

## Mr. Smith Takes a Holiday

Bob Smith enjoyed long, boring plane trips. His job often required him to work odd shifts, but he was one of those people who could fall asleep anywhere, anytime. He was looking forward to this trip to France so he could take a long nap and catch up on his reading. Unfortunately, the lady sitting next to him had other ideas.

"I just love flying because you get to meet such interesting people." The plane had barely left the runway when she tried to strike up a conversation. "Is this your first trip to France?" she asked.

"No," Bob replied warily. "My wife is French, so I've been there several times."

"Now isn't that interesting," the woman replied. "I don't know anyone from France, but my late husband had a nephew who moved to Poland. Or maybe it was Greece. I get those two confused. Anyway, this nephew. . ." She proceeded to spend the next hour describing her friends and relatives, her late husband's career, the trips they'd taken, where they stayed on each trip, and how the weather in Boca Raton where she now lived compared to the weather in Sioux Falls where she used to live.

"Oh my goodness," she said after she finished talking about the blizzard of 1983. "I've been going on about my life, but you haven't told me about yourself. I don't believe I even know your name."

"Bob," he said. "Bob Smith."

"That's a nice name," she said. "We had a dog named Bob once, but he ran away and we never saw him again. I think he was lured away by a Shih Tzu from down the street. The people who lived there were very stand-offish. They moved away shortly after Bob disappeared."

Bob said nothing, hoping maybe she'd lose interest and talk to the person in the seat on the other side of her.

"You said your wife was French," she said, not taking the hint. "Where was she born?"

"In France," Bob said, somewhat perplexed. "That's what makes her French."

"I guessed that much." She gave him a smile like he was a precocious child. "I meant, where in France was she born?"

"Oh. Just outside Paris. Northeast. Near Aubervilliers."

"But she's not making this trip with you?"

"She's already there," Bob explained. "She's a schoolteacher. She gets the summers off, so she's spending some time with her folks. I only get a couple weeks' vacation, so I'm going over to join her."

“And what do you do for a living?”

For a moment, Bob froze. All he could think of was that he should have thought of a cover story in advance. Finally, he spoke. “I’m a transition counselor,” he said.

“That sounds interesting. Are you a psychologist?”

“No, but sometimes I use a bit of psychology. It’s really not that interesting. I just talk to people who are making lifestyle changes.” Bob was trying to think of a way to change the subject.

“What kind of lifestyle changes?” the lady asked.

“I really shouldn’t be talking about it,” Bob answered.

“Is it illegal?”

“No.”

“Is it classified?”

“Well, no.”

“Then why shouldn’t you talk about it? You can trust me. I can keep a secret.”

Bob had just heard about her aunt’s gall bladder operation, her grandson’s peanut intolerance, her cousin’s impotence, and how her friend Mabel suspected her eighty-year-old husband was philandering, so he had doubts about her ability to keep a secret. Still, he didn’t want to be rude, so he answered her. “Well, most people don’t want to hear about it. You see, I talk to people at the end of their lives.”

“So, you’re in hospice care?”

“More or less,” Bob answered. “It’s like hospice care. I deal with the transition.”

“People going into hospice care?” the woman asked.

Bob hesitated for a long time before he answered. “The transition at the other end. With or without hospice care.”

“At the other end? You mean you talk to people just before they die?”

Again Bob hesitated. Finally, he said “a little later.”

“You talk to dead people? But how . . .” Her expression suddenly changed from confused to horrified. “Are you trying to tell me you’re the Angel of Death?”

“Oh, no,” Bob said dismissively, “Nothing like that. I’m not the Angel of Death. I’m not even a regional or a district manager. I’m more like a contract employee.”

“But you kill people,” the lady said.

“No,” Bob said, “That’s a common misconception. Death is natural. It’s part of life. Well, technically it’s the end of life but everything that lives will eventually die. With or without our involvement. We just help with the transition. Nobody wants to die. They struggle against death. Sometimes that’s a good thing. It helps people recover from serious injuries or illnesses. But sometimes, when recovery isn’t possible, the struggle just prolongs their suffering. We can help them understand that it’s OK to let go. And sometimes death is instantaneous. There is no struggle. But it’s still a dramatic change, and people are confused by it. The most common reaction is ‘Now what?’ We answer their questions and help with the transition.”

The woman’s expression suddenly changed to fear. “Why are you here?” she asked. “Is this plane going to crash?”

“I hope not,” Bob answered truthfully. “I’m off-duty.”

The look of fear gradually receded, and a look of suspicion replaced it. “How can an angel of death be off duty?”

“I’m not an angel,” he insisted, “but everyone needs a break now and then. Even the Angel of Death takes a holiday on occasion. Of course, we always make certain there’s someone to cover for us before we go off duty.”

“You make it sound like a giant bureaucracy,” the woman said.

“Well, there *are* a lot of people in the world. It takes a pretty big organization to handle the workload. And we have to be ready to surge in the event of wars or epidemics.”

The woman still eyed him suspiciously. “You’re pulling my leg, aren’t you.”

“No, I’m telling you the truth,” Bob said. But he couldn’t fully suppress a smile as he said this. The story sounded unbelievable, even to him.

“I don’t think it’s funny to tell tall tales like that. In fact, I think it’s rude. It makes people unwilling to trust other people.”

“It’s not a tall tale,” Bob said, “but you might want to fasten your seat belt.”

“Why?” she asked with a hint of sarcasm. “Is something bad going to happen?”

"I don't think so," Bob said as he fastened his belt. "But the 'fasten seat belts' sign just came on. We're probably heading into turbulence."

Just then the captain spoke over the intercom and asked everyone to fasten their seat belts, as they were expecting turbulence. The woman fastened her belt and opened a magazine, deliberately ignoring Bob. Bob leaned back, closed his eyes, and went to sleep.

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Bob threw his suitcase into the trunk, slid into the seat beside his wife, and kissed her hello.

"How was your flight?" she asked as she pulled away from the airport curb.

"Uneventful," Bob answered. "I was seated next to a chatterbox who wanted to know what I did for a living, but she gave up after an hour so I was able to get some sleep."

"Did you tell her?" his wife asked.

"Yes, but she didn't believe me. I knew she wouldn't."

"My folks are having the Garnier's over for dinner tonight. Whatever you do, don't tell them what you do for a living. There's nothing like having the Specter of Death at the table to take all the joy out of a lobster bisque."

"I'm not a specter," Bob insisted. "I'm just a contract employee."