

THE WEATHER GIRL

When I board the plane, the stewardess looks at me like I'm some kind of freak. She leads me through to the business class booths with the delicacy and care one might give to an explosive device that has somehow learned to walk around on its own, and hurries off before I can open my mouth to ask her a question. I pull off my raincoat and unlace my boots, kicking them both into the little locker under the unit in front of me. I wait patiently for take-off, which is delayed over and over again. Still, that's not surprising, when you consider who the pilot has on board. My minder leaves me alone. If you didn't know he was there for me, you'd never guess we were travelling together.

I haven't flown before. I never liked the idea of being trapped in a comparatively thin metal cylinder, hurtling through the air with no more right to stay airborne than a wet bumblebee. I push my earphones in to block the whispering of the other passengers. They know why we're delayed. Some of them even recognise me. I ignore them. I've been awake for thirty six hours, and I won't be able to relax until we get to LA. I want to smoke.

I close my eyes. Crowded House tell me that you can fight the sleep but not the dream. I'd welcome a dream right now. A crack of thunder outside the plane makes one of the other passengers shriek with alarm, and my eyes flick open again, trying to work out who it was. Thunder and lightning don't wake me up any more, but people put me on edge. People just don't like me. The nicer ones say stupid things: they ask me 'have you tried turning it off?' like it's the funniest thing ever. Because I've never heard that. Never. Honest. I've had three attempts on my life since I was nine years old, all because of what I am. Not like Mister Sunshine. He gets all the good press. No one ever stops to think how he causes droughts and crop failures if he stays in one place for long. Last year, he got paid a six figure sum to go on tour with some new political group. He didn't have to do anything, didn't even have to publicly endorse them, just be in the same town as their newest golden boy. After all, it's hard to look golden in the pouring rain. I don't make golden boys. I bring floods; thunder loud enough to deafen and lightning so bright and so beautiful you'll wish it was the last thing you ever saw. If you're looking right at it, it might be. I'm a bad news girl. Julius Caesar and the Roman Empire couldn't conquer the blue sky, but I can. I have.

I'm a weatherite.

You work out that a weatherite has been born in your area pretty damn fast. When a person causes a persistent and abiding weather phenomena to occur within a set distance from them at all times without it ever stopping, the locals start to realise something is up. Now, if you live in a little farm town in the Midwest, where there are five hundred people in as many thousand square miles, working out who it is isn't too hard. When, like me, you're born in the most densely populated metropolis in the world, it's a bit harder to work out which new born, squalling brat is causing the unending thunderstorm outside. New York City has the most technologically advanced drainage and sewerage systems in the world now. They had to put them in because I nearly destroyed the city before I was six months old. Two and a half million people died because I was born. It's no wonder they wanted to kill me.

I've travelled all around the eastern half of America for the last nine years, dragging a storm with me. It started when my second grade class took a trip to Orlando. Most of us had never seen the sun before, we'd only ever known the constant pounding of the rain, and the sisterly crack and flash that went with it. None of us were scared of thunder, but more than half of us were scared of seeing the sun. We shouldn't have been worried.

When the storm hadn't stopped by the time we reached Richmond, the teacher got her smartphone out to check the weather, and found a message from her husband saying that the skies over New York had cleared for the first time in over seven years. When it was still raining by the time we hit North Carolina, the teacher called the school. Everyone knew it had to be someone of about our age; all the kids in my grade used to play mean tricks on each other and whispered that it was this boy or that girl, just to be mean. Kids are little shits, and I was no different. Of course, with me it turned out they were right. Every school had a contact number for if one of them managed to find out who the weatherite was, and our teacher just had. Including me, there were three kids on that coach with birthdays near the time the storms had gradually started. Just three. None of us really had any idea what was going on, only that one of us had done something terrible. Our parents were brought down to be with us. The police cordoned off the area. The army turned up. My dad was furious, my mom was terrified. The rest of the school trip carried on down the coast. I remember my teacher waving to us from the back of the bus. She hadn't wanted to leave any of us behind – I think she was crying when she got on the bus, but in the rain, it's always hard to tell.

The single song that I've got on repeat hits the chorus, and Neil Finn tell me *'Everywhere you go, always take the weather with you, everywhere you go, always take the weather...'* It isn't even ironic anymore. If someone else played it for me I'd take it as an insult, but even after all these years, it's still my favourite song.

I've still never seen the sun. Apparently, that's supposed to be bad for you. In the seven years that I lived in New York, cases of Vitamin D Deficiency rocketed, hospital admissions for cancer, osteoporosis and diabetes doubled, and cases of depression and SADS increased by a factor of ten. I saw all that on the Discovery Channel – they made a program about it, nine months after I left. Did you know that Vitamin D isn't even a vitamin? It's some kind of hormone or something like that. My body produces increased levels of it naturally, presumably to compensate for the other shit it puts me through.

Three kids, standing in the rain, soaked to the skin and badly frightened. The army put us in trucks with our parents, and drove us off in different directions. The further we drove, the more frightened my mom looked. We drove all afternoon. I got hungry. When we stopped, my mom took me to the bathroom, and one of the soldiers bought me a burger. The wrapper was wet from the rain and the meat was overcooked, but nothing I've ever eaten tasted so good.

I never went back to New York. My mom screamed when they took me away. I was too scared to do anything. I just held onto the screwed up little wrapper from the burger so tightly that my fingernails left little red marks in my palms.

I graduated from high school last year. Two years early. I'm not super smart or anything, but when you've got private tuition straight from the upper levels of government, and not much else to distract you apart from the monotony of yet another long day's drive in the rain, time seems to

compress. I don't feel like I'm sixteen. I feel like I'm about ninety. I talk to my parents about once a month. I have a little brother now. They almost got rid of him, in case he was like me. They didn't put it like that, but that was why. Imagine the stress of knowing your only darling child is a walking supernatural disaster, then finding out you're pregnant again. He's fine, by the way. He's six years old. He likes baseball. He's shit at maths. He doesn't know about me.

