

**VIEWER
DISCRETION
ADVISED**

ANGUS STEVENS

FLIGHT RISK

Takeoff isn't until 10:30 but Adam wants to be there early, to leave before everyone wakes up and avoid the hassle of helping Nina get the kids to school, so he doesn't hit 'Snooze' for a third time and instead gets cracking.

Listen to them breathe.

Standing in the hallway looking into their bedrooms, Adam does this ritual hoping to feel connected.

If I can't hear them, do I stay till I can?

Louie is on cusp of teenagerdom, with a body too big for his bed, outgrowing childhood and his dad's jokes; Ella, enjoying being ten, is surrounded by fluffy toys, with Robbie Rose Robinson the world's most adored puppy, tucked in at her feet. Her panda finger puppet is on her bedside table. They have a tradition of him taking it when he goes away. Relieved to have spotted it, Adam pops it in his pocket.

What if I just stick my head into each of their bedrooms, one after the other?

But that defeats the appreciate your whole family sleeping thing.

Well this I'm 'The Rock' angle isn't really cutting it either.

Fuck it.

Downstairs, as he tries leaving without waking the house, Nina calls out, 'Adam?'

Putting down his overnight bag he returns to their bedroom. Nina's a very expansive sleeper. Her limbs take up vast tracts of bed country.

'Heya, little Kinki, what's up?'

'Be safe.'

It strikes him as very un-Nina.

'It's only for two nights.' He kisses her neck. She nuzzles in and loops her arm over him. They hadn't touched all night so he's glad she yelled out.

'Good.'

Her arm feels nice. Then heavy. He drops his head down. It slips off. Released.

In the cab, he decides not to feel bad about how happy he is to be going.

Twenty-eight hours in the air over three days, and maybe he could have arranged things so it didn't have to be him on the road, but he wanted to go. And now, on a glorious mid-November morning, Adam's at the airport bar nearly three hours early, having a gin and tonic for breakfast. He raises his glass.

Fly to San Fran, do the presso, shoot the interviews, fly home. Done.

And it feels good.

The plane trip is perfect. He's got empty seats either side, his new headphones, endless movies, and G&Ts on call.

Drunk at 30,000 feet, he cries watching *Selma* and makes friends with the air steward.

She hands him another G&T, and asks, 'Have you seen *Green Book*?'

The night it won Best Picture, Nina ranted, 'It's a fucking travesty. White men back-slapping over "aren't we great for not being racist" bullshit.'

‘Yeah.’

‘What do you mean, “yeah”?’

‘I agree.’

‘Adam, you’ve watched *Old School* fifty times.’

‘So what.’

‘But you haven’t got around to *Moonlight*.’

‘I’m waiting for—’

‘Or *A Promising Young Woman*.’

‘The right time.’

‘How many times have you watched *Anchorman*?’

‘They’re—’

‘And *The Waterboy*?’

‘Leave Sandler out of it.’

‘These directors did *Dumb and Dumber*.’

‘*Green Book* is not Sandler’s fault.’

‘*Something About Mary* and then this...’ Nina dripped scorn,
‘The Academy’s Best Picture.’

‘What do you reckon is the worst Best Picture?’

‘And he’s a flasher.’

‘Huh?’

‘One of the directors has flashed his dick over five hundred times.’

‘Oh, come on...’

‘Look it up. He’s said so. Including at Cameron Diaz.’

‘Okay, Kinki, I—’

‘Non-aggressively, apparently. Just as a joke.’

She sipped her wine.

Adam waited. He knew the moment he started speaking she’d talk over him. He hoped that if he waited long enough she’d finish her point, but the moment dragged on, so he thought maybe he’d got it wrong and began with, ‘I don’t think—’

Nina pounced. ‘And now dick flasher’s got an Oscar for “*hooray, I’m not a racist.*”’

To the steward’s question, Adam replies, ‘Not yet.’

