



## **On the Challenges of Not Reading in Planes or Decisions Born in the Dark**

**By**

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Pterodactyls flew first, not a ticket price distinction, just a timeline. With a brain the size of a lime, this creature piloted his compact mass of sinew and skin over prehistoric hill and dale without a compass or a flight crew or any extra charge for baggage exceeding the miserly 75-pound limit. He calculated distances without the swirl of neon-armed assistants and would never bother to visit any part of the earth that featured temperatures regularly hitting a cheerless 12 degrees. Reading lamps did not fail him mid-flight. His thick mesh tights did not gnaw into the atmosphere-starved flesh of his thighs, prompting him to flee to the toilet to separate nylon from skin. Perhaps, during lunch, he took a pit stop and was nibbled by a stegosaurus or two. But his laptop never requested codes unknown to man, woman, or animal kind while waiting and waiting and waiting on the tarmac of Chicago's O'Hare airport. He may have had some serious survival concerns but he had legroom.

Ten hours into a journey filled with choices born of no seeming choice, I blame him for this mechanical beast, his manmade descendant, we on flight 411 are currently trapped in. I blame him for our ridiculous ambition to go everywhere, my hopeless ambition to work while flying, my inability to read Susan Sontag's *Against Interpretation* during this flight, my despair at being incapable of understanding *Against Interpretation*

perhaps at any time, the resonant snoring of the round man next to me, the futility of closing eyes for rest and joining him in the act of dreaming. From my singular scratchy perch in row eight, I blame that first big bird - not to be confused with Big Bird, a youthful friend from earlier times - for everything.

It is strange how we come to be where we are and even more curious why we do what we do. Sitting in a darkened plane, all once and future traffic lights melted into one endless nightlight. We all had places to be and yet, here we were; blankets at our chin, necks u-turning at the intersection of pillow and headrest, jaws pried open by gravity, books thick as door stops on our laps, a blanket at our feet and whether we liked it or not, whether we intended it or not, we were all flying together. All because we looked up and felt what can only be termed overachiever envy. We should all be so free, so of the air, so capable of accomplishment. All the explanations for flight, all the logic, algorithms and sonograms, magical concoctions of math and engineering and desire for domination, for eternal life, fade to black as we fly. We watch the eternal Jennifer Anniston movie and resolve to be amused while intermittently wondering if the breathing bag would really drop down to us if we needed it.

I let helplessness wash through me and leaned my cheek against the metal of window cover. It felt Ice Age cold. After a struggle with the cover release, I inched the shade open and peered into an impenetrable dark.

I find I am suddenly on the verge of baby girl tears. This response feels entirely too large to be caused by a reading lamp malfunction. Does it really matter if I cannot

read Susan Sontag now or ever? Who am I trying to impress? I am not from New York so who is Susan Sontag to me or me to Susan Sontag (*may she rest in peace*) that I should weep for her? I'm based in Los Angeles and am culturally entitled to be less intellectually capable than those velvet-eyed, post-modern East Coast intellectuals. Joan Didion was very smart in LA; does she count? Maybe, if I had lived in New York, I could lay claim to my intelligence with more ease.

I begin to feel badly about the poor dinosaur I've railed against. *Why is it so dark?* What am I really crying about?

My mother died a year and a half ago after a lengthy battle with Alzheimer's and, adding insult to injury, she also had macular degeneration. These days, there are numerous Alzheimer's testimonials fluttering across the Internet, in newspapers, magazines, television, books. It is just as sad as everybody promises. The details change but the miserable punch line is the same: you will watch someone you know and love fade from Technicolor to black in slow motion. They reappear momentarily, tell you your hair is pretty or the potatoes are delicious, and then they are pulled back out to some invisible sea and you cannot find them. No matter what watchtower you climb up to, no matter the scale of your magnifier, you cannot 'see' them and, try as they might, they cannot see you. Occasionally other personas seem to appear in their form, use a tone of voice heretofore unknown and upbraid you for your lack of parenting skills ("You should be home with your children!") though you have no children. It is a dreary way to lose the light of understanding, the true lamp of your eyes.

Though not as frequently testified about, macular degeneration is a kindred puzzle of lost connection. During my mother's illness, I got obsessed with the loss of vision aspect; the reduction of reflection capabilities, cones now mismatched with nerve-ending rods as if vision were some kind of sporting event, a multiple man marathon race complete with baton pass. It was painless, this loss of specificity. Pictures of this condition are shot through with lush, tropic toned color. The macula itself is an oval shaped, yellow spot in the center of your retina. In those photos the eye doctor takes, it literally looks like a sun in the midst of a vein-y ocean. It contains a concentration of cells that deliver an extraordinary amount of information to the visual center of your brain. For all intents and purposes, the macula works like a pilot. It calculates distance. It filters distortions, absorbs excess blue and ultraviolet light, essentially working like sunglasses. Then it sends readings of immediate and long-range spatial relations to the brain, the air traffic controller supreme. After the brain has sorted through the information, it connects the data dots and your eye delivers picture.

When the macula begins to degenerate, everything blurs. It is impossible to understand where walls begin or end. Furniture seems to move as you look in its direction. As nothing has an edge, space is no longer calculable. Colors are decipherable but inconstant in their tonality. If your granddaughter wears a red dress with fuchsia rabbits hopping over a meandering string of yellow and white daisies, she just looks like uncooked steak. Without the assurance of a voice, no one has an identity. Faces are featureless. Bright lipsticks are sometimes readable. But all specificity of image is gone. In the end, it all just goes moonscape: luminous milky nothing.

