

Home for Kipp
Benn Stebleton

Northwest Flight 646 came to a rest at Gate 2 of Hector International Airport in Fargo, North Dakota. The only other gate, Gate 1, stood vacant several feet further along the tarmac. It was almost always vacant.

Jennifer did not shift in her window seat while her fellow passengers dug their carry-ons from the overhead and lined up politely but impatiently in the aisle. Groups of anxious white people were doubtlessly assembling just on the other side of the metal detectors to greet them. Jen remained seated while the row of luggage-laden passengers haltingly waddled towards the impossibly blonde flight attendant at the exit. A wide assed man in strained khakis was the last in line, tugging a wheeled suitcase behind him. He was quickly approaching the exit.

Jen let out a breath, released her seat belt, and pushed herself up into a shallow bow. She held the quiet stoop until she was able to stand upright in the darkly carpeted avenue. Her overstuffed backpack held firmly to its housing in the overhead compartment. Jen cursed it, jerked it, and fought it. When she had finally freed it she was alone on the plane, save for the crew waiting expectantly at the front. The flight attendant smiled warmly at her. Jen retaliated with a smile that leaked sarcasm at the eyes.

She entered the terminal with the backpack secured to her shoulders. Jennifer was not a large woman, and the luggage seemed to almost outweigh her. The burden gave her a heavy stride, each step driven down by the load. Her arms did not sway. Instead they grasped the front of the straps with the pretense of lessening the weight. Her shoulders remained rigid, refusing to let the anchor gain an advantage on one side or the other. Her upper body was pitched forward to prevent a backward imbalance. All of this was very subtle and carried with a great deal of experience.

Jen recognized no one amongst the excitement and laughter of the homogenous welcoming parties on just the other side of the security station. She marched past the little celebrations without hesitation. Just a few steps further, beside the down escalator, a man gave an indication of familiarity.

Her large hazelly brown eyes met his, then drifted over him in his entirety.

Outdoor employment had worn on his skin. Leonard worked construction. Jackhammerer, brick lifter, load bearer; something like that. He had been born in the Finn County hospital only three years prior to Jen, but he appeared as if he had 10 years on her. A receding hairline was concealed beneath a baseball cap that advertised Ford trucks. It was the same sort of baseball cap that most American males born after 1970 owned. She took in his blue pin striped Abercrombie button-down. Len hadn't played a game in twelve years, but he maintained the shoulders of a football player. The shirt stretched over those solid shoulders and a spherical belly before tucking into the waistband of a pair of dark blue jeans. Wranglers, likely fresh off a Wal-mart shelf, dropped over a pair of well cared for Tony Lama cowboy boots cut from the corpse of a plucked ostrich. These were his good boots, for special occasions only. Finally, her eyes were back on his face and the muddy brown goatee harassing his plump lips.

His hazelly brown eyes jumped up to her hair, specifically to the purple streak breaking through the otherwise muddy brown. He only momentarily considered the backpack that dwarfed Jen before spending some time on the shocking Kool-aid blue of the blazer she wore over a frazzled T-shirt. The shirt had once displayed a silkscreen of a revolutionary figure, but the image of Hunter Thompson had long ago become unidentifiable. A thick black belt, probably a man's, peeked out of the unbuttoned sport coat. It cinched drab and over-worn cargo pants to Jen's slim waist. The pants were too long and had been sloppily rolled into cuffs. Government issue combat boots somehow made her curved-in-the-good-places figure almost androgynous. A sparkling

ankle bracelet dropped over the leather of the right boot, returning some femininity to her.

Jewelry offended both her left eyebrow and plump painted lip.

“What the hell, Jen?” Leonard spat at her quietly.

“Bar open?” She passed by him and towards the nearby *Barnstormers’ Club*.

“Christ, it’s barely noon,” he complained, but followed her to a cocktail table.

The place was empty. Leonard had been right. It was too early for the polite people of the Midwest to begin drinking.

Jen shimmied out of her backpack and allowed it to hit the floor, then fell into a seat. Leonard grabbed the back of the other chair and twisted it to face away from the table before seating himself.

