

“Solution to Saturday’s Puzzle” by David Sedaris

On the flight to Raleigh, I sneezed, and the cough drop I’d been sucking on shot from my mouth, ricocheted off my folded tray table, and landed, as I remember it, on the lap of the woman beside me, who was asleep and had her arms folded across her chest. I’m surprised the force didn’t wake her—that’s how hard it hit—but all she did was flutter her eyelids and let out a tiny sigh, the kind you might hear from a baby.

Under normal circumstances, I’d have three choices, the first being to do nothing. The woman would wake in her own time and notice what looked like a shiny new button sewn to the crotch of her jeans. This was a small plane, with one seat per row on aisle A, and two seats per row on aisle B. We were on B, so should she go searching for answers I would be the first person on her list. “Is this yours?” she’d ask, and I’d look dumbly into her lap.

“Is what mine?”

Option number two was to reach over and pluck it from her pants, and number three was to wake her up and turn the tables, saying, “I’m sorry, but I think you have something that belongs to me.” Then she’d hand the lozenge back and maybe even apologize, confused into thinking that she’d somehow stolen it.

These circumstances, however, were *not* normal, as before she’d fallen asleep the woman and I had a fight. I’d known her for only an hour, yet I felt her hatred just as strongly as I felt the stream of cold air blowing into my face—this after she’d repositioned the nozzle above her head, a final fuck-you before settling down for her nap.

The odd thing was that she hadn’t looked like trouble. I’d stood behind her while boarding and she was just this woman, forty at most, wearing a T-shirt and cutoff jeans. Her hair was brown and fell to her shoulders, and as we waited she gathered it into a ponytail and

fastened it with an elastic band. There was a man beside her who was around the same age and was also wearing shorts, though his were hemmed. He was skimming through a golf magazine, and I guessed correctly that the two of them were embarking on a vacation. While on the gangway, the woman mentioned a rental car and wondered if the beach cottage was far from a grocery store. She was clearly looking forward to her trip, and I found myself hoping that, whichever beach they were going to, the grocery store wouldn't be too far away. It was just one of those things that go through your mind. *Best of luck*, I thought.

Once on board, I realized that the woman and I would be sitting next to each other, which was fine. I took my place on the aisle, and within a minute she excused herself and walked a few rows up to talk to the man with the golf magazine. He was at the front of the cabin, in a single bulkhead seat, and I recall feeling sorry for him, because I hate the bulkhead. Tall people covet it, but I prefer as little leg room as possible. When I'm on a plane or in a movie theater, I like to slouch down as low as I can and rest my knees on the seat back in front of me. In the bulkhead, there is not seat in front of you, just a wall a good three feet away, and I never know what to do with my legs. Another drawback is that you have to put all of your belongings in the overhead compartment, and these are usually full by the time I board. All in all, I'd rather hang from one of the wheels than have to sit up front.

When our departure was announced, the woman returned to her seat but hovered a half foot off the cushion so she could continue her conversation with the man she'd been talking to earlier. I wasn't paying attention to what they were saying, but I believe I heard him refer to her as Becky, a wholesome name that matched her contagious, almost childlike enthusiasm.

The plane took off, and everything was as it should have been until the woman touched my arm and pointed to the man she'd been talking to. "Hey," she said, "see that guy up there?"

Then she called out his name—Eric, I think—and the man turned and waved. “That’s my husband, see, and I’m wondering if you could maybe swap seats so that me and him can sit together.”

“Well, actually--,” I said, and, before I could finish, her face hardened, and she interrupted me, saying, “What? You have a *problem* with that?”

“Well,” I said, “ordinarily I’d be happy to move, but he’s in the bulkhead, and I just hate that seat.”

“He’s in the *what?*”

“The bulkhead,” I explained. “That’s what you call that front row.”

“Listen,” she said, “I’m not asking you to switch because it’s a bad seat. I’m asking you to switch because we’re married.” She pointed to her wedding ring, and when I leaned in closer to get a better look at it she drew back her hand, saying, “Oh, never mind. Just forget it.”

