the stewardesses that they laughed at his excuse for tardiness. The gum chewer guided him to his seat with a personal item that would surely not have fit in the bin at the gate. Several foul drops of sweat splattered on the armrest of 2D and Niles hastily retrieved the last of his wipes to sanitize his seating area once more.

The large man plopped himself into the first row of the business class section to catch his breath and wiped his brow on his beefy forearm. His mask inflated and deflated with each gasping breath. As the engines started up underneath him, the man bellowed to no one in particular, “Whew-ee! That kerosene reeks something fierce! Sure hope that isn’t me. Laws!”

Niles shook his head at the man’s ignorance. While not everyone on the flight to Houston would have had the Organic Chemistry background he did, it didn’t take a genius to conclude that a strong headwind would waft the scent of recently pumped jetfuel off the tarmac and into the cabin.

At about twenty-thousand feet, Niles began to feel completely relaxed. Over the PA system, he heard the pilot’s familiar introduction.

“This is your captain speaking. We have reached our cruising altitude, and at this time you are welcome to utilize the airplane mode of your electronic devices. I’d personally like to express my heartfelt gratitude for your support of our industry at this uncertain...”

Niles had already put one airpod into his ear at this point and felt no need to hear the rest of the pilot’s most sincere feelings. He had downloaded several of the most recent episodes of the New England Journal of Medicine Podcast and he wanted to be abreast of what the field had to say regarding exposure to this pandemic-inducing virus.

Just as the episode was thanking their sponsors, he noticed the stewardess who had spoken to him previously moving down the aisle with great urgency. He paused the podcast and listened to a heated conversation between the stewardess and a very consternated woman who was insistent that the airline had no right to compel her to wear a mask while in the air.

“This is a free country, and I cannot hardly breathe with that thing on. If you want to pop down an oxygen mask for me, I’ll keep *that* on during the flight and nothing else”

The stewardess’ cordial pleas for her to recognize the agreement implicit in the purchase of her ticket were to no avail. The contention amongst so many adults caused the little girl to again begin weeping loudly. Her parents were ignoring her. They and other passengers began to either engage in support of the struggling stewardess, or pull out their phones to record the incident in hopes of cashing in on an employee under duress. Others of the flight crew sought to appease the mask thwarter by offering to provide her with refreshment, but to no avail.

As such, no one but Niles noticed that the large man in the front of the plane was choking on some kind large pretzel that he had likely purchased in the terminal. The man shifted quickly from pounding his chest and neck to trying to remove his seatbelt in a panic induced state. His mania caused him to surrender his fine motor control and he looked like an agitated seal angling for another snack.

Fulfilling his Hippocratic Oath, and despite his desire to remain seated, Niles calmly removed his headphones. He unbuckled his seatbelt and rose to address the panicked man in business class. He slung his backpack with his medical kit across his back and put his hand up to remove his mask. He wanted to be understood by the flailing man, even at the risk of contracting the deadly virus that may be on their very plane. Before he could slip the mask into his bag, the plane rocked violently as the engine closest to him combusted. The bright flash of the inferno that would eventually consume the entire flight crew and all twenty-three passengers was the last thing that Niles would ever see before hitting his head and blacking out forever.

The official FAA report fourteen months later would conclude that a mechanical failure caused the second and fourth engines to catch fire. The fuel lines were internally corroded and surplus fuel had sparked and doomed the craft. The blackbox recording indicated while the novice pilot did an admirable job seeking to pull the plane out of its spin, the inferno in the cabin

had killed everyone onboard. One of the few pieces of luggage that could be recovered was Niles' now charred black backpack with his medical kit, the remains of his meal replacement shake, and a warped plastic bottle with what had been Purell inside.