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We were going to be flying to the carrier from the US Navy base in Bahrain on a Grumman C-2A Greyhound: an ungainly propeller plane, more war- or work-horse than greyhound. There was nothing sleek or speedy about it. The sky was doing what it always did at this time: waiting for the sun to show up. The sun is the only thing that happens to the sky in this part of the world—that and the stars which were nowhere to be seen. The temperature was pleasant; a few hours from now it would be infernal. Sixteen passengers, all Navy except for me and the snapper, gathered round the back of the Greyhound—also known as a COD (Carrier Onboard Delivery)—listening to the safety briefing. Our luggage had been weighed and taken away for loading. Despite my protests, I had to hand over my computer bag as well, something I'd never let happen before. It had to be stowed because when we landed on the carrier, when the plane touched down and hooked the arresting wire, we would go from 140 mph to 0 mph in a couple of seconds: the trap, the first of many words that I heard for the first time, or rather the first of many times that I heard a familiar word used in a completely new way. I knew what the trap referred and pertained to—the hook, the arresting wire—but was unsure how to use it. Did we *make* the trap? *Hit* the trap? *Come in for* the trap? The trap: it existed in isolation from other words, abruptly and permanently arrested from the normal momentum of syntax.

Then there was the word 'cranial': in this context not an adjective (as in massage) but a noun referring to the head-, ear- and eye-protectors that were handed out for the flight. Unnoticed, I noticed now, the sky had brightened from grey to

blue. We put on our float coats, carried our cranials and filed onto the plane. There were two seats on either side of the aisle—all facing backwards—and two windows on either side of the fuselage, each the size of a dinner plate. It was not the sort of environment in which one could complain about the lack of leg room, though that was one of the striking features of this aircraft. Others were fumes and noise.

The ramp we'd walked up winched itself closed and sealed us in. Further safety checks were made. This involved shining a torch as though to see if there were holes in the fuselage. There must have been more to it than that but holes in a fuselage are good things to check for, obviously. The woman who made these checks was the military equivalent of a flight attendant. She was wearing a sand-coloured flight suit, looked as tough as a woman in an Annie Proulx story. There was nothing of the trolley dolly—nothing 'Chicken or beef?' or 'Doors to manual'—about her, but when she sat down in front of me, prior to take-off, I saw that her hair had been plaited and pinned into a tight bun on the back of her head. The Navy allowed women to keep their hair long. I wasn't surprised, exactly, just pleased that's how things were.

We were not taxiing but a noisy increase in power had taken place and the noise was deafening. I'd thought the noise was deafening when we'd first boarded but back then I didn't know anything about noise or deafeningness. It sounded like the flight of the *Phoenix*. Felt like it too—even though we were not actually moving, let alone flying. This was the moment, evidently, to put on my ear-pinching cranial. Having done that I sat there, strapped tight, struck by the undisguised use of the rivet in the seat in front. Everything in the plane was ripped, scuffed, scratched, stripped. Tubes, pipes, cables and superstructure were all laid bare. Commercial passenger planes from the world's poorest countries outdid this one when it came to frills; even to compare this plane to anything in the fleets of the budget airlines

of the West would give a distorting impression of luxury. Passenger comfort was not a factor in any part of the design process.

Having worked itself up to a state of unstoppable intensity the plane accelerated along a runway for so long it seemed that we were attempting the logically impossible: driving overland to the carrier. At last the ground—glimpsed, through the window just behind and to my left—dropped away. We flew over a blur of Gulf but it was neck-achingly awkward, craning backwards to look through the porthole, so I reverted to sitting tight in this silently noisy, vibrating, heavily laden tube, studying rivet patterns.

After forty minutes the bumpy ride became jumpier still as we descended, bucking the bronco air. There was a stomach-draining lurch and heave. We were land—no we weren't! The flight attendant's arm came up in a spiralling lasso gesture to indicate that we had missed the arresting wire and were bolting: going up and around again.

We circled and tilted round, descended again. This time we thumped down and came to a dead stop. Instantly. It was sudden, but not as violent as I'd expected and feared—possibly because we were facing backwards and so were forced into our seats rather than thrown forward and out of them.