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At San Francisco airport the arrivals line is long. Holding his passport and his overnight bag, Adam is a little hungover, sleep-deprived, but fine. He edges along with the crowd, anonymous.

When he makes it to the scanning device he pops in his passport, gets photographed, takes the printout and moves on. A customs official standing behind a wood-veneer counter compares Adam with the printout and his passport.

But the three don’t match up.

‘Glasses, sir.’

‘Oh, right...’

Adam takes them off.

‘Welcome to America.’

The hire car is a huge white Lincoln. Presumably the kid at work who booked it, had his reasons, but to Adam it’s bizarre. It reminds him of his last year at uni playing *Cruis’n USA*, and the final race ending on the White House lawn, partying with Bill Clinton and a bunch of pixellated bikini babes.

When racing Louie on the Xbox Adam drew upon this *Cruis’n* experience. Louie seemed impressed until, in their post-race chat, Adam said he just tried to fang it the whole time. This made his son suspicious so he checked their settings.

‘Oh my god you’re on beginner and you still can’t beat me.’

‘It’s ’cause these controllers are so pissy and fiddly.’

‘You’re such a bot.’

*

Adam recalibrates his brain for driving on the wrong side of the road and turns onto the freeway. He hasn't been to San Fran since he was a backpacker, and he compares his early twenties self with his present day version. It starts to get ugly and feeling himself heading down a corridor of mirrors he snaps, 'Shut the fuck up.'

Today I'm driving in San Fran and I'm feeling fine. Okay?

Okay.

His Airbnb is in the Castro, the cool, gay part of town. He chose there because it was cool and gay and therefore the most San Fran-ish part of San Fran. The photo that determined which Airbnb he'd stay in showed one side of the house spray-painted with a mural of a young girl with dreadlocks, blowing the seeds off a dandelion.

Following the host's instructions, Adam discovers the key isn't in the letter box. The text he gets from the Airbnb woman says that she isn't sure what's happened but she's just up the street so wait a moment and she'll be there.

When she arrives, Adam's sitting on the front steps, trying not to have the shits about being locked out. Like the house, the Airbnb woman is cool. She has curly brown hair, is wearing a short pink skirt, and has tats along both arms; she's all teeth and friendliness. Her partner stands on the footpath near the front the gate, watching. He's tall, skinny, and tanned, with a shaved head.

Adam gets up, but before he can step past her to give her access to the door, he is blocked in by her crouching down in front of him and picking up each of the little pot plants that line the steps.

Right in front of him kneeling at crotch height, she chats away. 'The cleaner was supposed to leave the key in the lockbox, so I don't know where it's gone, but I keep a spare one around here...'

Adam is towering over her. Jammed in between her and the front door, he feels like he is invading her space, but there's nowhere to move.

'How was your flight?'

'Good, yeah, good.'

As she keeps looking under the pots, Adam glances over at her partner, and smile-nods, but receives nothing in return.

'Success!' She stands up and leans forward. Her arm and chest graze Adam's torso en route to unlocking the door.

She suggests nearby restaurants and bars, but Adam's not listening. The intimacy of standing so close to a stranger and having chit chat while their partner lingers, is too claustrophobic. Wanting to wrap things up, Adam tries to sound San Fran and chill, 'Brilliant, thanks, awesome, yeah...'

For all its authenticity, the Airbnb listing had been tricky in its depiction. Adam had wanted a San Fran two-storey duplex like in *Mrs Doubtfire*, but instead finds himself in a converted ground-floor apartment. The bedroom is not on the top floor with a gorgeous vista of San Fran but street level with a view of the bins. The black, metal spiral staircase in the living room that once led to the room upstairs is now closed over, leaving the handrails colliding with the roof, while Adam's sense of being stuck in the basement is compounded by the clomp of upstairs' every step.

