

# THE GIRL IN THE WINDOW SEAT

By John S. Halbert

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I'm a field representative for an automotive chemical company, traveling around the country working with customers. Although I'm officially based in San José, California (remember that fact), I travel so much that all my furniture and belongings are in a storage warehouse in Phoenix, Arizona, and I'm living out of a suitcase. (Actually, *two* suitcases.) Been doing this now for a couple of years, and with the expense account and the company car, I have it made. No rent, no other costs to speak of except clothes and various forms of entertainment---I save my dough and the rest is mad money to spend on side trips, vacations; an antique car or two and the ladies. Coast-to-coast ladies. Some not so lady-like.

So, here I am, in Denver, when the telephone rings in my hotel room at 5:00 AM. The boss is on the line. "Thank goodness I caught you," he says.

"Where else would I be, at five in the morning?"

"Ah, yes . . . well, get your things together . . . your flight leaves at seven. You're coming to Dallas to get a company car, and you'll be doing field-work with a new customer for the next four weeks."

The next day, I am in Houston, with the big company Oldsmobile loaded with samples and a list of customers to see, scattered in towns and cities ranging from New Orleans to Austin; and down into the Rio Grande Valley. I head first over to New Orleans and Baton Rouge, hitting some small towns in between. Next, to Austin, then through Corpus Christi and on to the bottom of the United States at Brownsville, Texas; and nearby McAllen, Harlingen, and Laredo. When I return to Houston two weeks later, the schedule calls for me to be here for two weeks.

On the first Thursday, at 5:00 AM, the telephone in the hotel room rings. It's the boss. "Thank goodness I caught you," he says.

"Where else would I be at five in the morning?"

"Ah, yes . . . well, get your things together . . . your flight leaves at seven. You're flying to Chicago and on to Milwaukee to work a trade show."

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Saturday evening, and I'm on my way back to Houston. Trade show a big success. While the airliner stops in Chicago, I stay on the plane watching the cleaning ladies vacuum the carpets and eyeballing a new crew coming aboard. In the meantime, I strike up a conversation with an engaging brunette who tells me she's on her way to Houston for training with "Uncle Ben's Rice Company". She seems interesting, so I figure I'll ask her out when we get there. (One must not leave attractive female visitors alone in an unfamiliar city with time on their hands, and I'm pretty familiar with Houston, since I used to live there, heh-heh.)

In a half-hour, the airliner is loaded with passengers, food, fuel, and luggage for the non-stop, three-hour flight to Houston. Already, I'm planning my next moves with the Uncle Ben's girl sitting next to me.

But before long, the female rice representative falls asleep, snoring loudly. Most

un-dignified, and takes most of the luster off her.

As we still have a long way to go, I step up the aisle to the front of the cabin to a magazine rack. Looking back down the rows of seats, I spot a very pretty young woman with reddish-brown hair, sitting alone with her feet tucked aside, staring out the window. Curious about her, I take back to the seat only *one* magazine, instead of the several I had originally intended to carry. That, of course, in order to have the perfect excuse to make *several* trips back-and-forth in order to study more thoroughly the twenty-something girl by the window. A quick glance reveals that her ring finger is unoccupied. Perfect.

On the next swaying jaunt up to the magazines, the aisle is jammed with passengers; practically everyone is leaning across the seat-backs, looking out the left-side windows. "Isn't it beautiful?" a middle-aged lady says. I look out the window and see that they are watching the reflection of the full moon dancing along on the Mississippi River that's passing below us. A beautiful sight, and must be causing the pilots up front to wonder why the airplane wants to roll to the left!

I just happen to be stopped in the aisle at just where *she* sits, so I casually lean over and look over her shoulder at the moon's reflection hop-scotching along on the ribbony river. By now, I'm thoroughly intrigued by the girl in the window seat.