It was as if she had slammed a door in my face, and quite unfairly it seemed to me. I should have left well enough alone, but instead I tried to reason with her. “It’s only a ninety-minute flight,” I said, suggesting that in the great scheme of things it wasn’t that long to be separated from your husband. “I mean, what, is he going to prison the moment we land in Raleigh?”

“No, he’s not going to *prison*,” she said, and on the last word she lifted her voice, mocking me.

“Look,” I told her, “If he was a child I’d do it.” And she cut me off saying, “Whatever.” Then she rolled her eyes and glared out the window.

The woman had decided that I was a hard-ass, one of those guys who refuse under any circumstances to do anyone a favor. But it’s not true. I just prefer that the favor be *my* idea, and

that it leaves me feeling kind rather than bullied and uncomfortable. *So no. Let her sulk*, I decided.

Eric had stopped waving, and signaled for me to get Becky's attention. "My wife," he mouthed. "Get my wife."

There was no way out, and so I tapped the woman on the shoulder.

"Don't touch me," she said, all dramatic, as if I had thrown a punch.

"Your husband wants you."

"Well, that doesn't give you the right to *touch* me." Becky unbuckled her seat belt, raised herself off the cushion, and spoke to Eric in a loud stage whisper: "I asked him to swap seats, but he won't do it."

He cocked his head, sign language for "How come?" and she said, much louder than she needed to, "'Cause he's an *asshole*, that's why."

An elderly woman in aisle A turned to look at me, and I pulled a *Times* crossword puzzle from the bag beneath my seat. That always makes you look reasonable, especially on a Saturday, when the words are long and the clues are exceptionally tough. The problem is that you have to concentrate, and all I could think of was this Becky person.

Seventeen across: a fifteen-letter word for enlightenment. "I am not an asshole," I wrote, and it fit.

Five down: six-letter Indian tribe. "You are."

Look at the smart man, breezing through the puzzle, I imagined everyone thinking. He must be a genius. That's why he wouldn't swap seats for that poor married woman. He knows something we don't.

It's pathetic how much significance I attach to the *Times* puzzle, which is easy on Monday and gets progressively harder as the week advances. I'll spend fourteen hours finishing the Friday, and then I'll wave it in someone's face and demand that he acknowledge my superior intelligence. I think it means that I'm smarter than the next guy, but all it really means is that I don't have a life.

As I turned to my puzzle, Becky reached for a paperback novel, the kind with an embossed cover. I strained to see what the title was, and she jerked it closer to the window. Strange how that happens, how you can feel someone's eyes on your book or magazine as surely as you can feel a touch. It only works for the written word, though. I stared at her feet for a good five minutes, and never jerked those away. After our fight, she'd removed her sneakers, and I saw that her toenails were painted white and that each one was perfectly sculpted.

Eighteen across: "Not impressed."

Eleven down: "Whore."

I wasn't even looking at the clues anymore.

When the drink cart came, we fought through the flight attendant.

"What can I offer you folks?" she asked, and Becky threw down her book, saying, "We're not together." It killed her that we might be mistaken for a couple, or even friends, for that matter. "I'm traveling with my husband," she continued. "He's sitting up there. In *the bulkhead*."

You learned that word from me, I thought.

"Well, can I offer—"

"I'll have a Coke," Becky said. "Not much ice."

I was thirsty, too, but more than a drink I wanted the flight attendant to like me. And who would you prefer, the finicky baby who cuts you off and gets all specific about her ice cubes, or the thoughtful, nondemanding gentleman who smiles up from his difficult puzzle, saying, “Nothing for me, thank you”?

Were the plane to lose altitude and the only way to stay aloft was to push one person out the emergency exit, I now felt certain that the flight attendant would select Becky rather than me. I pictured her clinging to the doorframe, her hair blown so hard it was starting to fall out. “But my husband--,” she’d cry. Then I would step forward, saying, “Hey, I’ve been to Raleigh before. Take me instead.” Becky would see that I am not the asshole she mistook me for, and in that instant she would lose her grip and be sucked into space.