Plus the walls are covered with paintings, none of them good. They fall into three categories: Mexican-themed blocks of colour housed in heavy, dark wood frames; buxom topless maidens done in a wishy-washy seventies style, with Hawaiian flowers in their hair, and African prints giving the fertility gods some serious respect.

Getting familiar with the place, Adam goes through unlocking, opening and shutting all the doors, windows and wardrobes. In the

chest of drawers he finds a mobile phone charger and a red bra. To Adam, who grew up with a brother but no sisters and a mother who kept her thoughts and clothes to herself, the bra had once been a mysterious and wondrous thing. Now faced with this item, functional and lacy, it feels like washing.

He leaves them where he found them, closes the drawer and finds himself thinking of the night before.

Sitting opposite Nina, trying not to stress out about the fact that it wasn't the cheap and cheerful place he'd hoped for, and trying not to resent the fact that the plate-for-two was in fact two bits of fuck all, Adam had been once again struck by the sheer blaze of her. His thoughts bounced between *She's a dogmatic pain in the arse* to admitting *She's kind of magnificent*.

In full flight, Nina was a thing to behold.

She ate without any consideration of etiquette and while cutlery was acknowledged as a sound starting point, if it wasn't doing the job, using fingers was fair enough. She loved making sure that the waiter always thought hers was the best table. If served by a waitress, she didn't care quite as much, but regardless of their gender, at every nice-meal-out, she always had two options that could only ever be resolved by what the waiter thought was preferable. She loved to tip; glorified her time as a waitress and wanted to make sure that she righted the wrongs of all the nights she served tables by tipping an amount Adam found painful. Her favourite kind of waiter would be a gay man within a ten-year age radius of her, who was opinionated and a little bit fabulous.

Adam's favourite waiter was like a note slipped under a door, someone who had all the answers but was barely noticeable.

The restaurant was crowded with dark wooden tables and soft lighting. Among this tasteful setting their date night had an edge.

They hadn't seen each other much lately, so they wanted to make the most of it, especially since Adam would be gone for a few days, but he had brought with him a backlog of resentments while Nina looked like she was hunkered down awaiting his report card.

'Is that Judy Davis?'

Nina shrugged. 'Why aren't you eating the duck?'

'I'm leaving it for you.'

'I picked it 'cause I thought it was something you'd like.'

'Didn't we agree we'd just choose stuff we wanted?'

'Yeah, but you love duck and you're always saying I never consider you, so...'

Nina gestured like a gameshow model presenting the prizes, 'I got the duck.'

How can she think ordering the duck makes up for the shit-ton of cooking, washing and bloody everything I've been doing lately?

'Don't you want it?'

'Thank you, it's just—'

'You're stressing out about your trip?'

'No, I just thought—'

'Presenting in the Valley, it's a big deal?'

'Not really.'

She's not even thinking she owes me a thank you.

'You said that it could totally change the business—'

'Yeah but—'

'That it was a really big deal.'

It was true, so much so that Adam was trying not to think about it at all, and instead, whether consciously or not, was focusing all his energies on Nina and the slow squeeze of his domesticated life.

If he had taken the time to consider his assumption that marriage would be an endless stream of mind-blowing moments, Adam may have realised this was based on his sixteen-year-old brain thinking

how cool it'd be to be married because every day you'd see a woman naked and you could have sex whenever you wanted, and that this notion having morphed into a vague, ever-deflating sigh of, 'Is this it?' still held a disproportionately large cache in his head.

But Adam didn't get that far. He stopped at, *What's the point of eating out if we're just going to get the shits with each other?* before dutifully answering her question. 'Yeah, it's pretty big I guess.'

'It'll be fine.'

'For sure.'

'So, then what's wrong?'

'Nothing.'

'Just tell me.'

'Honestly, I just thought it really was Judy Davis.'

'So, she's still alive?'

'And it got me wondering if she's still married to Colin Friels—'

'Right...'

'And how he's only done TV and she's more famous and...'