As soon as we pull up at the Houston airport terminal, while everyone else is pulling down their hand luggage and other things, I grip my briefcase and elbow my way toward the front. As I edge up to where she is situated, I'm astounded to see her drag a good-sized *television set* from in front of her seat! Amazed that they'd actually let her carry such a thing onto an airliner in the first place, I follow close behind her as we head out of the plane and up the concourse.

Right away, it's obvious her load is more than she can manage, what with the handle of the heavy TV set in one hand, some sort of carry-on in the other, and a bulging handbag slung over her shoulder. Beads of sweat are popping out onto the gasping girl's forehead as she swaps her load between hands several times and lurches on.

Since I know this particular gate is the farthest from the Baggage Claim area of any in the airport, and we have a long way to go, it's time to make my move. Sidling up alongside her, making a show of looking her up and down, paying obvious attention to the cumbersome television set, I speak up to her over the noise of the bustling crowd in the concourse. "Hi, you didn't have to bring your own TV . . . we have televisions in Houston, too!"

The young woman ignores me; staring straight ahead, stumbling along in the crowd, still fumbling with her clumsy load.

"Look . . . ah, ma'am, it's a long way to 'Baggage Claim'---let me at least carry the TV for you."

After a few more stumbling steps, the girl stops, puffing, brushes her hair out of her eyes and looks at me. "All right." She hands over the big set. I'm surprised how *heavy* it is---thirty pounds or more---no wonder she was having such a hard time with it. We resume our trek up the bustling concourse. As before, she has nothing to say as we go along.

Time to break the ice. "We've a long way to go . . . we might as well introduce ourselves. Name's 'John'."

"Cecilia." I detect an accent. She's still staring straight ahead; I guess she just wants me to carry her TV, behave myself, and keep quiet.

"You're from Houston?"

She shoots me a quick glance, then her eyes snap back straight ahead. "Yes . . . but I'm moving to San José, soon!"

*The girl is moving to San José!*

I raise my hand for her to hold up. As she turns about and frowns at me; passers-by, caught unawares by our sudden stop in the crowded space, bump past us, nudging our elbows and our carry-ons.

I set down the TV and fumble for a business card that I hand to her with a grin. "You won't believe this, but I *live* in San José!"

She gapes at it, then looks up with a wide-eyed gasp. It's written all over her stricken face that she's thinking: "I'll move to Cleveland . . . to Denver . . . to Winslow, Arizona-----*anywhere* but to San José!" For sure she had thought that moving to California would rid her of me once and for all. Now, according to what she has told me, she's going right out to where I live! The girl's eyes are wide, un-blinking. She is shaking her head. She looks to be in shock.

We resume our slow trudge toward the Baggage Claim, at the other end of the airport.

By the time we get there, the other passengers have already claimed their luggage and cleared out. Ours' are still rocking along, all alone, on the clunking carousels. By now, it is well after midnight and we are by ourselves in the big, open space.

The girl, now known to me as "Cecilia" is casting about, seeming to be looking for someone.

Realizing she is about to get away, I think fast. "How about us getting together, tomorrow? Have you a 'phone number?"

She pulls out the card I gave her and writes some numbers on the backside, then hands it to me.

"I'll call you at noon," I tell her.

She gives me a stern look. "You need to go, now."

"Go? But I can't leave you here all by yourself!"

"My brother is picking me up . . . he doesn't know you . . . and we haven't been properly introduced. They're just like that. They're from the 'old country'."

"You want me to leave you here, *alone*?"

"I'll be all right . . . he'll be here in a few minutes, I'm sure."

I can't believe she's in earnest about staying here, unguarded, in this vast place.

But she insists, so with misgivings I leave her standing there by herself and with my luggage head for the line of outside waiting taxicabs.

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***Noon, the Next Day:***

After three rings, her voice comes on the line. "Hello?"

"Hi, 'John', here, from last night at the airport . . ."

There's a gasp and a long pause. "Ah . . . yes, ah---" She seems to be at a loss for words.

"Well, I told you I'd call at noon . . . and it's noon . . . so, how about it---let's get together, this afternoon."

"Where are you?" She sounds uncertain.

