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The Man Who Loved to Fly

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This story is dedicated to the memory of John Checkley,
who loved to fly

February 18, 2019



“Hello,” he said.

“Hello,” I said. “What brings you to our office?”

“Oh, I’d like to buy a plane ticket, please.”

He took a deep breath and looked at me as if he was trying to remember something and could do with a little help. I gave it to him:

“You want to travel,” I said.

“Yes,” he said, and there was relief in his voice, “yes, I want to travel.”

“We can arrange that. You came to the right place. Please have a seat.”

He looked around for something to sit on, and I pointed towards the backless miniature wooden chair in front of me. He sat himself with dignity, trying to cross his short chubby legs and almost succeeding. Then he pulled up his socks, readjusted the suspenders to his trousers, and rested his plump little hands on the taller kitchen chair serving as a desk.

“And where did you say you wanted to travel to?”

“Oh, I’d like to go to ...”

“Rome.”

“Yes, to Rome.”

“Very well. We have many flights to Rome. What day of the week would be more convenient?”

“I’d like to go on a ...”

“Tuesday.”

“Yes, on a Tuesday.”

“Let me see.” I picked up my ball point pen, turned a few leaves in my notebook, and said to him:

“Oh, I’m so sorry. We don’t have any more tickets for this Tuesday. Perhaps you’d be interested in flying out next Tuesday?”

“Yes, next Tuesday ...”

“... would be lovely, thank you,” I said.

He looked at me with his bluebell-colored eyes, two dimples showing on his cheeks, and agreed:

“Yes, that’ll be lovely, thank you.” Then he leaned back on his little wooden chair and sighed a sigh of relief, for he knew he’d done well.

My little brother, aged three, was trying to book a flight to Rome through my travel agency, and, given his total—albeit understandable—ignorance of the ways of the world, I was trying to help him out. I was the booking agent, and a person of some experience as far as social life, appropriate manners, and worldwide travel go: I had been on a plane several times, flying to grandma’s and grandpa’s place ever since I was five, and knew how to talk to grown-up fellow-

travelers and airline personnel. Train and bus trips I wasn't even counting anymore—they were too commonplace. Furthermore, I didn't think suggesting the right answers to my questions would be undermining my brother's dignity both as a passenger and a human being. He didn't think so, either.

“Good. Well then,” I continued “what's your name?”

“Lucu,” he said. This was a little easier, and I didn't need to suggest an answer: he'd known how to say his first name ever since he'd turned two or thereabout.

“Let me write that down: L-U-C-U. Surely you also have a last name, don't you?”

“Yes I do, but I don't remember it right now.”

“It's Florea. F-L-O-R-E-A. Now, could you please tell me whether you're a man or a woman?”

“I am a man,” he said, putting an unripe grape in his mouth. He must have picked it from the grapevine Father had planted in our yard a few years back, over there by Dr. Cristea's fence. It was late June, and the grapes were green and miniscule, but we liked them because they were tasting sour, and sourness added interest and something that was called ‘zing,’ and ‘zing’ itself was an interesting word.

“Sir, please don't eat in the office,” I said. “So, you say you're a man. M-A-N. Got that. And how old are you?”

“I am three years AND seven months old,” he said, and spat out the grape. It rolled over to the terrace corner and got lost in the green and pink mass of climbing roses.

“No, that's not good at all. You must say ‘I'm thirty years old’. And please don't spit in the office.”

“Thirty years old? But I'm not. I'm three years AND seven months old, even Mother says so.”

“Never mind what Mother says. She doesn't know about airline regulations. You are a prospective passenger on this flight and you must be thirty years old. It's one of the rules.”

He didn't seem too pleased or too convinced, so I continued:

“I invented this game and I'm the office manager. You're only a passenger, and as such you must play by my rules.”

“OK,” he said.

“Well then, say it: ‘I'm thirty years old’.”

“I'm thirty years old.”

“And do you have a wife?”

“A wife?” he said and looked at me completely baffled; his eyes grew the size of two bluebell-colored plates, the kind of plates you put cakes on when you have people over, like I had Christine and Paraschiva the day before. “How do you mean, a wife?”

“Well, a wife is a woman you’re married to. Like Father is married to Mother, and that makes her his wife. It’s important that I should write down your wife’s name, otherwise you cannot purchase a plane ticket from me.”



“Oh,” he said. “I understand.”

A deep crease formed on his forehead; he shifted his little body this way and that, and made a few gestures in the air, appearing to be deep in thought. He bent his head and looked sidewise at the angler and fish embroidered on his vest, as if seeking advice. Both man and fish remained impassible, perhaps because the angler was Chinese so how could he possibly speak any Romanian at all; as for the fish, everyone knows fish don’t talk.