The ramp-hatch at the back of the plane was lowered to reveal that we had landed on another world—albeit a world with the same pure blue sky as the one we had left. Rotating radars, an American flag, the island (another old-new word, referring to the bridge and assorted flight-ops rooms rising in a stack from one side of the deck: an island on the island of the carrier). The hatch continued to inch its way down, revealing the flight deck itself, populated by vizor-faced beings in red, green, white, yellow jerseys and float coats. Parked jets—F-18s—and helicopters.

We were here. We had arrived on carrier-world.

I have never known anything like the suddenness of this change. Compare it with the experience of flying from London and landing in Bombay—from freezing winter to eighty-degree heat—at two in the morning in January. Even a change as dramatic as that is gradual: a nine-hour flight; a long and slow descent; taxiing round the airport to the gate; immigration, baggage claim, leaving the terminal. Typically it's an hour and a half before you find yourself out in the Indian night with its smell of wood smoke and the sense of vast numbers of people still asleep. Whereas here, one moment we were travelling at 140 mph and the next we had stopped, the hatch opened and we had entered another world with its own rules, cultures, norms and purposes.

The black-vizored people were either looking our way or scurrying, or lounging or gesturing. Three, in white jerseys and float coats, stepped onto the ramp and told us to follow in single file. They must have been yelling because we stepped out into a silent world—I had not realized until now how effectively the cranials' ear protection worked—in which steam curled and floated along part of the deck. The air was heavy with the smell of jet fuel. Heat blared from the sky and bounced up off the deck. Three more cranial-headed guys in brown jerseys and trousers were swathed in heavy chains like mechanics in the Middle Ages, in charge of a siege engine. We wanted to dawdle but had entered a dawdle-less and urgent world where you do what you are told which was to walk single file to the catwalk at the edge of the deck and then down the steps to the Air Transfer Office (ATO). Already crowded with people preparing to depart, it was soon full to the brim with those who had just arrived.

Ensign Paul Newell, who would be chaperoning us around the boat, squeezed into the room and introduced himself. Always nice to be greeted in an alien world! Especially when the greeter is as friendly, smiling and welcoming as Paul. It was like being met at a resort, conveniently located right under the local

airport, with a welcome drink and a garland of flowers to hang around your neck—except there were neither drinks nor garlands. He was wearing a white jersey and sporting something that I would come to recognize as a not uncommon feature of life on the carrier: a form of moustache that has become almost entirely extinct in civilian life. Not an obsolete RAF handlebar extravaganza, just a little under-the-nose, over-the-lip number that had no desire to take itself seriously, that spent most of its time in a state of discreet embarrassment at the mere fact of its continued if meagre existence.

We were ready to go—but we were not ready to go. I had been making notes on the Greyhound and rather than hanging on to my notebook had obediently handed it over to the flight attendant who, as we were about to begin that aborted first descent, chucked it into a kit bag with stuff from other passengers. And it had gone missing. So Paul had to set off on a stationery search and rescue. Why hadn't I just crammed it in my pocket? Because I did as I was told. But by doing as I was told I displayed a lack of initiative which was now delaying—possibly even jeopardizing—the mission.

The other new arrivals were taken to their quarters and those leaving the carrier were escorted onto the flight deck. By the time Paul returned, the snapper and I were the only people left.

'This is all there was,' said Paul. He was holding not a sturdy Moleskine notebook of the type allegedly used and mythologized by Chatwin and Hemingway but a flimsy school exercise book with a green cover and some kiddie's scrawl on the inside pages.

'That's it!' I said, glad to have my vocational identity re-established.

Now we *were* ready to go. Which meant we were ready to begin traipsing through endless walkways, hatches and doorways, some raised up a few inches (knee-knockers), some at floor level. It was like a tunnel of mirrors, and the snapper, natu-

rally, was keen to get a shot of this infinite corridor. That would have to wait. Every ten feet there was one of these open hatches and there was always someone either standing aside for us to go through or walking through as we stood aside—the former, usually. Being a civilian and therefore without rank meant that I was treated as though I outranked everyone. This willingness to step aside, to let me pass, was a demonstration, at the level of courtesy, of a larger point: they were willing to lay down their lives for me, for us. Had the order come to abandon ship I would have been escorted, firmly and courteously, to the first available lifeboat *because I was a civilian*. As well as people stepping aside—one of them with a healing cut across the bridge of his nose and the remains of a black eye—there were always people cleaning. Everywhere you went, down every walkway and stairwell, sailors were washing, wiping, rinsing, dusting, sweeping, scrubbing, brushing, buffing, polishing, shining.

