
One on the Aisle

Karen Rosenbaum

PAULA HAD THE AISLE SEAT. Her younger brother Tony was in the middle, next to Sugar, and the two of them pressed against the window and each other and pointed at cloud formations. Down below was Nevada. Paula turned another page in *The Einstein Intersection* even though she couldn't remember one word she had just read. What she *was* remembering was the wedding reception, Tony and Sugar's, yesterday, and that awful lavender dress she had to wear and how she had to smile, especially when her great aunts would say, "You just be patient, dear. Some day the right one will come along for you." And now being on the same flight. "No!" she wanted to shout, "I am *not* chaperoning the newlyweds. They get off the plane at Reno, where they are renting a jeep and driving their camping gear to Yosemite. I get off at *Oakland*."

Tony and Sug did get off the plane in Reno, Sug gushing about how she ought to come and visit them and they'd fix her up with Sug's *darling* cousin Ned, and Paula did get off in Oakland. Bumping her bag along on its inefficient little wheels, she pushed through the doors to the sidewalk.

"How's the sister of the groom?" JoAnn was standing by the Vega, holding forward the front passenger seat, so Paula stuffed her suitcase into the back and climbed in after it.

"Feel like talking?" asked Rita from behind the wheel. Rita and JoAnn believed in talk therapy. They did most of the talking.

"I thought I'd die when Janice got married," said JoAnn. Janice was JoAnn's twin. "And then Mindy." She twisted around in her seat and offered Paula a butterscotch lifesaver. "Mindy-moo. The baby."

Rita stepped on the gas and the car jerked onto the airport beltway. "Everyone for hot fudge?" she asked.

"How about Packer's?" offered JoAnn.

"The pimple platoon's always at Packer's," said Rita. "They look at us like we're their mothers."

"Fiorenza?"

"Naw. Everyone's a lez at Fiorenza." Rita squeezed the Vega in between two vans on the freeway. "How about Ice Dream?"

"I'm gonna have a double fudge," JoAnn said. "I've been good all week, and I worked out for an hour and a half last night."

"I need a few extra pounds to get the sound right," Rita said. She sang a little with an all girls' country band. She had volume.

"Why didn't you stay longer in Utah?" asked JoAnn. "You could have checked out the intermountain men."

"I can't breathe in Utah," said Paula. "I'm congested all the time. Maybe it's the sage. Maybe it's the way people look at you. I think the average thirty-year-old woman has six kids."

Paula laughed and reached into her purse for a Kleenex and spit out the gum she always chewed to help her ears pop on airplanes. "Besides I needed to get back. I've got this sale pending—if the bank comes through and the naughty ladies of Crestview Lane get that house on San Ramon."

"How naughty?" asked Rita.

"I don't know," Paula said. "The women have been renting the house since January, and the neighbors have their suspicions. One of them called me last week." Outside the car window, the coliseum lights glared over the playing field. "It seems the women don't have any jobs that the neighbors can see. They spend a lot of time outdoors picking weeds and mowing their lawn. In skimpy shorts. And at night, men come."

"What did you tell the neighbors?"

"They should be happy that someone is taking care of the yard."

"Real estate isn't as rewarding as teaching, is it?" Rita glanced at her by way of the rear view mirror.

"No. But I'm not sorry I switched. Seven years at any job is enough. Especially seven years of seven-year-olds. I've got five more years in real estate."

"I haven't heard of real estate agent burn-out," said JoAnn.

"Then what will you do," asked Rita, "if your sea captain hasn't come in?"

Paula looked at the lights of the Oakland hills. The Mormon temple emitted triangular patches of light. Last week in testimony meeting, a slightly retarded young man with a sweet, round face said that the temple lights guided to shore lost boats. "I've been thinking," Paula said, "of social work."

