

Excerpt

Below is an excerpt of *This Was Not the Plan*. You can read a larger excerpt by clicking the PDF at the end.

Mira's Birthday

Exactly four years ago today, Mira and I were sprinting through Times Square in hot pursuit of the Naked Cowboy. It was a Wednesday in June; I was supposed to be in a client meeting. Instead, I was participating in a citywide scavenger hunt that had taken me to four boroughs in just under five hours. There were six teams of two, and my wife and I were in the lead. The only thing that stood between us and victory was a man who wandered around the city wearing only a cowboy hat, a pair of tighty-whities, and a guitar.

When I asked Mira what she wanted to do on her birthday, "scavenger hunt" was not the answer I was expecting. But then, nothing about my wife was ever expected. She delighted in surprises, in spontaneity, in throwing caution to the wind. She was endlessly curious. Her insatiable appetite for the world was so infectious that it could inspire a square peg like me to play hooky on a Wednesday *just because*. Because why the hell not, Charlie? Carpe diem, Charlie. You only live once, Charlie! Mira, you see, she got me. She knew me better than I knew myself. Case in point: on that particular Wednesday, she knew that, instead of reviewing tax returns in a windowless conference room, the best thing for me to be doing was to chase a naked man down Eighth Avenue in the middle of rush hour traffic. And so we did. And so we won.

Mira knew how to make me live.

She would have been thirty-two today.

Her birthday is my least favorite day of the year, I've decided, though Halloween definitely gives it a run for its money. Mira loved Halloween. She used to find the most absurd costumes for us, the more embarrassing the better. Two months after we started going out, she made me go to a party dressed as an Almond Joy. She was a Mounds. On the back of my wrapper it read: I HAVE NUTS. On the back of hers: I DON'T.

The things you do for love.

You'd think I'd actually hate March thirteenth the most, but I don't, not really. That's the day that Chip McCleary, a pilot with an unfortunate tendency to drink on the job, accidentally flew my wife's plane into the Atlantic Ocean. There were no survivors.

With 270 casualties, the crash of Flight 1173 just missed making the list of top ten deadliest aviation disasters in history. It tied with the Lockerbie bombing at number eleven, a statistic that reporters cited with a tinge of disappointment, as though they were just one casualty shy of a truly spectacular story. Still, they loved to talk about it. For weeks, Flight 1173 was the only thing on every channel every hour of every day. There were pictures of the wreckage and of Chip

and the flight crew and the passengers and of us, the passengers' families, and, when those were exhausted, pictures of the wreckage and pilot and the crew and the passengers and the passengers' families of other aviation disasters (Lockerbie was a favorite). There were interviews with everyone from the air traffic controller on duty that day to conspiracy theorists who were convinced that Chip had ties to Al Qaeda to senators with strong opinions on post-9/11 aviation security. Chip's estranged wife, a former flight attendant named Jazz with frosted hair and a mega-watt smile, loved being on air so much that she managed to parlay her two minutes of fame into a gig as a local weather girl. The story was dissected for so long and from so many angles that, by summer, all that was left was an occasional spot featuring a fourth cousin of some other pilot who suffered from alcoholism. I didn't watch much of it. None of it resonated. Drunk pilots and senators had nothing to do with me or with Mira or the life we shared together. The crash of Flight 1173 was a public tragedy. The loss of Mira was a private one.

This past March thirteenth marked the second anniversary of the crash. As with the first anniversary, photos of the wreckage were suddenly on every channel. CNN ran the names of the victims on a ticker tape at the bottom of the screen, like stock symbols or breaking celebrity news on E!. I got phone calls from friends and old colleagues and distant cousins, and a whole pile of mail from a group that called themselves the Families of 1173, informing me of a class action lawsuit against the airline and inviting me to a candlelight vigil at JFK Airport. My buddy Moose showed up at my apartment unannounced, armed with a lifetime supply of booze and a half-eaten box of Junior Mints. I appreciated all of it—the booze especially—but in truth I felt surprisingly numb all day. It was just a gray Tuesday in March, more melancholy, perhaps, than the Tuesday before it, but not markedly so. Not nearly as bleak as Mira's birthday.

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An urgent e-mail from Fred, my boss, pops up in my in-box.

How's it going? it says.

Okay, I guess. Tougher than I would have thought. Thank you for asking, I type, before realizing he's referring to the Harrison Brothers' memorandum I'm supposed to be reviewing, not Mira's birthday. I delete my e-mail.

Good, almost done, I reply. *Will send ASAP. Great. Tx. Need by close of business today.*

Understood.

Sighing, I flip to the end of the memorandum. One hundred and fifty pages down, fourteen to go. I'm one paragraph in when I hear

a rap on my office door.

I spin my chair around. In the doorway stands Todd Ellison, my least favorite person at Hardwick, Mays & Kellerman. As usual, Todd has missed the memo that he is not, in fact, a partner, and is wearing a custom-made suit, an Hermès tie, and a pair of shoes that likely cost

more than my first car. Todd's father, Todd Ellison Sr., runs a giant hedge fund, TCE Capital Partners, which happens to be our firm's biggest client. Last year TCE was responsible for forty percent of our corporate business. Suffice it to say, the partners handle Todd Jr. with kid gloves. In the ten years he's been at the firm, I'm not sure he's ever actually practiced any law. While the rest of us are billing ninety-hour weeks, Todd is given cushy assignments, like organizing our firm's holiday party and acting as head camp counselor for the summer associates.

"Hey, Todd." I give him a curt nod and look back at my computer screen, hoping he'll buzz off and bother someone else.

"Hey, Charlie," he says, missing my cue. When he saunters through my door, I notice a gaggle of nerdy-looking kids behind him. "Just taking the newbies for a tour. Thought maybe you could tell these guys a little bit about your practice."

The summer associates cram into my office and glance around, taking in the panoramic view of Central Park, the sleek Barcelona chairs, the wall bearing my diplomas, the shelves of client binders with the names of nearly every major bank and hedge fund on the Street. They look suitably impressed.

"Well," I say, scratching my head, "I joined the firm almost ten years ago, same class as Todd. I'm a senior associate in the Litigation group. I work primarily with Fred Kellerman, whom you may have met during recruiting. Fred runs Litigation here at Hardwick. He's also the Kellerman in Hardwick, Mays & Kellerman."

Eager nodding from the summer associates. They know Fred. Fred's a legend. They teach classes about Fred in law school. He's probably the reason that half of these kids wanted to work at Hardwick in the first place. Fred's the reason I wanted to work at Hardwick in the first place, and he's the reason I stay working at Hardwick, despite the hellacious hours, unending stress, and morally bankrupt clients.

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