Personally, I spent the rest of my time on the carrier ducking and diving or, more exactly, ducking and stooping. I walked the walkways and stoop-ducked through hatches, always focused on a single ambition: not to smash my head even though there was an opportunity to do so every couple of seconds. It was like staying in a cottage in Wales that had been epically extended and converted to nuclear power. Every time I pulled myself up to full height I was at risk. So I bobbed and weaved, ducked and stooped.

The older one gets the more obvious it becomes that the advantages of being short in this little life greatly outweigh the mythic benefits of being tall. In exchange for a slight edge when serving at tennis and being attractive to tall women (or so we delude ourselves) we spend our time folding our limbs into cars and planes and generally smashing our brains out. My fourteen days on the boat were the stoopingest I have ever spent, fourteen days that rendered the Alexander Technique obsolete, and made nonsense of the idea of good posture. I was on the look-

out, right from the start, for other tall men with whom I could bond. Was I the tallest person on the boat? (Did the Navy have a maximum height requirement the way the police or the Army had a minimum one? If so was this ceiling height reduced further in the notoriously cramped conditions of a submarine?)

After five minutes of knee-knock and stoop-walk we arrived at my stateroom. Note the possessive pronoun. Not 'our', 'my'; singular, not plural. *I* was taken to *my* room. The idea of sharing a room had so filled me with dread that, right from the start, I had been lobbying for solitary confinement. That would not be possible, I was told: the snapper and I would share a room with Ensign Newell and three other officers. Six in a room! But we writers need a room of one's own, I claimed, trusting that any grammatical damage would be more than offset—in the eyes of the Navy—by the Virginia Woolf allusion. I like to write at night, I went on, and the sound of my typing would disturb other people. No need to worry about that, came the jaunty response. With jets taking off and landing you become adept at filtering out noise, so a bit of tapping won't disturb anyone. It's not just the typing, I replied (via the mediators who were arranging my stay on the boat). My prostate is shot to hell. I need to pee at least twice a night. What he needs to understand, came the Navy's reply, is that space is extremely limited. Enlisted men and women are in berths of up to two hundred so to be in a room for six is an enormous privilege. What they need to understand, I replied, is that I'm too old to share. I'll go nuts if I have to share. I grew up with no brothers and no sisters. I am constitutionally incapable of sharing. My wife complains about it all the time, I said. Basically, only the Captain and a few other people in positions of high command have their own rooms, came the stern rebuke. Well, maybe I could take the Captain's room and he could move in with Newell and the boys for a fortnight, you know, reconnect with the masses, I emailed back (to my mediator, not intending this to go any further). As the time

for my deployment drew near I tried to reconcile myself to the inevitability of sharing a room—I even bought a pair of striped pyjamas—but found it impossible to do so.

Imagine my relief, then, when I was shown to the Vice-Presidential Room in a special little VIP corridor of ‘guest suites’. I had got my own room through sheer determination and force of will. I had taken on the might of the US Navy and won. Newell escorted the snapper to their shared quarters, said they’d be back in fifteen minutes, but I didn’t give a toss about the snapper: he could have been sleeping out in the open, under the stars on the flight deck, for all I cared. The important thing was that he wasn’t sleeping here, with me, even though there was a spare bunk (or rack, as they say in the Navy). That would have been the worst outcome of all: sharing with the snapper, or any *one* for that matter. Sharing a room with one person is worse than sharing with six and sharing with six is in some ways worse than sharing with sixty. But to be here on one’s own . . . to have this lovely little room—with a desk, a comfy chair, a basin (for washing in and peeing in at night) and a copy of George Bush Sr.’s daughter’s memoir of her dad—was bliss. There was even a thick towelling robe—jeez, it was practically the honeymoon suite, a place where a man could devote himself single-handedly to the maritime art of masturbation.