She really hadn't been thinking of social work, but that night as she unpacked the lavender dress—it seemed more tactful to donate it to a thrift shop here than in Salt Lake City—she remembered that at the end of each day of teaching, she had felt exhausted, often frustrated, but she never once wondered if it was worth it. Of course maybe the world just seemed more hopeful then. Last year an old boyfriend, Mark, who had just turned thirty-five, said that he figured he had lived half his life already—and even

if it hadn't been great, it had probably been the best half. "I'm going to live longer than thirty-one more years," she had told him, "and my next years are going to be *better* than my last years." It had been disquieting that he had looked neither impressed nor convinced.

The naughty ladies didn't get their loan, but Paula did have one big sale that July—a warehouse in Emeryville to a co-op of artists—and she got the listing for a promising little house in the Berkeley flatlands. She began planning a trip to England. Maybe with a sidetrip to Ireland. Tuesday nights she took an extension course in the Irish novel, a nice break from science fiction. Or was science fiction, she pondered, the break from something else? The Irish novel teacher, a thin, bearded man named John Turnwall, was a great favorite with middle-aged ladies. Am *I* a middle-aged lady? Paula asked herself. She decided not. True middle-aged ladies wore summery skirts and gold jewelry or polyester pants and Reeboks. Paula wore levis and a sweatshirt and munched on peaches while the true middle-aged ladies gathered around the blackboard at break-time and breathed questions at Mr. Turnwall.

"Any interesting people in your lit class?" JoAnn asked after their regular Thursday jog around Lake Merritt and during their regular Thursday salad supper at JoAnn's apartment. "Aside from the hotly-pursued teacher?"

"Three men," said Paula. "Two of them sit on the back row holding hands. Don't ask about the third."

"You've met men in those classes before." There was a hint of accusation in her voice.

"A lot of good it's done me."

"There was Lynn. That lasted a while."

"Yeah," Paula said. "All of February. That's just because he was so shy it took him a whole month to get up the nerve to ask me to sleep over."

"Maybe you should have done it."

"I'd have to turn in my Golden Gleaner pin," she said. JoAnn didn't reply. "Would *you* have done it?"

"Maybe," JoAnn said. "If I loved him, of course."

"Oh," Paula said. "Well, I didn't love Lynn."

"You liked him a lot though. You maybe could have learned to love him."

"Naw. He didn't have—he wasn't dynamic enough. Or something. It just wasn't right."

"Wouldn't bother Rita. *She'd* sleep with him if she just liked him."

"Yeah. Well, you can do that easier if you're a Presbyterian." Paula took the paper napkin JoAnn handed her. "But say you did love someone and he asked you—would you give it all up?"

"It being the church?"

"And all the things that means. The good things. The bad things."

JoAnn looked miserable. "I don't know," she said. "My mother would die. Do you think you could? How about Mark? Do you ever think you were wrong to end that?"

Paula winced a little. "Mark. I thought since he'd been a Mormon once, he'd understand."

"Naw," JoAnn said. "That's why they leave." She squeezed a slice of lemon on her plate of greens and raw mushrooms. "Well, we could hit the Saturday night dances again."

Paula stuck out her tongue. "Want to?"

"No. There's no one there worth having. Who'd have me."

"Hey," said Paula. "Do I perceive that your self-esteem is subsiding?"

"Remind me how wonderful we are."

"We *are* wonderful." Paula rattled the ice cubes in her water and brought her glass down hard on the table. "Maybe the naughty ladies have the answers. You ever think of buying a house?"

"Not on my Macy's salary."

"We maybe could go in together—both give up our apartments."

"I don't know." JoAnn ladled low-cal blue cheese dressing on what was left of her salad. "What would we do if—you know—our lives changed? If we had to split up? Who'd get the house? Besides," she added, "don't you think that would send out the wrong kind of signals?"

"What signals?"

"Well, judging from my experience, that near-extinct breed, single Mormon men, would figure we were too independent, too settled in our ways." She spread her dressing around with her fork. "And eligible non-Mormon men, who aren't in any great supply either, would figure we were gay."

"Hmm." Paula stabbed a chunk of celery. "You might be right."