A nervous steward asks me if I'll please turn off my mp3 player during take-off. I do as I'm asked, then wrap the red headphone cable around the palm sized player. The plane begins to taxi.

On the other side of the cabin, a Jewish lady begins to pray.

There are six weatherites in the world at the moment. I already told you about Mister Sunshine; he has it easiest. He's British. His real name is Jake, by the way. We all have real names, but we tend to call each other by the weather effect we produce. Sunshine has it easiest of all of us, but given what some of the others do, I don't like to complain too much. Snow is a French woman who travels around ski resorts in Europe, and she's filthy rich. She's got it pretty easy, too. Foggy is a pretty miserable Chinese guy who writes terrible poetry. Then there's Hurricane, an old Argentinian lady who has to live in an underground military base, and there's an eight year old kid in northern Siberia who drops the temperature in a fifty mile radius enough that nothing can live near him. All told, I suppose I have it fairly easy.

I heard a rumour about a guy in central Africa who caused sandstorms, but I don't know if that was real, or if someone just killed him. All of us have had people try to kill us. Makes sense that one of us would go down sooner or later.

There was talk of trying to put some of us in the same local area, see what happened. If that's still a plan, no one has told me about it, and I don't reckon they would tell me anyway. Not until it came time to go. They're moving me over to LA because the city's in the middle of a natural heatwave and there's supposed to be a funeral tomorrow for some foreign dignitary. Apparently they asked for me.

The uncontrolled ability to make it rain, and I'm being paraded out for a rich guy's funeral.

As the plane accelerates, I wish I'd found enough religion anywhere in my life to start praying myself. Surely, we aren't going fast enough to get this thing off the ground? I feel so heavy. Why did they put me on a passenger jet? Why not a military plane?

They never explain anything to me. When I was old enough to realise what was going on, old enough to cope with the idea that I'd never see the sun, I thought maybe the government had taken me away so that I'd be a superhero. They could send me to places with droughts, and I'd fix it just by being there. People would cheer when they saw me, and everyone would want to be my friend. Instead, I've been kept on the road one way or another, through the last part of my short childhood, and through the first three years of my teens. I wonder if I'll ever meet someone nice. Get married. Have kids. I wonder what would happen if I had kids with one of the others.

The plane pulls into the air, and I hold my breath, eyes squeezed shut. I've never been hit by lightning. I have no idea if it will kill me just as fast as anyone else, but I'm betting that if it hits the plane, it'll do the job just fine. The acceleration is horrible, and I promise myself over and over again

that I'll walk the two thousand miles back from LA if I have to, just so I'll never have to get back on board again. We climb steadily, bouncing between pockets of turbulence. Why couldn't it have been one of the others. There were three kids, all soaked to the skin and terrified. Why did it have to be me? The plane banks and wobbles, and everything outside goes white as we hit the cloudbank. The cloudbank that I put there. Just by being alive. We pass into it like passengers on Charon's boat, entering Hades. We climb, and climb. It's no wonder they wanted to kill me, no wonder they...

Golden light spills suddenly into the cabin, and I begin to panic, certain that the plane must be on fire, that something terrible must have happened. I lean out into the aisle, but all of the other passengers look finally, strangely, relaxed. They're smiling and nodding at each other. The Jewish lady has both hands raised to heaven with a grateful, thankful look on her face. The skin on the back of my neck prickles, and I turn to look out of the window. The cloud bank is finally below us: I can see the extent of my storm, spread out below us like a purple bruise on pale white skin. The light... the light... I raise my hand against its brilliance, shielding my eyes like someone switched on the lamp in the middle of the night. What is it? Why is everyone so happy to see it? It's long seconds before I understand.

It's the sun.

The glorious, rising winter sun. I feel the warmth of it creep across my face, and my skin prickles in the unexpected heat. It is the more beautiful than anything I have ever imagined. I've seen it before, of course, I've spoken to Jake by video call, but to see it in person, to feel it... I drop my shielding hands to touch my cheeks, and the warmth spreads to my fingers as the slanting light pours in. I sit there for so long, open mouthed, wide eyed, not caring if I'm burning my retinas, not caring about anything. I almost don't notice when the steward comes to ask me if I'll close the blind, to allow the other passengers to sleep.

"I'm sorry... It's just... I've never..."

He frowns, maybe realising that I'm not a monster after all. "Wait here."

Then he's gone. I pull the blind down with more sadness than I think I've ever felt in my life, trying to leave just a fragment of it open, but the light is wonderfully pervasive and even that tiny crack lights the whole cabin. I have no choice but to close it completely.

After a few minutes, the steward comes back, and beckons for me to follow him. Still slightly dumbstruck, I trail after him in my socks, towards the front of the plane. He unlocks one of the first class booths, and holds the door open.

"They cancelled their flight. When they heard you were aboard." He shrugs. "Seems only fair for you to have it."

For a moment, I'm not sure what he means.

He smiles. "Go on in. It's only small, but it's a private room. I'll bring your bags down. You can leave the blinds open in here."

My eyes start to well up. He shoos me into the little room, which is like an opulently luxurious cell, and pushes the door shut behind me. There are two blinds in here. Both open. I don't even

bother with the seat, just sit cross legged on the floor and stare at the light. The beautiful light. I never want to leave it behind, but I know I'll only see it for another few hours before we land, then I'll have the storm back, and the light will be gone again. I realise that there are tears on my cheeks.

When there's no rain, it's easy to tell.