So I gave the prospective passenger time to think it over. After a while he looked up at me with his innocent blue eyes, the corners of his mouth took a downward direction, he sighed again—a sigh of sadness and melancholy—and said:

“Alas, ma’am, I don’t have a wife anymore: unfortunately she died last year in a plane CACASTROPHE.”

“You’re a widower, then.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

His eyes grew misty; the dimples disappeared, the shoulders bent as if bearing some heavy, crucifying burden, and the whole of the little guy turned into a vision of grief and sorrow. I didn’t know whether to laugh at his mispronunciation of the word, or admire his precociously elevated vocabulary. Alas. Catastrophe. Unfortunately. At three years of age, plus seven additional months.

“CACASTROPHE?! Oh, I see. You mean CATASTROPHE, no doubt. How awful. Please accept my condolences.”

“OK,” he said. “I accept. Are you gonna give them to me now?”

The corners of his mouth turned upwards, the dimples came back, his cheeks got real rosy, his plump little fingers performed a few flourishes in the air, and joy returned to his face.

“Give you what?”

“Combo ... cono ...”

“Condolences. No. I’m not about to give you anything.”

I could tell this saddened him no end: his mouth formed into an arch with both ends pointing downwards, just like before, when he had announced his wife was dead. Of course, I thought, that comes from him not knowing what the word meant. According to the book *Psychology for All* which resided in Mother’s and Father’s personal library, such reactions were known as *frustrated expectations*. Still according to the book, in such instances you had to dispel confusion by offering further clarification, so the person in question had a perfect understanding

of the concept, which in turn led to him or her not raising their hopes too high, which in its turn led to absence of frustration. It was really simple; so I said:

“Ask me what ‘condolences’ means.”

But he wasn’t interested in finding out, and signaled that by a vigorous shaking of the head, signifying NO. He just wanted me to give him the thing, he didn’t want to know what the thing was. The tears were gone now, and he looked at me again, expectantly.

“I cannot give you condolences because they are not a thing; it’s just an expression.”

“What’s an expression? And why can’t you give it to me?”

“An expression is something people say. I cannot give you that.”

“Oh, I see. Then WHAT can you give me?”

“This is getting out of hand. You’re not supposed to get anything in here you’re not paying for. You’re supposed to stick to the rules. This is a travel agency and you’re supposed to be perfecting a transaction. Now ask me how much it cost.”

“What?”

“The plane ticket to Rome.”

“Oh. How much does it cost?”

“Twenty-five LEI.”

“OK.”

“Don’t just say OK. You have to give me the money now.”

He put his right hand in his pocket and extracted several pieces of paper which I had previously cut out from a larger sheet, and on which I had inscribed the words ONE LEU, THREE LEI, FIVE LEI, and TEN LEI. He said:

“Here is the money,” and gave me the whole bunch.

“Oh, sir, this is way too much. Look, you gave me three TEN LEI bills, two FIVE LEI bills, two THREE LEI bills, and three ONE LEU bills. Do you know how much that is?”

“Yes, it’s twenty five LEI.”

“How do you mean?”

“Well when you made the money and gave it to me you said I should give all of it back to you when you tell me the price of the ticket. So it must be twenty five LEI.”

It made sense: I had devised the game and told him beforehand what to do; these were my rules, and he was now playing by them as requested. Before handing him the ticket, though, I had one more question to ask:



“Just out of curiosity, sir, aren’t you afraid of flying, what with your poor wife dying in that terrible plane crash leaving you a widower for the rest of your life?”

“No. I’m thirty years old, and a courageous man who loves to fly.”

At that moment we heard Good Mama calling from the kitchen:

“The *paprikas* is ready! Come quick!”

No one on Paris Street, nay, in the whole neighborhood mastered the fine art of making *paprikas* like Good Mama did. Certainly other grandmas prepared *Kolozsvari kaposta* (like Ileana’s Nagymama), baked incredible cakes, and offered home-made chocolate with sour-cherry topping and such-like things (like Erica’s granny), but as far as *paprikas* goes our own Good Mama really had the know-how.

So the man of thirty got up, grabbed the plane ticket I had manufactured an hour earlier and put it in his pocket where the money had been. Then he raised his arms to form a 90-degree angle with his body, bent forwards from the waist up, opened his mouth to make buzzing sounds like airplanes do, and flew towards the kitchen, now leaning to the left when he got to the hallway corner, now to the right when he got to the kitchen door.

From the terrace I could hear the clatter of pots and pans and various other kitchen utensils; a lovely smell of chicken, fried onions, and sour cream traveled like a diaphanous mist on the wings of invisible breezes all the way to my nostrils. I left my travel agency paraphernalia on my desk next to the toy telephone I had placed there in case someone important called me, and ran to the kitchen where Good Mama was filling the plates.