"I admit there may be exceptions. Some guy who is stone-broke, for example. He probably can't afford such prejudices." JoAnn wiped the dressing out of her salad bowl with her last leaf of lettuce. "Of course, we could invent stories," she said. "Say we're sisters."

"With different last names?"

"Or cousins."

"I though you wanted a relationship based on honesty."

"Maybe that's a prejudice I can't afford," JoAnn said. "I just want a relationship."

Paula held a slice of cucumber on her fork and looked at it. "Want to go on the Sierra Singles hike on Saturday? But we don't hike together."

"Okay. Anyone interesting likely to show up?"

"There are always men," said Paula. "Politically correct men, ecologi-

cally correct men. Of course they may be child abusers, wife abusers, illegal substance abusers. But they vote the right way on wilderness bills."

"What'll I wear?" said JoAnn.

The sun broke through the fog early Saturday. Paula eyed the pickings. I hate this, she thought. Why can't I just come to enjoy the walk and the scenery? The hike leader, a mousy little guy with a fat daypack, was talking about poison oak and rockslides. There were a couple of big guys in Hawaiian shirts and thong sandals. Pass. A corporation lawyer sort who looked at everyone through half-closed eyes. Pass. JoAnn was talking to a woman with a copyright logo on her t-shirt. The hike leader strolled onto the dirt road. Everyone fell in behind him.

Paula felt in her pocket for her Kleenex. Her nose always dribbled when the grass was brown and dry. Just ahead of her, three people walked abreast, two women and a man with a maroon leather hat and a sweatshirt that skidded up in the back. He reminded her a little of Steve, a boyfriend in one of her earlier existences—her student-teacher existence. When the trail narrowed, the man politely let the two women go ahead. The khaki belt below the ragged sweatshirt looked familiar.

"Is that a Boy Scout belt?" Paula asked suddenly.

He turned around and grinned. "Yeah." He had a black beard flecked with grey. "How'd you know?"

"My brother has one," Paula said.

"See the buckle?" He didn't stop as they talked, just turned, took a few sidesteps, and lifted the sweatshirt in front.

"You've got it on upside down," said Paula.

"It's not upside down to me." He looked at the buckle. He grinned again before he turned and picked up his hiking pace.

"Your brother, huh?" he said over his shoulder.

"My brother." She hesitated. "He's on his honeymoon right now, and he probably has his Boy Scout belt with him. Except he wears it right side up."

"Does he have his wife with him too?" He lagged a little behind the two women and let her catch up with him.

"Yeah. They're camping. In Yosemite."

"Where?"

"Tuolumne Meadow, I think."

"I'm Dan," he said, turning and offering his hand.

"I'm Paula." It was strange to shake hands, still moving down the trail. The woman just ahead turned around and eyed them for a moment, then shrugged and walked on.

The group leader blew a whistle, and they stopped in a clearing under two oak trees for lunch. Paula sat on a large rock at the edge of the circle.

Dan leaned back against the rock and slid down to the ground. He squinted up at her and unwrapped his sandwich, a French roll with salami and Swiss cheese and sprouts. "Bon appetit."

"Did you make that?" she asked.

"The deli did it," he admitted. "I'll bet you made yours though."

"How'd you guess?" She pulled the plastic bag off her peanut butter and strawberry jam on whole wheat.

"I love peanut butter," Dan said.

"I love salami," Paula said. "Trade halves?"

He pulled a pocket knife out of his pocket and started sawing. They made the exchange. He looked at her hands. "I can tell this was made by a professional. You ever worked in a grade school cafeteria?" She laughed. "You ever been married?" She noted the lack of transition, but she offered him a carrot stick.

"No," she said. "You?"

"Yeah. Five years. We split up a year and a half ago."

"Kids?"

"No. You? I mean some people do even if they . . .," he started.

"No," she said. "What do you do?"

"You mean for a living?" He spoke through a mouthful of sprouts. "I'm a draftsman for Sears."

She finished her peanut butter half and started on his salami. "You design new stores?"

