

Flight Home

Flight	From	To	Status
UA 518	Evansville	Salt Lake City	On Time

This is my third time on an airplane. It's 1974. I'm twenty, three months away from nursing school graduation, and about to start a job in surgical intensive care at Indiana University Hospital. But first, I'm off to a student nurse convention, flying to a city and a region I've never been to, flying away from the humidity and endless flatness of southern Indiana, the closeness of friends, the comfort of Mom's meatloaf and steaming sweet corn pooled in butter.

At this convention, I'll join other students for late night caucuses to draft resolutions, motions and amendments. We'll flirt and laugh and believe we're the future of health care.

And I'll discover mountains—snow-capped peaks of the Wasatch and Oquirrh ranges blocking the horizon, encircling the city's downtown, and crisping the air as if their distant, icy coolness reached down to the boulevards.

Flight	From	To	Status
UA 520	Salt Lake City	Evansville	Delayed

Maybe this delay is a sign that I shouldn't return to the Midwest, should just remain here amidst the mountains. My heart rate speeds and sweat soaks my palms as I consider tearing up my ticket, walking out of the airport, and just staying. The towering mountains pull me like a magnet.

Or perhaps the tug is to do something unexpected, to break the rules of straight As, waiting until marriage, and always doing what Mom says. Even if she ever forgave me, Mom would never understand.

Heading for the airport exit, I glance at the schedule board. Numbers for a new departure time scroll into place, and I turn back toward the gate.

Flight	From	To	Status
UA 723	Evansville	Seattle	On time

It took six years, but I'm heading back to the mountains. This time, the North Cascades. Still full of passion for nursing and now, with a new husband, trying to decide where to move for graduate school. Boston—old and prestigious. Seattle—young and experimental. And closer to my Oregon in-laws who will meet us there and entice us with a ferry ride on Puget Sound and fresh salmon at Ray's Boathouse. Until now, I thought this fish only came in a can and had to be mixed with cream of mushroom soup, molded into a baking dish, and topped with crumbled potato chips.

As we approach Seattle, the gray skies clear and sun glints off the Cascades' glaciers the way overhead lights in the ER shimmer over taut, white sheets on waiting gurneys. We'll return by car just four months later, my belly pregnant, and all of our belongings stashed in our Honda Accord and a horse trailer the in-laws hitched to their motor home.

Flight	From	To	Status
Cont. 1724	Seattle	Miami	On time

In 1983, children can sit in their parents' laps on airplanes, and if the kids are under two, like our twin son and daughter, there's no charge. My husband and I are still in school, and somehow we scrape together the airfare to go to Florida over winter break to visit my mom and her partner, Steve. This trip will be the first time Mom holds the only grandchildren she'll ever have.

It wasn't only the mountains that had lured me two thousand miles away from her. And perhaps it wasn't only sandy beaches that impelled her to put another thousand miles between us. Had she surrendered to a geography that felt like her true home, just as the mountains had claimed me? Or was her move to Florida a silent rebuke of my separation from her?

"Grandma!" my daughter shouts as she bolts from my grip and toddles down the ramp at our flight's arrival gate. She soars into the outstretched arms of a woman she's only encountered over the phone. The tears in my mom's bright blue eyes signal this time I've done something right.

Flight	From	To	Status
Cont. 1218	Seattle	Orlando	Cancelled

For half of September in 2004 I tried to schedule a flight to Orlando. First, Hurricane Charley shut down the airport, then Frances, Ivan, and Jeanne. The retirement community my mom and Steve had moved into a few months earlier was in the eye of the storms.

Even more frightening was the diagnosis of liver cancer Mom's doctor had delivered just as hurricane season arrived. Each conversation I had with her about treatment left me with more questions than answers, and answers were what Mom expected from her daughter, the nurse.

Finally, a break in the weather, and I booked a flight. The storm paused for my arrival. I bent to embrace Mom and looked into those blue eyes, now encircled with yellow; her tanned arms around my neck were tinted orange.

I had two sleepless nights, partly due to the wind's charge down the cookie-cutter streets of the retirement community, but more from trying to comfort Mom's intensifying pain and increasing confusion. The hospice nurse arrived with narcotics just before the hurricane's furor knocked out electricity.

The next morning, as Steve settled Mom into the van and I gathered up medicines for the appointment with the doctor, the phone rang.

“I thought you’d be making this call first.” My husband’s choked voice reached me across the time zones. “*My* mom died last night,” he said.

How many ways can a heart break?

Mom’s doctor admitted her to the hospital to get better control of her pain. Nothing, though, could untangle her thinking or ungarble her speech as her liver function collapsed. While the hurricane swirled outside the hospital windows, grief twisted through me.

I never told Mom that my mother-in-law had died. I could barely comprehend this unexpected loss; that news wouldn’t have penetrated Mom’s memory, clouded by bile and ammonia. Instead, I’d told her I had to go home for a few days and would be back soon with the rest of the family. Through the grace of her transfer to an inpatient hospice program, I was able to leave her, tucked under a quilt made by one of her friends, while I flew across the continent for a funeral.

Flight	From	To	Status
Cont. 1113	Orlando	Portland	On time

As the skies calmed and the clouds parted to reveal first the Rockies and then the Cascades, I convinced myself that soon my family and I would return to my mother’s bedside. My husband, children, and sister-in-law met me in baggage claim, their eyes swollen and bloodshot. My sister-in-law’s voice wobbled like a slowed down sound track, telling me Steve had phoned.

“He wants you to call him,” she said.

Flight	From	To	Status
Cont. 1119	Seattle	Orlando	On time

Steve and I sort through Mom's belongings. I decline the fur coats stored away in garment bags in the garage; he thinks he can sell them as he passes through Vegas on the drive to our house to bring me my great-grandmother's porcelain canister set, my grandmother's cherry writing table, and my mother's ashes.

Flight	From	To	Status
Cont. 1125	Orlando	Seattle	On time

As the plane ascends, I lay my head on my husband's shoulder, our fingers interlocking on the armrest between our seats. Through the window I watch the Gulf disappear, then the patchwork quilt of the Plains as we head west, toward the mountains, and home.

Six weeks later, Steve will arrive at my island home north of Seattle. We will toss my mom's ashes into the blustery November wind and watch them swirl in the seawater off Iceberg Point, the craggy Olympic Mountains breaking through a mantle of gray clouds.