Two down: “Take that!”

It’s always so satisfying when you can twist someone’s hatred into guilt—make her realize that she was wrong, too quick to judge, too unwilling to look beyond her own petty concerns. The problem is that it works both ways. I’d taken this woman as the type who arrives late at a movie, then asks me to move behind the tallest person in the theater so that she and her husband cans it together. Everyone has to suffer because she’s sleeping with someone. But what if I was wrong? I pictured her in a dimly lit room, trembling before a portfolio of glowing X-rays. “I give you two weeks at most,” the doctor says. “Why don’t you get your toenails done, buy yourself a nice pair of cutoffs, and spend some quality time with your husband. I hear the beaches of North Carolina are pretty this time of year.”

I looked at her then, and thought, *No*. If she’d had so much as a stomachache, she would have mentioned it. Or would she? I kept telling myself that I was within my rights, but I knew it

wasn't working when I turned back to my puzzle and started listing the various reasons why I was not an asshole.

Forty across: "I give money to p--:

Forty-six down: "—ublic radio."

While groping for Reason number two, I noticed that Becky was not making a list of her own. She was the one who called me a name, who went out of her way to stir up trouble, but it didn't seem to bother her in the least. After finishing her Coke, she folded up the tray table, summoned the flight attendant to take her empty can, and settled back for a nap. It was shortly afterward that I put the throat lozenge in my mouth, and shortly after that that I sneezed and it shot like a bullet onto the crotch of her shorts.

Nine across: "Fuck!:

Thirteen down: "Now what?"

It was then that another option occurred to me. *You know*, I thought. *Maybe I will swap places with her husband*. But I'd waited too long, and now he was asleep as well. My only way out was to nudge this woman awake and make the same offer I sometimes make to Hugh. We'll be arguing, and I'll stop in midsentence and ask if we can just start over. "I'll go outside and when I come back in we'll just pretend this never happened, OK?"

If the fight is huge, he'll wait until I'm in the hall, then bolt the door behind me, but if it's minor he'll go along, and I'll reenter the apartment, saying, "What are you doing home?" Or "Gee, it smells good in here. What's cooking?"—an easy question as he's always got something on the stove.

For a while, it feels goofy, but eventually the self-consciousness wears off, and we ease into the roles of two decent people, trapped in a rather dull play. “Is there anything I can do to help?”

“You can set the table if you want.”

“All-righty, then!”

I don’t know how many times I’ve set the table in the middle of the afternoon, long before we sit down to eat. But the play would be all the duller without action, and I don’t want to do anything really hard, like paint a room. I’m just so grateful that he goes along with it. Other people’s lives can be full of screaming and flying plates, but I prefer my own remains as civil as possible, even if it means faking it every once in a while.

I’d gladly have started over with Becky, but something told me wouldn’t go for it. Even asleep, she broadcast her hostility, each gentle snore sounding like an accusation. *Ass-hole. Ass-hole-ole.* The landing announcement failed to wake her, and when the flight attendant asked her to fasten her seatbelt she did it in a drowse, without looking. The lozenge disappeared beneath the buckle, and this bought me an extra ten minutes, time spent gathering my things, so that I could make for the door the moment we arrived at our gate. I just didn’t count on the man in front of me being a little bit quicker and holding me up as he wrestled his duffle bag from the overhead bin. Had it not been for him, I might have been gone by the time Becky unfastened her seat belt, but as it as I was only four rows away, standing, it turned out, right beside the bulkhead.

The name she called me was nothing I hadn’t heard before, and nothing that I won’t hear again, probably. Eight letters, and the clue might read, “Above the shoulders, he’s nothing but crap.” Of course, they’d don’t put words like that in the *Times* crossword puzzle. If they did, anyone could finish it.

Sedaris, David. "Solutions to Saturday's Puzzle." *When You Are Engulfed in Flames*. New York:
Back Bay Books, 2008. Print. 125-134.