"Mostly warehouses. What about you?"

"Real estate." Paula glanced across the clearing at JoAnn. She was sitting in a circle with two women and two men. She briefly caught Paula's eye and discreetly nodded.

"You're about twenty-eight then?" Dan asked.

She looked at him. He'd be at least thirty, maybe thirty-five. "About," she said.

She hiked in front of him when the trail was narrow and beside him when it widened. They talked about backpacking in the Sierra and day hiking in Briones. Paula didn't mention that on her last two Sierra backpacking trips, she was herding fifteen-year-old Mormon girls along the trail. Dan would start sentences with "we," then shift hurriedly to "I."

Back at the parking lot, he asked her if she'd like to go out for a beer. "I don't drink beer," she said, "but I'd like to go out. Maybe I could get a ride back to Oakland with you?" She hoped JoAnn wasn't making similar arrangements and counting on her to drive the car back; there, leaning against the trail-head posts, JoAnn was talking to a guy in overalls.

"Sure," Dan said, so eagerly that Paula added, "I shouldn't stay out late though. I've a batch of cousins coming in tomorrow for breakfast, and I've a house to show in the afternoon." She glanced up at him, but he didn't

seem too disappointed. "Let's stop at the Leaning Tower," he said. "We can get a deepdish pesto."

When he dropped her off at the apartment, he wrote down her phone number. He'd probably call, she figured. And then what? She liked him. How long before she should tell him that she was thirty-two, that she didn't have a batch of cousins, that she spent most Sunday mornings at church, and that because of her religious scruples she wasn't likely to sleep with him, this month or next year. Here it was beginning again, another three-date affair. The phone rang. "Well," said JoAnn. "How was he?"

"Nice," Paula settled into her easy chair. "Very nice. How about Mr. Overalls?"

"Well, at least he reads."

"What does he read?" She hung her legs over the chair arm.

"I think he reads the kind of stuff *you* read. Dolphins in space, that sort of thing. Nothing I'd ever heard of. What does *yours* read?"

"You know," Paula said, "I forgot to ask."

Sunday, the bishop took her by the arm and led her into his office. "Sister Rather," he said, "we're grateful for your fine work with the young women in the ward, but I wondered since you haven't got anything to really tie you down, if you'd be interesting in going on a mission? The High Priests' quorum has a missionary fund, so the money wouldn't be any problem."

She tried to cover her gasp, but he saw it. "Sometimes women who are doing the Lord's work are blessed in other ways," he said, looking down at his fat fingers. "My wife's cousin had given up on getting married when she accepted a mission call to serve in Kansas. She hadn't been home more than a month when she met a widower who took her to the temple."

"Let me think about it," Paula said finally. "I guess I should feel flattered that you have that kind of faith in me." She didn't feel the least bit flattered. She shook the bishop's hand. "But don't write any checks yet."

Dan called Monday, and Thursday Paula met him at a waterfront cafe for lunch. They ate shrimp salads and arranged a hike for Saturday after she checked in at the office. "You bring the peanut butter sandwiches. I'll bring the wine," he said.

"Just bring enough for you," she said. "I drink water on the trail. This," she held up her Perrier, "is about as racy as I get."

Walking her to her car, he reached for her hand. "What kind of license plate is this?" he asked, pointing at her front bumper.

"Read it."

"R124C41."

"It's a test. Mean anything to you?"

He scowled.

"Don't feel bad. Only old-time science fiction fans would know. Early story by Hugo Gernsback—'Ralph 124C41'—one to foresee for one. You know, make predictions. I had it put on my plates as a joke."

"Anybody ever get it?"

"Maybe three, four people have stopped me to tell me they did. I've had the plates for almost four years."

He squeezed her hand. "Your equivalent to 'If you love Jesus, honk'?"

"Well," she said, "I guess so."

