

"Unexpected date at 45,000 Ft" or "Those California Girls"

I have had a fascination with the state of California since the age of about 7. Now, I've never stepped foot in the Golden State, but have always felt this pull towards it. Not exactly sure why, it might have been a television show I watched as a child or perhaps a story I read, but somehow California has always held a special place in my heart. As I grew older, one place in particular drew my attention, Santa Barbara, again there doesn't seem to be a specific reason that I can think of and I want to relate a story about life and coincidences. Some 20 years ago I was flying back from a business trip in Europe and as the company I was working for at the time was pretty cheap, I ended up sitting in the middle seat of the middle aisle. As we settled in I was stowing my smaller carry-on bag under the seat in front of me, in which I would carry something to read, gum, a snack and at the time my iPod. In any case, all of a sudden i'm bumped on my left shoulder, but I was looking away and as these things often happen, chose to ignore it, then it happened again and since at that particular time no one was sitting to my right, I shifted a bit in that direction, still looking away from the person in question. Then I was bumped again, at this point I had had quite enough and turned around to expect to see someone's back turned to me, but instead was greeted by a pair of pretty bare feet standing on the seat next to me and two beautiful legs rising up to a pair of rather tight shorts and then, feeling my presence looking up at her, this young attractive woman looked down, her attention being taken away from adjusting her carry-on in the overhead compartment, she said an enthusiastic "hi" and gave me the most beautiful smile framed by a mane of dark hair. At that moment I had turned around and was ready to give this person a mouthful, but the wind was literally knocked out of me and I was completely reticent. She had realized that, in her distraction, she had been bumping me with her knees and she excused herself, sat down and introduced herself. Laurel Kunzel, I still remember her name after all these years, first because I found her first name rather unusual, as I associated it more with half of a famous comedy duo than the beautiful young woman sitting next to me and secondly I had always associated her family name to a classical music conductor. She introduced me to her friend, whose last name was McFadden, again a name that struck me as it's the last name of an actress

who portrayed Dr. Beverly Crusher on Star Trek, one of my all-time favorite shows. In any case, they were both from Santa Barbara, CA and were going home after a European tour. Unfortunately her friend was not feeling very well and they had already arranged to meet a doctor in NY when we landed. So while her friend slept comfortably for most of the flight, Laurel and I had a wonderful conversation about life, the Universe and everything. We even went on an unexpected date of sorts as we settled in and watched the in-flight movie, The Proposal with Sandra Bullock and Ryan Reynolds and I remember as the credits rolled at the end, I quipped with her that I hope no one tried to leave the movie theater. It was a rather surreal moment as, so as not to bother her dozing friend, she had leaned in towards me and since I had someone to my right who kept leaning on me as they dozed off, we ended up leaning in towards each other. In that moment, in the darkness of the airplane, far above the Atlantic ocean it was as if time itself had stood still. I wanted to capture that moment and put it in a bottle. Don't get me wrong, I had a girlfriend back home who I loved and would never have dreamt of cheating on her, but in that airplane, unbeknownst to the world, it was a short magical moment for me with a young woman from Santa Barbara, I shall never ever forget it or forget her. I have never spoken or contacted her since and I did find her several years ago on Facebook and found out she was a garden designer based in LA.

Fast forward some ten years after that and California would enter my life again, but in a more bittersweet way. I read a very emotional autobiographical book by Neil Peart, famed drummer of my favorite rock group RUSH. In it he recounts the tragic story of the loss of his daughter Selena at 21 in a car accident and his wife Jacqueline, who succumbed to cancer 10 months later. Devastated and not knowing what to do with his life, he decided to hop on his motorcycle and traverse Canada and the USA several times. At the end of the novel he finds himself standing on a pier overlooking the Pacific, where might you ask? Santa Monica, California, where else. He had been introduced to a photographer, Carrie Nuttal, through some mutual friends and they wed a few years later. Unfortunately, Neil passed away in California back in January of 2019. So you see California has often crept into my life in one way or another and I have vowed that I will place my foot on its soil one day, my mother has often joked that if I ever get to California, I'll never come home, she may be right about that!

Stefano

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