There was one small problem and it became obvious when I’d been in the room for about three minutes. The crash and thunder of jets taking off. Good God! A roar, a crash and then the massive sound of the catapult rewinding itself or whatever it did. The most irritating noise in my street in London is an occasional leaf-blower. You know how loud—how maddening—that is? The noise here made a leaf-blower sound like leaves in a breeze, the kind of ambient CD played during a crystal-healing or reiki session. This was like a train rumbling overhead. It was nothing like a train rumbling overhead; it was like a jet taking off overhead—or *in* one’s head. It was a noise beyond

metaphor. Anything other than what it actually was diminished what it was. It was inconceivably noisy but the noise of jets taking off was as nothing compared with the noise of jets *landing*. I thought the ceiling was going to come in. And then there was the shock of the arresting gear doing its business, so that the initial wallop and roar overhead was followed by a massive ratcheting jolt that tore through the whole ship. I knew I was one floor down, directly below the flight deck, and although I wasn't able to work out exactly which noise meant what it seemed that my room was precisely underneath the spot where most planes hit the deck.

How was I ever going to get a night's sleep? Especially since—as Newell explained when he and the snapper came back—this went on all night. I would be here two weeks. I would not get a minute's sleep. Was it the same where they were? No, they were two floors down, Newell said. You could still hear the jets but it wasn't anything like as noisy as here. We were yelling at the top of our voices, not quarrelling, just trying to make ourselves heard.

'And this goes on all night?' I yelled, repeating as a question what I'd just been told.

'Round the clock. It's an aircraft carrier. We're sort of in the business of flying aircraft.'

'Is there still a spare bunk in your room?' I said, not knowing if I was joking. I was torn between relief at having my own room and anxiety about what having my own room entailed.

'You'll get used to it,' said Newell. That's where you're wrong, I wanted to yell back. The essence of my character is an inability to get used to things. This, in fact, is the one thing I *have* grown accustomed to: an inability to get used to things. As soon as I hear that there's something to get used to I know that I won't; I sort of pledge myself to not getting used to it. There wasn't time to yell all this; we had to complete a bunch of forms because, like a man driven mad by people in the apartment upstairs

playing thrash metal, I was going right back up to the source of the racket, to the flight deck.

With the paperwork taken care of we stopped off for a safety briefing at the empty ATO—the ATO shack as it was always known—where we were handed cranials and float coats again. The shaven-headed duty officer showed us a plan of the deck, emphasized the importance of sticking close to our escorts, of doing exactly what—and going exactly where—we were told. All pockets were to be buttoned or zippered shut. No loose bits and pieces that could fly away. I could use a notebook and pen but had to make sure that I was holding on to them firmly, not pulling them in and out of my pocket the whole time. And watch out for things you can trip over—there are plenty of them. Any questions?

Loads! But there was no time to ask them. We trooped back up the narrow stairs to the catwalk and were back in the silent world of the flight deck. The empty sea glittered like a brochure ('Ever Dreamed of Holidaying on an Aircraft Carrier?'). The sky was a blue blue, greasy with the reek of fuel (something the tour operators didn't publicize). And there was something dreamlike about it: the cranial silence, for one thing, gave the visual—already heightened by the pristine light—an added sharpness. It wasn't just that the aircraft carrier was another world—the flight deck was a world apart from the rest of the carrier. And everything that happened elsewhere on the carrier had meaning and importance only in terms of what was happening here. Take away the flight deck and the planes and all you've got is a very big boat.

There was a lot to take in—or not to be able to take in. Like the size of the flight deck. How big was it? Impossible to say. It was as big as it was. There was nothing to compare it with. Well, there were people and jets and tons of other equipment,

but there was nothing bigger than it—except the sea and sky which always serve to emphasize the lack of everything else. So in tangible, physical terms the carrier was the world and, as such, was all that was the case.

I was not the first writer ever to set foot on an aircraft carrier. One of my predecessors had been hauled up by a sharp-eyed editor for fiddling his expenses. Such things are not unheard of in journalism but this time the editor had him banged to rights: claiming taxi fares during the period when he'd actually been on board the carrier.

'I know,' said the journalist. 'But have you seen the *size* of these things?'

I'd heard another story, about two brothers working in different sections of the same carrier who didn't set eyes on each other during the seven months of their deployment. It didn't matter whether stories like these were factually correct: the truth to which they attest is that carriers are *big*. Big as small towns. Big enough to generate stories about how big they are.

The flight deck is not only big; it is also overwhelmingly horizontal. That's what the carrier has to be: a pure and undisturbed length of horizontality, one that remains that way whatever the sea pitches at it.