Instead of peanut butter sandwiches, she brought cold quiche to Saturday's hike, and instead of wine he brought cherry-flavored seltzer water. "I love this place," he said, stretching out against a rock in the shade. "After Chrissy and I split up, I used to come up here by myself. I'd bawl like a baby. Then I'd feel a little better and hike around some more."

Embarrassed a little by his openness and the emotion of her reaction, Paula looked down at her hands.

"You like kids?" he said suddenly.

"Yes."

"Me too. But I don't know if I could bring kids into this world."

He might be talked into children, Paula thought. "I taught for seven years," she said. "Second grade."

"Really? Did you like it?"

"I loved it. But it wore me out."

"Is that why you stopped?"

"No." She wound some grass strands around her finger. "I was afraid of getting in a rut. I didn't want to spend too long doing the same thing. I didn't want my whole life to have passed while I tacked pictures to the walls at Emerson Elementary. I wanted to start over." She looked up at him. "Does that make sense?"

"I think so." He slid over, closer to her. "But what you're doing now, is it very"—he sought the word—"fulfilling?"

"Not like teaching. But I have time now to think. If work is too fulfilling, you don't always have time or energy to appreciate it."

"It shouldn't be that way." He brushed her cheek with a grass stalk.

"Is your work—fulfilling?"

"Well, yeah, in a way. I mean, I like drafting plans. I'd like it more if I could be more innovative. Or maybe if I felt the buildings would be used for some great humanitarian purpose. I always wanted to be the guy who could talk people out of jumping off bridges and buildings instead of the guy who built stuff."

"How would you do it? How would you talk somebody out of jumping?"

"I don't know exactly. I mean it would depend on the person. You haven't ever been tempted to jump off a roof, have you?"

"Only when I was about five and thought if I wished hard enough I could fly."

He smiled. "Did you dream that too? I thought I was the only one who dreamt that!"

"I used to say a little spell," she confessed, "something I got out of one of my books. Sometimes I would ask that I could fly. Sometimes I wanted to be tiny and invisible. It was like a prayer."

"Did you pray?"

"Well, yes," she said. "And I might have mixed up the prayers and the magic spells. I think the religious things and the fantasy things all spoke to the same part of me."

"Any particular religion?"

"I was raised a Mormon."

He didn't react. "And when you stopped believing in Santa Claus, did you stop believing in Jesus Christ?"

"Ah," she breathed. "I still believe in everybody!"

"I think I believed in Christ—till my dad died. That was when I was sixteen. Your folks both still alive?"

"Yes."

"And then Chrissy—it's hard to have faith that some deity, something nonmaterial, cares for you when you're convinced no one *real* does."

"You couldn't think *no* one cared."

"That's what you think when the one who matters most stops caring. You know. You've had long-term relationships with guys." He said it rather than asked it.

"I guess so." She opened the lunch sack and offered him a plum. "Sometimes two people understand different things about the same relationship."

He looked up questioningly. "You've lived with someone before?"

"No." She said it as lightly as she was able.

"But seen the same person over a period of time."

A period of time. "Yes, of course." She held her own plum in both hands, fondling it without raising it to her mouth.

"Do you *want* a long-term relationship?" His voice sounded a little urgent.

"I can't think of that question abstractly. If there is a man I want to be with, then I want a long-term relationship." She let out a breath of air. Here, she thought, we go again.

"But you think that you might not want to be with one person a long time."

"I didn't say that. I think I would."

"How old are you?" He started counting on his fingers. "You taught seven years . . ."

Paula took another breath. "Thirty-two," she said.

"And you've never really committed yourself to a man?"

"No man has really committed himself to me." She pressed more firmly on the plum.

"Oh come on. You're an attractive woman, warm, bright." He lay his plum on the ground. "You aren't afraid of men, are you?"

Paula gave an insincere little laugh. "Only some men. I need to move a little more slowly than some people do in friendships."

He touched his hands together. At least he didn't say, "Baby, you don't have a lot of time left." What he said was, "I'm asking because I'm looking for a long-term relationship. I hate this dating crap. I don't want to waste someone else's time, and I don't want to waste my time."