A bored bartender in a uniform embroidered polo shirt was soon next to them.

“What can I get you to drink?” He looked over Jen when he spoke, his gaze glancing off her purple hair like a bullet not intended to hit its target.

“Do you have any *good* beer on tap?” She hit the word “good” in hopes that the emphasis would be enough to communicate her intended meaning.

“Sure, we have Bud Light, Miller Lite, and Coors Light all on draft.”

“They don’t have any of your pussy microbrews.” Leonard had understood what she’d meant.

“Jack Daniels with ice,” Jen ordered. She considered Jack Daniels overproduced and intended to appeal to masses. It lacked a great deal of complexity or character in order to sell well in every bar in America. But, to its favor, it was sold in every bar in America.

Barkeep turned to Leonard, whom he was able to look straight in the face.

“Yeah, another one of those. And the check. We ain’t drinking long.”

With a lack of other customers and two simple drinks to pour, Barkeep was quick to return.

Ice knocked gently into glass as they both wordlessly drank.

“How’s Seattle? I s’pose you’re listening to a lot of grunge?” Leonard broke the hush.

“Grunge? Jesus fuck, Leonard, that was fifteen years ago.”

“Then what kind of weird shit are you listening to? Do they all dress fucked up like you?”

Jen quietly drank.

“I think the Vikings have a shot at the Super Bowl this year,” Leonard said. “Seahawks will probably still suck, though.”

“And that somehow makes all of the people in Minnesota better than all the people in Seattle.”

“What the hell, Jen? At least you could pretend you learned some manners from Mom and Dad. I did. I’ve taken a few days off work just to drive you around. It’s not like I really liked Kipp.” He growled at her.

Jen quickly turned away, staring into the floor. Still silent, but distracted even from her drink now.

Kipp had been Jen’s boyfriend until she graduated high school and fled Cartwright, North Dakota. That was eight years ago. She had promised to stay in touch, but had failed after the first six months. She was too nomadic, too unstable, too distracted by new adventures. Sometimes she had a phone, sometimes she didn’t. Occasionally she had a computer with Internet access, but she usually did not. There was the U.S. Postal Service, but no one used that anymore. She had a whole list of excuses, but all they did was keep her from admitting that she had moved on. Or she had thought she had moved on until she had received Leonard’s email. Kipp’s family had contacted him because they didn’t know how to reach her. Now she had no choice but to say the goodbye that she had not given Kipp years ago. She somehow missed him more in the past few days than she had at anytime in the past eight years.

Jen downed what remained of her whiskey and dug a roll of dollar bills from her hip pocket.

“All your cash is in ones? You stripping?” It was an accusation, not a question.

“That or bartending. You decide.” She covered both drinks, dropped a generous tip, and shouldered her pack again.

Out the front doors it was uncharacteristically warm for North Dakota in September. Early autumn was an unpredictable time for the state. Familiar with the odd weather fluctuations of the region, Jen had overpacked. She carried the weight of this forethought on her back, across a parking lot, and to Len’s Ford F150.

Upon reaching it she dropped her load into the box, then stripped off her loud blazer.

“Jesus, that’s a lot of tattoos!” Leonard reacted to her bared arms.

They both climbed into the leather interior of the truck. After the V-8 was alive and the pickup was moving Jen reached over and tugged back her brother’s sleeve. Under the hair of his forearm was an image of a large eagle, anchor, and globe.

“Hey, Pot, you’re a little bit black yourself,” she withdrew her hand, but the sleeve remained back.

“This is different. I got it in the corps. It shows that I belonged to something. I’m a patriot, not a freak,” Leonard argued.

“An epileptic patriot,” Jen mumbled, but she made sure that it was loud enough to hear.

Leonard had signed onto the Marine Corps right after high school. Just a week short of graduating from Parris Island he had dropped into the mud, M16 in hand, and had a grand mal seizure. He hadn’t even had a chance to kill hajjis for his country before he returned to North Dakota and his current job constructing the strip malls and Applebee’s of Fargo.

He wrapped his left hand over the tattoo, not quite casually enough to make it look unintentional.