Adam paused wanting to see if she's interested. '...And whether it was true that she won the Oscar for Best Supporting Actor but that Jack Valance, when he was presenting the award, was too drunk and read out the last nominee's name as the winner which happened to be the new Spiderman's Aunt May... Moira what's-her-face? She was in *My Cousin Vinny*?'

'Marisa Tomei.'

'Yeah, exactly. So, because Jack was drunk, Judy got duped.'

'You were thinking all that?'

'Yeah... that and how she'd feel about it.'

'Okay...'

Sceptical, Nina swivelled around, checked out the woman who looked nothing like Judy Davis, and played along. 'Doesn't she have

a letter from the academy saying they made a mistake and she'd actually won?

'Isn't that what you told me?'

'I think Kate said that Paul was at their house once when he was living in Balmain and Judy showed him the letter.'

'So, I wonder what Colin thinks about all of that?'

'Thinks of what? The struggles of having a successful wife?'

'No, that—'

'You think you're Colin Friels?'

Is she joking? Or winding me up?

'Alright then, how is everything?' asked their waitress, who was not a fabulous gay man, but instead an English backpacker who behaved like an extra from *Wallace and Gromit*.

Adam fake-smile replied, 'It's great, thanks.'

'Can I get another glass of the rosé, please?'

Once she'd left, neither spoke. Adam didn't want to answer the 'Do you think you're Colin?' question but could feel Nina expecting a reply.

Have fun.

Adam sipped his beer.

Maybe she's flirting? I mean, I'm so out of practice, so maybe...

Adam took a different tack, hoping it is flirty. 'Anyways, I was reading an article about Julia Louis-Dreyfus telling a story about how she was doing a *Saturday Night Live* skit with Tina Fey and that blonde woman—'

'Amy Poehler.'

'Yeah, and they were riffing about whether they were too old to be fuckable and how all of a sudden Julia stopped finding it funny and—'

'What does this relate to?'

‘Judy Davis.’

Nina leaned back. ‘Go on.’

‘And I saw *Husbands and Wives* when I was seventeen and it became like my roadmap to what marriage is about—’

‘It’s classic Woody.’

‘Yeah, and after that film I saw my parents differently.’

‘Why?’

‘Well, do you remember how Sydney Pollack leaves Judy Davis for someone younger and—’

‘You want an affair.’

‘What—’

‘Is that what this is all about?’

‘No! At the end, Sydney and Judy get back together and—’

‘You want permission to fuck around?’

‘That’s not what I’m saying.’

‘That’s exactly what you’re saying.’

‘No, I just, I’ve always used movies to make sense of life and—’

‘You’re wondering if you went off and fucked someone else would people see that it was my fault, like the bullshit way Woody made Judy’s character into the villain.’

‘Here we go!’ With impeccable timing, the Wallace and Gromit waitress presented Nina with her rosé and picked up the side plates. Angry whispering now, Adam didn’t wait for her to leave, ‘You jump a million steps ahead, I just thought I saw Judy Davis and I started thinking about her and all of a sudden—’

‘That’s such bullshit.’

‘It’s not.’

‘She’s not Judy Davis and you’re full of shit.’

As Nina made her point, her fork left the table. It hit the floor and clattered out of reach.

The less Nina cared about being overheard, the quieter Adam became. Back-peddling, he replied, 'That's not what I'm saying.'

'So, I'm just making it up?'

Five beers and three wines in respectively, Adam's point was lost in the sweep of what's implied and assumed. 'Kinki, you're not making it up.'

'Sure.'

'And there's no agenda.'

'Right.'

'I'm just saying, as a kid that film resonated and—'

'And you're identifying with it now as an adult—'

'Yes.'

'Because you're trapped.'

Adam stepped out one last idea. 'I don't think you understand what—'

'If you want to fuck around, just do it.'

'No, I—'

'I'm sick of this. That I'm not enough. Just fucking do it.'

'I'm not saying that—'

'Yes, you are. Just be honest.'