The teams in their colour-coded jerseys and float coats reminded me of a time I'd visited the Chicago Stock Exchange with the traders in their colour-coordinated blazers on the dealing floor, all gesturing and clamouring in a repeated daily ritual that made perfect sense, the consequences of which were potentially catastrophic. Here too the functions of each team were clearly differentiated from one another according to a colour code I did not yet understand—except for the brown shirts. We were on one of the most technologically advanced places on earth but the guys in grease-smearred brown jerseys and float coats, draped with heavy brown chains, looked like they were ready to face the burning oil poured on them from the walls

of an impregnable castle. The combination of medieval (chains) and sci-fi (cranials and dark vizors) didn't quite cover it, though; there was also an element of the biker gang about them. All things considered, theirs was one of the toughest, roughest looks going. No wonder they stood there lounging with the grace of heavy gun-slingers about to sway into a saloon. Every gesture was determined by having to move in this underwater weight of chain. I couldn't keep my eyes off them. They weren't posing. But in this silent world everyone is looking at everyone else the whole time, all communication is visual, so you're conscious, if you're a guy with a load of chains hanging from your shoulders like an ammo belt, that you're the fulfilment of some kind of fantasy—not a sexual one, more like a fantasy of evolution itself. And they weren't swaggering; there was just the grace that comes from having to minimize effort if a task is to be properly done, especially if a good part of that task involves standing around waiting with all that weight on your shoulders.

The air was an ecological disaster. It was hot anyway, and the heat reared up from the deck, dense with the fumes of jet fuel. Whenever a jet manoeuvred towards the catapults or back to its parking slot or to the elevator there was a wash of super-heated wind, like Death Valley with an oil-gale blowing through it. We were in the middle of the sea and it smelled like a garage with fifty thousand cars in it, each suffering a major fuel leak.

Critics argue that the First Gulf War and the invasion of Iraq were all about America's insatiable need for oil. What did we need this oil for? To sustain our presence here, to keep flying missions. The whole enterprise reeked of oil. Planes were taking off. The fact that cranials insulated us from the ear- and sky-splitting noise emphasized the tremendous forces at work. There was an acute sense of thousands of years of history and refinement—the refinement of the urge to make war and the need for oil in order to do so—converging here.

The purpose of an aircraft carrier is to carry aircraft. Launch-

ing and recovering planes is, as Newell had drily pointed out, the name of the game. As a plane prepared to take off, a woman in a green jersey, perched on the edge of a kind of manhole, signalled to other members of the ground crew. Others in green and red signalled to each other with absolute clarity. Everyone was in contact, visually, with everyone else but the jets were the centre of attention, and the pilots flew the jets. All eyes were on the jets. The pilot was the observed of all observers. There was no room for anything even slightly ambiguous. There was a guy near the front of the aircraft, keeping low, making sure he didn't get sucked into the jet intake, and two other guys almost behind the wings—the final checkers—each crouched down on the heel of one foot with the other leg stretched out in front, also keeping low, making sure they weren't hit by the jet blast. How Pina Bausch would have loved to have gotten her hands on this scene! And thank God she didn't! (Same with Claire Denis whose film *Chocolat* ends with a lovely sequence of the gestural language of African baggage handlers and whose *Beau Travail* gazes longingly at the bodies and ballet of soldiers in the French Foreign Legion.) For the beauty of this performance was inseparable from its setting and function. The elaborate, hypnotic choreography on display was devoted entirely to safety, to the safe unleashing of extreme violence. Violence not just in terms of what happened hundreds or thousands of miles away where the planes were headed, but here, where the immense forces required for launch were kept under simmering control.

Up until a certain point a plane can be touched by members of the ground crew. Then the JBD (Jet Blast Deflector) comes up behind the plane. The plane goes to full power—it is only now that one appreciates that the plane, prior to this moment, has been idling, dawdling. The wing flaps are jiggled. Final checks. Thumbs-up between the pilot and the last two members of the ground crew who scurry away, staying low. The plane is flung forward and in seconds is curving away from the end of the car-

rier, over the sea. In its wake there is a wash of steam from the catapult tracks. After a few moments the catapult shuttle comes back like a singed hare at a greyhound race. A minute later another plane from a neighbouring catapult blasts into the sky.

