

The Chilling Effect

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Excerpt from Chapter 1

When I was a little boy, they called me a liar, but now that I
am grown up, they call me a writer.

Isaac Bashevis Singer

High above the Rockies, flying out of the dusk and into the dark, the red-eye from L.A. to Philadelphia was on time and routine in every way; a few passengers had already flipped off their overhead lights and were trying to sleep.

As soon as Jack glanced up the aisle and saw David walking toward him, however, he knew that the routine part of the flight was over.

He glanced quickly to his left. The seat directly across the aisle from him--the seat where David always sat in his nightmares--was vacant.

Jack felt something odd happen inside his chest--a small pop and then a quick, stabbing jolt of pain. He swallowed raggedly and then dared to look back up the aisle.

David was still there, standing in the aisle, waiting patiently for a young female flight attendant to finish speaking to a seated passenger and get out of his way. He looked directly at Jack, across the attendant's back as she leaned forward to speak to the other passenger. He smiled slightly and nodded as a small greeting.

Jack closed his eyes. He was starting to sweat. The pain in his chest had disappeared as quickly and as mysteriously as it had begun, but he felt increasingly nauseous and dizzy.

When he looked back, David was still standing there in the aisle, still looking at him rather expectantly. Oddly, David was wearing exactly the same clothes that Jack was wearing, but Jack noticed that David's khakis look crisp and freshly pressed, whereas his own were rumpled after a week in his luggage. It took every ounce of his self-control to do so, but Jack managed to return David's nod. David smiled a bit more broadly--he looked remarkably relaxed and calm, Jack thought.

Considering the circumstances.

Jack forced himself to look away for a moment and take a long, slow, deep breath.

He looked back up and David was gone.

It presented a conundrum.

For the first time since boarding, Jack looked at the woman in the window seat beside him. He'd pegged her right away as a

potential chatterer and had studiously ignored her, feigning much more interest in the movie playing on his laptop than he really felt.

She was reading a paperback--he did a double take, because he knew instantly what it was; it was Debbie Bloom's damned book, and he hadn't gotten used to seeing the near-match to his own name she'd used in the book's title: Killing Jack Martin.

Jack Marin audibly sighed--the reading woman looked at him with a welcoming smile. She was going to say something about the book; he just knew it. It wasn't a conversation he wanted to have. Especially not then.

He stood up. Carefully--he felt oddly fragile, worried the sharp pain might return or something else, equally disagreeable and unexpected might happen--he walked up the aisle. He checked each row as he did, looking for David or for what he hoped he'd actually find, instead: some guy who looked like David. He tried to appear casual as his sense of panic increased. He went all the way up to the forward bulkhead--waiting until a flight attendant parted the curtain closing off first class to quickly check those seats, as well--then turned and came back down the big jet's other aisle, still looking.

There was no sign of either David or a look-alike, and once Jack had turned again at the rear bulkhead, confirmed that both bathrooms were vacant and returned to his own seat, he saw that

the seat across the aisle from him remained oddly empty on the otherwise packed flight.

Jack wasn't given to excessive equivocation. If he came up against a problem, his first impulse was to meet it head-on.

Therefore, he methodically stowed his laptop in his carryon bag, made sure one of his business cards was prominently placed immediately under the bag's main zipper, shoved the bag under the seat in front of him and closed the pull-down tray. He was still sweating, but the queasy, unbalanced sensation that had overtaken him as soon as he had seen David had passed.

He took a deep breath. Then he let it out in a loud wheeze, clutching his chest with both hands as he did, his eyes wide and staring. He pulled at the collar of his shirt and gasped. "I can't breath!"

The reading woman next to him immediately yelled, "Oh my god, he's having a heart attack!"

Within moments, the aisle filled with attendants. The captain put out a call for any doctors on board to go to Jack's aid, and soon there were three MD's vying to play the role of lifesaver. After they sorted out their respective ranks relative to the situation at hand, the one who worked in the ER won, and the gynecologist and the plastic surgeon went a bit sheepishly back to their seats. No one knew it, but the cardiologist in seat 36B had remained silently uninvolved,

knowing from bitter, past experience that nasty lawsuits often dog in-flight heroics.

The big jet turned around, headed back west and put down in Denver. Wearing an oxygen mask, Jack was trundled down the aisle strapped on a gurney, then carried down one of those roll-up stairways familiar from movies from the '40's, out onto the shut-down runway and to a waiting ambulance. He knew exactly what to expect, of course. He flew so often that he'd been on three flights that had made emergency medical landings, so none of what happened surprised him, and the pulsing lights from the ambulance and various other emergency vehicles clustered about the jet were merely what he'd expected.

The fact that he felt fine also didn't bother him in the least. There was no reason to feel guilty. The other passengers would all have great, dramatic stories to tell, and he had faith that the airline would get everyone where they were going, and possibly even make up the time they'd lost.

Once, on a flight into Chicago that had made an emergency landing in Kansas City, the pilot had announced, once they were back in the air, that he was going to try to do just that: make up lost time.

"Let's open this baby up and see what she can do," he'd said.

There'd been a pause, and he'd then added, in a contrite tone, "I've always wanted to say that."

On that occasion, Jack had watched in amusement as the attendants had scurried instantly to their jumpseats as the seatbelt sign started flashing. He'd felt the jet just boogie and been pressed back by the sheer power of unleashed forward thrust.

People don't realize that passenger jets are conserving fuel by flying at the lowest possible power. When needed, pilots can make the engines purr. That flight had actually arrived early in Chicago and had to circle O'Hare, waiting for a runway, then sit on the tarmac to wait for a gate.

So Jack didn't feel guilty about lying in order to get off the red-eye that night. He did feel sorry, however, for the very young, very dewy flight attendant who had been the first at his side during his "heart attack"

She had bent breathlessly over the handsome passenger with curly dark hair and a great body she'd been watching since boarding and looked up at him pleadingly with the biggest, greenest eyes imaginable. Still trying to maintain the allusion that he was in agony--probably dying--Jack had surreptitiously checked her out. She had a sweet, tight body and smelled wonderful as she leaned in close. He gasped a bit for effect, hoping she'd get even closer. Under the circumstances, it

didn't seem impossible that he might cop a feel--a dying man reflexively reaching for human warmth and comfort, that sort of thing.

"Don't go!" she'd said. "Please don't die."

"Can you keep a secret?" he'd whispered. He was rubbing her arm in what he hoped passed for the spontaneous grasping of the dying. He allowed his hand a drift a bit and was instantly erect when he brushed against her breast and felt the hard little button of her nipple through her uniform blouse.

She stared at him blankly.

"I'm actually fine," he said. "But I saw a dead man on board. So I gotta go, honey."