Paula gave a little sigh, sincere this time. "Look," she said. "Maybe you ought to know something about me. I told you I was raised a Mormon. That means a lot of things. That means I can't," she changed her mind, "won't," she paused, "sleep," she searched for the words again, "with just anyone," she finished lamely, and bit into her now warm plum.

"Well of course not with just anyone," said Dan. "But with someone you felt serious about?"

"Probably not."

"Not ever?"

She shook her head. "If I marry," she whispered.

"Marry," he repeated and stared at her. He stood up. "You mean you're a virgin? A thirty-two-year-old virgin?"

She looked up at him. "That's right," she said. She felt suddenly defiant and wished she'd said it more emphatically.

"Really?" He crouched down and squashed his plum with one knee. He looked at it but seemed not to notice. "Really?" he said again.

"A vanishing species," she said and handed him a paper towel. She stood up. "Pardon me while I vanish."

Dan dabbed at the plum on his levis. "I guess I don't know many women who have religious backgrounds that interfere with their sexual lives."

"No," she said. "You probably don't."

"I mean, I grew up in St. Louis and there are a lot of Catholics there, but they acted just like anyone else when it came to—you know."

"I know."

"You're serious." He put one arm through his daypack strap. "You're really serious, aren't you?"

She nodded. They hiked back in silence. She felt a familiar resignation.

When they got to the car, he turned around. "You knew how you were," he said. "Why did you come out with me?"

Paula shrugged. "I didn't know how *you* were," she said.

"Yeah, but you musta known that I'd probably want to—pursue this," he said delicately.

She shrugged again. "Beyond all common reason," she said, "I continue to have hope."

England was supposed to be especially nice in September. Paula closed her eyes and leaned against the seat back. When she'd been a teacher, she couldn't take vacations in the fall. At the baggage check-in, she'd asked for the window seat, but was told she was lucky they still had one on the aisle. Across that aisle were an old lady and a very, very old lady. Probably mother and daughter. Maybe someday she'd be traveling with her widowed mother. They'd live together like two old maids. But her mother, of course, was *not* an old maid. Her mother had fulfilled woman's destiny and had given birth and nurtured children. Whatever happened to that old card game anyway, Old Maid? She supposed the feminists had drummed it off the shelves and tables of America. Even her bishop referred to "mature single women" when she had told him last week she wasn't ready yet for the kind of mission he proposed.

Next to her a small fat child of indeterminate sex was sleeping, propped up against a fat sleeping woman who had pulled down the window shade and was leaning against it. It was early morning and she guessed the plane was somewhere over Nevada. She would stop in Chicago, then switch in New York to a cheap flight to London. Two off-duty stewardesses were sitting in front of her and chattering about flights and housemates and boyfriends. "The weather was awful," said the one in the aisle seat. "No tanning in Tulsa."

Paula massaged her temples with the thumb and ring finger of her left hand. She had a packet of brochures about what to see in the Lake District. She'd have to stop in Lancaster, the town her great-great-grandparents left in 1863. She wanted to see castles and cathedrals. "Maybe you'll meet someone interesting," JoAnn had said just two hours ago as she left her at the curb at the airport. She didn't tell JoAnn that in her wallet she had a square of paper she'd cut out from Tony and Sug's last letter. "Be sure to look up Andrew," it said. "He's younger than Ned and not as cute, but he's probably really lonesome for some good American talk." The address was an Oxford one. Despite herself Paula was impressed.

She ran her fingers over the cover of her new paperback. The letters and pictures were raised like braille. A massive structure rose out of what seemed to be an airfield. Elevated roads or runways jutted out at odd

angles, and sleek spacecraft sailed in different directions. Perhaps it was a giant vertical spaceport. In a few minutes she'd start reading and find out.

But for now she slid down into the seat and closed her eyes. The child next to her whimpered and then fell silent. It was going to be a very long day, Paula thought. She'd be grateful if at the end of it there were a clean bed and nonallergenic pillows and gentle dreams.