

in the flesh by Ray Vukceвич

Thinking about traveling made me feel a little queasy, but it was time to move the meat. I had to do it, had to bite the bullet, grab the bull by the horns, get tough and get going or get off the pot or whatever.

My granddaughter would be starting kindergarten soon and we had never been in the same room together.

Broadband only took you so far.

I was going to have to actually go there.

Since she'd been born, I'd spent a lot of time feeling guilty. A real Grandpa would move across the country, maybe get a little house down the block where he would bake cookies, well maybe I could buy cookies or have them delivered from a fancy bakery, and keep ponies for the apple of his eye to ride when she came over after school. A real Grandpa might even get a Grandma so the little girl coming through the woods with her basket of goodies wouldn't feel vaguely uneasy about the lack of correspondences between her life and some published ideal.

The way it had worked so far was that I'd do a funds transfer, and then Mommy and Daddy would go down to the local toy store and buy something, maybe a Barbie, and have it irradiated and wrapped. They'd write "From Grandpa" with half a dozen exclamation points, and put it under the tree or onto the birthday table. Someday I would have to sit her down and explain that too many exclamation marks were like picking your nose in public. That was not the kind of thing you could say to a child in an email.

My neighbor, Maria, when I suggested she might come with me and be Grandma said, "No way!" but she did agree to watch my apple trees while I was gone. This time of year there wasn't much to do, but it made me feel better knowing Maria would be prowling around in her overalls with a flashlight. No, wait a minute why would she be out there at night? I just liked to picture her in her overalls. There is something so sexy about a woman in overalls, the way you unhook those shoulder straps and...but that's another story.

Maria volunteered to go with me to the airport and bring my clothes home afterwards, but I told her I had that covered. I would just throw my clothes away. Pretty extravagant, she said, but I could tell she was glad. No one likes to go to the airport.

She was there to see me off when my cab arrived. I'd put on torn jeans and a red checked shirt with only two buttons (one at the top and one at the bottom) and cheap rubber flip-flops. I kissed Maria on the cheek. I put my hand in the cab's scanner, and the back door popped open.

The driver didn't bother turning on the speaker, so there was no small talk on the long drive into the city and then on to the airport. When we arrived I punched in a few bucks tip, more out of habit than gratitude, and the door popped open again and I got out.

I was still a long way from where I needed to be. My next stop was at a vending machine for a traveling robe. There were at least a dozen people milling around the vending machines, and I wondered if there was a meat convention either here or wherever all those people might be going.

I followed the arrows to the main door. I stopped and read the sign posted out front as required by law. The sign explained that once I stepped through the door, I would not be able to step back through it.

Okay. I took a deep breath and went on in to the airport. I walked down a long hallway that branched to the left for women and to the right for men. At the end of the branch was another sign explaining the trip through this door was also strictly no return. You go in you don't come out. This is not a lavatory!

The room was one big cold area with tile floors and metal benches bolted to the wall. There were three other men in there. We didn't exchange glances. I sat down on one of the benches and struggled with the plastic safety wrapper holding my robe. I had no sharp objects, of course. In the end I used my teeth to get a rip started.

I got undressed and threw my old clothes in a trash barrel and put on my new robe. It was white and thin and obviously a paper product. At least it closed in the front with a single big button. The floor was cold under my bare feet, so I didn't hang around but moved straight for the door at the far end marked "terminal this way."

I walked into an open area and stood looking around for a moment before I located the counter I needed. I got in line. Getting in line was not something I'd done in a long time, and it made me feel very strange. That feeling must have been shared by the other four people in line because we maintained about ten feet of distance between each of us.

When it was finally my turn, I put my hand in the scanner and confirmed for the woman behind the glass who I was, where I was going, and why. I thought my song and dance about me being a grandfather finally making the long trip across the continent to see his young granddaughter would at least get me a smile but she just looked bewildered at that part of my story.

Had I talked to any strangers?

"Just you," I said.

"What do you mean by that?" She gave me a hard look.

"Just a joke," I said.

"We don't joke at the airport," she said.

"I'm sorry," I said.

"Please pay attention and follow instructions once you're inside," she said and buzzed me in.

When the door closed behind me, I walked into a long carpeted tunnel where I was met by a woman in a white lab coat and a uniformed man with an assault rifle. He stepped aside, and I saw a gurney and another trash barrel.

"Put your robe in there." The woman indicated the barrel with her clipboard.

I took off the robe and tossed it and stood before them naked feeling skinny and plucked. Hey, maybe I should do the Funky Chicken. No. That would baffle them, and the soldier might shoot me. They weren't old enough to remember the Funky Chicken. In fact, I wasn't old enough to remember it either. It was just something that bubbled up to the top of my mind because I was nervous and naked in front of a soldier with an assault rifle and a woman with a clipboard who was now snapping on a rubber glove.

After her brief and not altogether unpleasant probing, she said, "Okay, get up on the gurney."

I climbed onto the metal table.

"It's cold," I said.

The soldier grabbed my left foot and shackled my ankle to the gurney.

"Small poke," the woman said and gave me an injection. Delicious warmth moved through my body as

the sedative did its work. The woman shook out a thin blanket like the way I remember my mother used to shake the sheets out before hanging them on the clothesline. The blanket settled over my body.

The soldier moved to the head of the gurney and pushed. The woman walked along beside me.

"I'm off to see my granddaughter," I said.

The soldier made a noise which I interpreted as meaning, "Hey, and here we thought you were some kind of hot shot off to a big deal that could only be closed by much meat in the same room at the same time."

"Pressing the flesh," the woman said.

"What?" I said, suddenly wondering how much of this conversation was strictly in my head.

"I don't know," she said. "It just seems kind of frivolous, you know?"

The soldier maneuvered my gurney parallel to what looked like an aluminum garage door. The woman pushed a button and the door slid up and away. Inside, the passengers who had gone before me were stacked up like items in an automated deli.

"Here you go," the soldier said and slid my gurney into place. Then the whole thing rolled up so they could slide the next passenger in. Once the box was full or when they ran out of passengers, it would be moved to the airplane. And then we would be off into the wild blue yonder, as free as birds. Or maybe caged chickens.

Leaning to the left and looking over the edge of the gurney, I could see the legs and feet of the woman and the soldier.

"This is the most important trip of my life," I called out.

"So, b'bye then," the woman said and closed the door with a bang.