It was a double whammy, double death, perfect storm situation, my mother's two conditions. Though medical professionals assure me they are not, my sense was that they were somehow related. It was as if the pilot and the air traffic controller were disintegrating in parallel flight patterns. I'd like to believe there was some balm in her encroaching blindness. I'd like to believe her determined attempts to solve the problem of not seeing helped ease the pain of not remembering. I don't know. I cannot imagine the levels of increasing 'dark' my mother must have experienced over the course of her lengthy illness. She, who loved the sun, loved being outside for any reason - gardening, golf, construction, anything to be in the sunlight - navigated in darkness, made decisions in shadow for the last decade of her life.

In the early to mid phases, while she could, she would wander in the backyard and attempt to do things. There was an abundant deer population surrounding our fenced in property and we had always enjoyed watching them, feeding them during the off-season. Especially my mother. Now, my father stocked up on feed for them and she spent hours out there year round. Called for them. Threw handfuls and handfuls of corn towards the sound of their hooves. Her favorite was one she named "Crip," no relation to that notorious LA gang. He was a smallish buck with a useless back leg and hobbled around the woods adjacent to our back yard. I would watch and she would listen for their approach. When she heard them, she would squint towards the tawny forms, toss a handful to the right, hear the hooves follow the grain as it hit the ground and then call for Crip and quickly toss a handful in the other direction, just for him. It was thrilling. I loved her so for her resolve, her determination to even the odds for Crip. "He needs extra

help” or “I know he’s hungry” were her running commentary as she threw food towards the fence. Even when she no longer remembered why, she knew her concern was reasonable. She had made a decision and she clung to the shape of it long after Crip, who miraculously survived to visit my mother for three years, had disappeared from the herd.

Though she knew she was losing her smarts (her phrase), she continued to revel in her habit of problem-solving. Names and memories of faces vanished. But her discernment of the specificity in a sound or the feel of air promising rain or, best of all, full tilt sunlight seemed to help her re-locate her strength of mind. Perhaps it simply reminded her of the joy of being productive, feeling competent. Certainly there were ugly moments. She was obsessed with the security of her tools - hedge clippers, hammers and the like - and kept hiding them under the bed. Bathing became an ordeal and a physical fight. Finally, as the disease progressed, she slept more and more, became less mobile, going outside no longer an option, and stayed in her favorite chair, folded over like an unstarched dinner napkin. It was hard to recognize her, harder still to know it was indeed my mother.

I have a myriad of images of her, to counteract this last one: teaching calculus, her pencil scratching down a column of numbers, swinging a golf club (though the ball never went straight it went far), re-locating clothes from a hall closet to set up a photo lab, unrolling bolts of material across the dining room table and drafting patterns for our dresses, tracing highways in bright yellow marker on the maps for our vacations, delighted with her plan. In all the pictures, I can see thought swim through her movements. Action always seemed to include thought and always seemed designed to

engender forward motion in anyone around her. In her absence, I am keenly aware of the legacy of this idea: to be active in order to be involved, to *be* full tilt, thoughtfully engaged, honestly energized with no trace of doubt attached.

From around the time of Crip, I have another picture, sewn together from many different moments. In my mind's eye, she is standing in the backyard, a patch of earth she loved, the splotchy green of the Texas Hill Country running circles beneath the midday sun just beyond her. She smiles and leans her head left towards the back porch. Her hair is the color of clouds and though I do not know if she knows where she is or even what she is, she is somehow radiating a certainty that she is something good, something substantial, something that should not fall. This is my mother. This is my mother falling and *not falling*. As ever, her joy feels reasoned and despite the haze I know she felt, I understand that she is clearly *seeing* by force of habit. "Isn't it beautiful?" she seems to call out to the air. I hear her or I imagine I hear her and what this picture speaks to me is almost unendurably beautiful, as almost unendurably beautiful as life itself. This image will stay with me, stays with me, and will instruct me until I too, inevitably, fall.

Maybe the pterodactyl was looking for his mother the first time he took flight. Or maybe he just wanted a better apple from off the limbs of a bigger tree. Or maybe he had memorized the idea of light, planted it so deeply into the body of his days, that one night, in the middle of the greatest dark, his memory lifted him up into the air and he flew. I'm sure scientists will reason a different story and call it evolution, which of course it is. But

mine is too, a story of evolution and miracle. And this story pleases me. It reminds me of my mother and that calms me down, transforms the dark of this current flight into something definitely workable.

I resolve to ask for assistance with my overhead lamp, make the necessary apologies and extract myself from my window seat. As I saunter down the aisles, I study the sleeping profiles of my companions in flight. We will all make it home. We will all continue chasing kindred tails and dragonflies, I'm sure. Some of us will go blind. But even without eyes, even in absolute blackness, surely it is possible for an ancient light seeking impulse to safeguard our decisions. If it worked for the pterodactyl surely the guy in the baseball cap in the tenth row will figure out he should take the job in Kansas City. And, in the twelfth row, blue sweater, red hair - go ahead, do it, go to Paris whether you can afford it or not, just go. *Ask for a raise.* In the line for the restroom, apologize to your brother. Man texting while waiting, stop texting. Everyone on this plane, say no when you mean no and yes when you mean yes. (*Stop getting those last two mixed up.*) Enjoy your food and take walks. Listen. As the Mayans and my beloved phonetics instructor used to love to repeat, "Worship the sun." But use sunscreen.

When I finally reach the stewardess, I jostle her shoulder and murmur "Excuse me." She winces. Her eyes pinch themselves into focus. I see her see me and wish she did not see me. I know she would like to go back to sleep. Then, in the space of a breath, I see her *decide* to be kind, to be helpful. She straightens up, smoothes her hair and smiles, "What can I help you with ma'am?"