Adam leaned over, whispering, 'I'm just admin to you.'

'You're not a fucking housewife.'

'Everything I want I put second.'

'You think I don't?'

'No, I—'

'It's called parenting—'

'How could you get it, you're not a guy.'

Nina snorted.

Adam was incredulous. 'Are you telling me you identify with not just the mums, but also the dads at school?'

‘Why not? We’re just parents.’

‘Riiiiight... like Hamish. And fucking Pete? You can relate to them? They’re guys who are basically just shitty blobs of domestic wetness and yet somehow you can relate—’

Nina, defiant: ‘Yes.’

‘Are you kidding me? They don’t know what they want; I don’t know either and yet you’re telling me you, in that uniquely shit, male kind of way, you know how they feel?’

‘Absolutely.’

‘Imagine if I tried that crap on you.’

‘It’d be great—’

‘I mean, they’re spineless fucks and they can’t want that. I don’t either. And I fucking hate sausages but I’m at fetes twenty-four seven, BBQing and packing the car and washing your undies and—’ Adam’s eyes darted around, looking anywhere but at her. ‘If I’m not one of those sexless amoebas, then the only other option is to be a Shooter McGavin fuckwit with their checked shirts and low-carb beer, thinking they’re all still players, laughing at everything like they’ve fucking got it all worked out, with their disposable income and ocean swims and they can bang whoever they want cause their wife’s cool with it, if she knew, which she doesn’t, so they’re probably divorced which makes the whole thing so... Fucking. Ordinary.’

He spat out these final words, and glared at the table. Their glasses and the condiments spread out looked like the CBD. The word ‘divorced’ sat there too. She waited for him to look up and face her but he focused on his beer, tracing the edge of his glass with his finger as the restaurant chatter seeped in. He muttered, ‘A new life awaits you in the outer colonies.’

‘What—’

‘The chance to begin again...’

‘What’s that from?’

Adam, not looking up, shook his head.

‘Tell me.’

‘Don’t worry about it.’

‘No really.’

Blade Runner.’

‘You and your fucking movies.’ She snatched her wine, ‘You only see what you don’t have.’

They sat in silence. Got the bill. Walked home. He tried to touch her when they arrived back, but Nina avoided contact.

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Within walking distance of his Airbnb, Adam finds a bar-restaurant with footpath seating. He orders his favourite travel meal – a Corona with a chicken burger and fries – and while waiting for his food, grabs his mobile and reads his emails. There’s a bunch of questions from the office relating to things he can’t fix until he returns to Sydney.

To avoid the stressful powerlessness of these office issues, and the looming expectation of the next day, he tries to distract himself by listening in on the two women sitting behind him. They are both in expensive active-wear and could be his age, or a decade older. The quality of their cosmetic surgery has Adam outsmarted, but his glance hasn’t fooled anyone. One woman glares at him, happy to show her indifference to his eavesdropping.

Adam returns to his meal. As though to highlight that she isn’t going to change anything for anyone, and certainly not for any man, the woman continues to recount her husband’s noncommittal attempts at reconciliation. Loud and clear. Her conversation seems

to be increasingly directed at Adam, so he gets busy with his burger.

Soon after, the women hug their goodbyes, unlock their silver SUVs, and drive off.

There's no way those women were going to look at me.

Why would they?

Hang on, I'm not a total flop. I got Nina to like me.

Yeah, twenty years ago.

*And I hate mining, and conservative politics. I'm anti-homophobia.
Anti-racism. Anti-sexism. Anti-corporate greed.*

Gosh, want a biscuit?

No, I just...

*Those women couldn't care less, so just get another Corona and act
like it's The Fast and the Furious.*

*Yes, sold! And how good is Louie's impersonation of Vin, 'I don't have
friends... I got family.'*

So good.

*See, Kinki, this whole 'I only see what I don't have' is just not true.
Wife, kids, house; I see it all the time.*