“Still wearing the wedding ring, too,” Jen said.

Leonard added iron to his voice. “The divorce isn’t final.”

“And those little offspring?”

“I’m trying to get some weekends.” The iron was leaking out.

Jen had left another lunch period taken alone. She was on her way to her locker for her physics book. Cartwright High’s corridors were only sparsely populated. Students spent more time in the cafeteria when they had friends there to distract them with conversation.

She noticed the red paint from a distance. It was sloppily splashed over the face of her locker, two ugly letters that spilled over the borders to partially deface the neighboring lockers. The paint was still wet, tiny bulbs of red were cutting paths down from both letters.

“HO.”

Goddamn, Jen hated the word “ho.”

Slut, bitch, cunt, fuckbag, cocksucker, slamhound, dog, dike, twat, pole smoker, hussy, beaver, tramp, cum bucket, fatass, even whore were all okay with her. But not “ho.” Never “ho.”

She barely saw Allison giggling at her own locker. It was impossible for Allison to go completely unnoticed. She was like a melting snowman, round and disproportionately lumpy, with a mouthful of wires and almost brutal orange hair. She spent nearly as much time alone as Jen, although Allison hadn’t chosen a solitary existence. But, for the moment, even she had someone at whom to laugh.

Jen spun the lock right, left, right. She threw open the painted door and slammed it violently. It recoiled back open. She smashed it shut again. It bounced back. She threw it hard once more. The crashes filled the brick hall like small explosions. Allison stopped laughing.

Jen’s cute sixteen-year old face had all of the fury that hell hath, and then some, when she turned to Allison. “You know who did this!”

Allison nearly broke into frightened tears as she nodded.

“Who?”

“I told them I wouldn’t tell,” Allison tucked her head down to protect a neck that was already shielded under an extra chin. “And besides, Jen, you’re weird.”

Jen reached into her locker and tore through a frayed duffel until she found her gym padlock. An Abus. Model 7850. A well built combination lock. Inexpensive, yet solid. Nearly impossible to break. And really quite versatile.

She stripped off her belt abruptly, causing Allison to twitch and throw her arms up in an unnecessary defense.

“You tell me who did this, and I’ll make certain that they don’t bother you ever again.” Jen threaded the leather through the stainless steel shackle. She then looped Abus into place at the end of the belt.

The intimidation of a swinging padlock and the promise of three less people to torment Allison made her spit out: “Mark, mainly. And Ryan and Ethan.”

Varsity football players. Seniors. Just one year above Jen. Their perceived duty was to remind the rest of Cartwright High that the status of all other students was well below that of a football player during a winning season. They were particularly merciless with the unattractive. Allison was a frequent target of their ridicule.

“Where are they?” Jen demanded, casting the leather and lock into widening circles.

Allison pointed past Jen. “They just drug a freshman into the boys’ bathroom. They’re probably initiating him with a swirly.”

Jen was already accelerating into a full run before Allison had finished speaking. She hit the bathroom door with a shoulder and rushed in.

There was an obvious wrestling match at the door of the first stall. A young boy was lying on the floor, his arms desperately locked around an attacker’s leg. Mark was hunched on one knee

at the boys left, with his back to Jen. He was tearing at the freshman's arm. "Let go of me, you little fuckin' faggot!"

The other two football stars were on the victim's other side. Ryan was kicking the boy's legs brutally with a Nike that was better suited for cross training than bruising, but it completed the latter well enough. "Hope you can hold your breath, pussy! You're going to be flushed, you little shit!" Ryan then laughed at his own cleverness.

Ethan was tugging at their victim's other arm. He was the only one that noticed Jen enter above the scuffling and swearing.

"Fuckin' assholes!" Jen's padlock was windmilling through the air. Mark turned just in time to see it before it crashed with a blunt thud onto the top of his skull. An unrelated X-ray years after would reveal a hairline fracture in the bone. He tipped over onto his back. His head sustained a second injury when it collided with the tile. A third blow came from Jen's boot, which dropped down onto the side of his face and remained there to pin his swelling cranium to the floor.