With the first part of the launch and recovery cycle completed there was an interlude of quietness, though even during the busiest times there had been a lot of hanging about; at least one of the coloured-castes of crew were lounging about in a state of relaxed alertness. John Updike asks, in one of his books about art, if there is such a thing as an American face. I don't know, but looking at the guys on the flight deck, unfaced by cranials and vizors, persuaded me that there is such a thing as an American walk. Even overweight cops have it: an ease and grace, a subdued swagger. It used to be identified mainly with race—a black thing—but now it seems a cultural and national quality.

Through the dazed silence we walked towards the stern of the boat to better observe the planes landing, past the side of the island where a sign warned, quite reasonably:

BEWARE OF  
JET BLAST  
PROPELLERS  
AND ROTORS

All of which were gathered here in great abundance. Over this warning, like the sign of a giant casino, was the white number 77. There was much to see, lots of it on an enormous scale—but my escort was always tapping me on the shoulder, pointing to hoses, pipes, hooks, chains and other small things that could be tripped over.

We could see the planes high up in the blue distance, plane-shaped specks coming round in an immense circle. As they approached the carrier their wings were all the time tilting slightly, first one way and then the other, adjusting, compen-

sating. Three arresting wires—thick as rope but thin and wiry in this context—were stretched across the rear of the deck. On the port side of the boat, very near the back, the landing signal officers—all pilots themselves—communicated detailed refinements of approach to the pilot.

The planes thump down and then, rather than slowing down—as one might reasonably expect—immediately accelerate to full power in case they miss all of the arresting wires and need to go round again, as had happened to us on the *Greyhound*: a bolter, in the argot. If the hook catches then the arresting wire snakes out in a long V and brings the plane to a halt. The dangers of the operation are numerous and evident. The plane can crash into the back of the ship, slide off to port and into the sea or—worse—slide starboard into the island, people, tow trucks and other parked planes. Every variety of mishap was featured in a book I'd been looking through on the flight to Bahrain: *Clear the Deck! Aircraft Carrier Accidents of World War II*. Unused missiles would shake loose from under wings and be launched into the island. The force of the landing would be so great that a plane already damaged by gunfire would break in two, the back half snagged by the arresting wire while the front part barrelled on down the flight deck. In the worst crashes the plane would become an instant fireball but—and this is what rendered the book engrossing rather than simply horrific—it was often impossible to tell what would happen to the pilot. The plane comes crashing down and, amid the flames, the pilot scrambles out of the cockpit and rolls down a wing to safety. The plane smashes into pieces and the pilot walks away, shaken but otherwise unhurt. But a relatively innocuous-looking crash results in his being killed instantly, still strapped to his seat.

The metaphor that kept coming up in pilots' accounts was that landing on a carrier was like trying to land on a postage stamp (one of the guys I met later on the carrier would use exactly that phrase). Which takes some doing, of course, but if

it's daylight, with a steady wind, perfect visibility and the sea flat as a pond it looks fairly routine. But then you throw in some variables: a storm, cross-winds, rain and pitching seas so that looking through the Plexiglas of the cockpit is like being on a trawler in the North Sea. Or maybe one engine's gone. Or both engines are gone. Or you're blinded by gunfire, unable to see anything, taking instructions from a plane on your wing and the LSO, nobody raising their voices, just 'Right rudder, right rudder'—until the last moment when the LSO shouts, 'Attitude, attitude, attitude!'

You can see footage of this stuff, along with a lot more escapes and disasters—recent and vintage—on YouTube. A plane that seems on the brink of stalling, almost vertically, right over the carrier, somehow takes wing again. A malfunction means the navigator has partially ejected and so the pilot has to bring the plane in with his colleague riding on the remains of the cockpit as if at a rodeo. Hearing the LSO yell, 'Eject! Eject! Eject!', pilot and navigator obey instantly, only to see their plane gather speed and fly gamely into the distance like a horse whose jockey has fallen at Becher's Brook.

If all goes as planned, the plane comes to a halt, the tail hook is raised, the arresting wire is released and comes snaking back, helped on its way by crew members who prod it along with brooms to discourage it from even thinking of taking a break. Within seconds it's back in place, kinked and quivering somewhat from the strain of its existence—understandable in the circumstances—but otherwise ready for the next tug of war with an F-18.