Ryan still didn't know precisely what was happening when Jen had reversed the lock and brought it up to his chin. He whimpered when the steel hit him, then cried when the blow clamped his teeth onto his tongue in what would soon become a grotesque mess. Later in the day, during economics, he would vomit up much of the blood that he'd swallowed.

Ethan had had a little time to prepare. He was already rising up to his full height and attempting to catch the belt with both hands. While he reached Jen drew back her free arm and landed a solid punch into his nose. Red quickly stained the sparse hairs of a goatee he had been trying to grow for a month. Jen freed Mark's head to throw the kick into Ethan's ribs that dropped him.

She stepped back, still twirling Abus. “Get the fuck up, and get the fuck out! And if you fuck with either me or Allison Leininger again I’ll beat the shit out of you in front of the whole damn school!”

“Goddammit, you bitch!” Mark was protecting his wounded head with one hand while the other stabilized him on a long and insecure journey to a stance. He wobbled and fell into the wall. “You stupid bitch, you fuckin’ ho!”

Abus struck him in the mid-spine.

His shoulder brushed against the wall until he stumbled out into the hall, where a crowd of students had been predictably drawn by the sounds of drama. Ethan considered putting up a fight, but lost the idea when his captain had retreated. He tore off several paper towels and stuffed them under his fountaining nose as he left.

Ryan was spitting blood and wiping away tears when he followed his friends.

Jen’s heart began to slow, her breathing began to quiet itself, and she finally became aware of a screaming pain in her punching hand. Only now did she look at the freshman who had kicked himself further into the stall in fear of Abus.

He was actually kind of cute. Not quite as marshmallow as everyone else in the region. Coal black hair sat in a mess on his head, falling into his eyes. His skin was more of an olive than the typical Anglo-Saxon. Somewhere along the blood line a native Sioux had probably laid an ancestor. He was skinny, which probably contributed to his targeting for a swirly.

“Hey, what’s your name?” Jen asked with Abus at her side.

He stared up at her. He needed a minute to convince himself that he had actually witnessed a 110-pound high school girl lay out three football players. Eventually, he spoke with a stutter. “Kipp. Kipp. My name is Kipp.”

Jen smiled. “For real? Kipp? I like that. It’s different.”

After a five-day in-school suspension, Jen had someone to have lunch with. A week later she had someone to skip fifth period with. Then she had someone to spend evenings with. She soon had Kipp discussing art, literature, and film. They commiserated about growing up in religious families. She got him to read the bullshit that philosophers wrote instead of actually living. He memorized George Carlin standup so that he could make her laugh. They talked about traveling. San Francisco, New York, Alaska, London, Berlin, Russia. Argentina. All over Africa. They planned how they would disrupt both the Republican and Democratic National Conventions. He learned to play the guitar and tried to impress her with Social Distortion and Pixies covers. When that failed he wrote his own music, which worked only a little better. They drank everything that they could buy or steal. Whiskey, vodka, tequila, and lots of cheap beer. They smoked whenever they could score weed. And they fucked. After a little coaching, Kipp could make her come. They fucked a lot more after that.

Then she graduated and left. She had suspected that he would not survive the pack animals of middle America on his own, but she had been hopeful.

It was three hours of ripe wheat fields and unbroken horizon from the airport to the farm. A dusty road led into it and nowhere else. The house was a ranch style. A flat box on the prairie. A family of sorts once lived here. Now it was only home to a retired farmer and the 50 chickens he kept for eggs and companionship.

The truck came to a halt at the small porch. An aged man appeared behind the screen door, wearing a comb-over and clothing purchased at the Tractor Supply Company. Jen and her dad's contact over the past eight years had not even been sporadic. When they did speak, usually on holidays, it was a simple exchange of information.

"I'm in Seattle now, Dad...It doesn't rain as much as they say...Yes, I have a job...It pays enough...I'm getting by...I still have that old Jeep...It runs well...I have my own place with

two cats...I know you don't like cats...I know you don't like the city, either...No, I won't be coming home anytime soon...Happy Thanksgiving...Goodbye."

She slipped into her jacket while Leonard shut down the vehicle. He exited before she did. Dad stepped out into the afternoon heat. The screen door slammed with the same fragile percussion of all screen doors.

Dad was not known to smile, but one could safely call his initial expression a grin, however slight. It didn't last long. When Jen stepped out from behind the F150, his hazelly brown eyes fell heavily upon her wardrobe. Then he noticed the hair. He dropped the smile and said: "There are sandwiches in the kitchen."

Then he was walking away, avoiding further eye contact as he shuffled towards the chicken coop.

"He's probably still pissed that you skipped Ma's funeral. The whole family is pretty mad about that. Can't say that I really blame them. You're nowhere to be found when your own mother dies, but get news about an old boyfriend and you can't wait to get back," Leonard said as he threw his plastic wrapped suit over his shoulder. He was inside the house before she could respond.

Jen stood alone in the perpetual Dakota wind for several seconds. She was home.

Jen hadn't seen the inside of a church since her mother had last insisted she attend services as a teenager. She was uncomfortable, sitting in the back pew, wondering why it was called a pew, while the building filled around her. She had made a little effort to not attract attention. People were here for Kipp, not her. She, appropriately, wore a black dress with sleeves that concealed her tattoos. But her purple patched hair and piercings drew some looks. Some people went as far as to twist discreetly in their own pews to see her. As long as she remained

seated, those in front of her could not see her fishnet stockings or orange Converse Chuck Taylors.

Leonard sat next to her, in his dark JCPenney suit and oxfords. He wasn't quite as uncomfortable as Jen, but it was apparent that he would rather be elsewhere. On the other side of him a middle-aged woman was wiping tears away with a bright white embroidered handkerchief.

Finally, the music shifted from background filler to something louder that demanded attention. Well-dressed young men accompanied two aged mothers up the aisle, inspiring the congregation to rise together and watch them walk.

Then Kipp, or some altered version of Kipp, appeared. Jen had to weave her vision through the crowd in front of her to get a view. He stood at the front, near the altar, wearing a white tuxedo with matching teal bowtie and vest. He was much more grown up than when Jen had left him. Tall, with shoulders that had filled out into a man's frame. His hair was still black, blacker than what was allowed for most Caucasians. But the cut was short and businesslike now. Years ago he would constantly push the twin floods of his mane out of his face in a manner that was indescribably sexy. Today most of that hair and much of its accompanying sex appeal was gone. His hands were folded politely before him. He was smiling, broad and white. He looked happy, even in that ridiculous outfit.

Jen felt a swelling in her throat. She bit her thick lip to distract herself from it, but it only moved to her eyes and provoked them to glisten.

Kipp looked over the crowd quickly, smiling and winking at a few individuals near the front. It was doubtful that he had seen Jen or her wet eyes 12 rows back.

The parade of tuxedoed groomsmen and bridesmaids in offensively teal dresses began. There were six of each. The whole procession allowed Jen time to regain her composure. More lip biting, a little sniffing, some fist clenching.

The music changed again and a spectacular blond haired, blue eyed, Norse myth entered the back of the church. An elaborate pure white gown draped the living Barbie. She had been a cheerleader and sorority girl at Minot State University, where she had met Kipp. He had found her in his first year, at a party. In his second he'd made the track team, in the third he'd been accepted to a fraternity. He graduated after five years and quickly took a job at a bank, a job that paid well enough to buy a nice diamond and an immaculate dress.

Her father flashed her a wide grin, which she returned. The bride's shining smile somehow added to her already blinding whiteness. Most light reflected off of her. Some would describe it as beaming. Jennifer wouldn't use that word.

When the bride began her walk, Jen finally let a tear reach her lashes. She blinked it away, but another one quickly followed.

She felt Len's calloused hand on her shoulder. It wasn't there to offer comfort. He was turning her, away from the model bride and towards him. Through a set of tears on the brink of release Jen met her brother's eyes. He looked down, into his free hand. She followed his eyes and found him offering a flask bottle of Jack Daniels Old No.7. The posed tears escaped when she chuckled, then trailed down to a smile as she reached for the bottle.