"I'm at a hotel near the airport."

"Oh, that's 'way too far from where I am."

"I drive eighty-thousand miles a year---nothing is too far for me!"

Another pause. "Ah, well, ah . . . I guess so. Okay, then." It seems she is really surprised to hear my voice. (*I'm not sure she's very happy to hear from me.*)

"Okay, where are *you*?"

"It's a long way."

"No problem. I used to live in Houston. And I have a map. Now, how do I get there?"

As I take notes, she directs me to the far southwest corner of the city, mentioning roads and streets that are familiar to me, until----"and you turn left at 'Bun-Drud'."

I'm frowning. "*Bun-Drud?*"

"Yes, 'Bun-Drud'."

I have no idea what she means. (Remember, she speaks English with an accent like that of "Chequita Banana" in the TV commercials.) "Spell it."

"B-o-o-n-e-R-o-a-d."

"Oh, 'Boone Road!'"

"Yes, 'Bun-Drud!'"

"I'll be there in an hour."

About an hour later, I'm driving down "Bun-Drud", but I can't locate the side street where she lives. I pull up to a convenience store (*that's now a funeral home---I don't know if there's a message there or not*) and drop coins into a pay telephone. "Oh!" you're almost here . . . stay where you are and my brother will bring me there."

A scant couple of minutes later, a gargantuan barge of a sedan scruffs up next to my parked car. At once, a young, earnest-looking, black-haired fellow hops out and starts writing down my license-plate number!

The girl, dressed casually, alights from the car and looks to be embarrassed when she sees the fellow scrutinizing the car tag and the car in general.

"This is my brother, Jorge." She turns to me, "This is---" She gives a look like she can't remember my name.

" . . . 'John.'" I get her off the hook.

"Yes, John. Of course."

The brother shakes my hand as he looks me up and down, frowning.

She says something in Spanish to him, and he (reluctantly-like) gets back into his bargemobile. Never taking his eyes off me, the young man starts his car and backs out. I can tell he is concerned for his sister. He swings away, looking into the rear-view mirror all the time.

After the machine disappears down the street, I open the door and the girl slides onto the front seat. She's looking at me, warily. "Where are we going?" Her tone is like someone who has been kidnapped.

Oh, we'll go out to the 'San Jacinto Monument' and to the 'Battleship Texas'." I try to sound casual; breezy, like I do this sort of thing every day. "Then we'll go get something to eat. We'll have lots of fun." I hope she believes me.

She isn't saying much as we head down the freeway. And I keep glancing at her. Holy smokes! In the light of day, she looks to be about sixteen years old! If that's the case, I'm over twice her age! I might have to take her right back home. As we ride along, I probe her with questions. Turns out she's actually twenty-six, is recently divorced, and has two little boys. Originally from Bogota, Colombia, in South America (that explains the accent), she had gone to Chicago to sign the divorce papers, and was on her way back to Houston, where her extended family lives. That's what she was doing on the airplane. Well, twenty-six is a lot better (and more legal) than sixteen. The sun catches her reddish-brown hair, making her look even better by daylight than she did the night before. And she seems to have loosened-up; not as uptight as she had been when her brother had delivered her to me. This could get interesting. And I'm going to

be in town for another whole week!

At the San Jacinto State Park, when we drive up to the Monument, she tells me she went there not long ago and has already seen it.

So we turn toward the battleship, tied-up in a nearby lagoon. We board the ship and go below decks, to the engine rooms and other spaces. Then we head topside, up steep stepways and ladders to the towering upperworks, where, high above main deck, we peer through windows at the steering wheel on the control bridge, and poke around various guns and other shipboard things that make up a man-of-war.

Starting back down, the girl takes only a few steps, then she gasps and grabs the hand-rail. "My back! I can't move!" She is frozen in place; immobilized; her eyes wide. "Something's happened! Help me!" She puts out her hand for me to grab.

There seems to be no alternative but to carry her down to the main deck! I hoist her onto my shoulders and, balancing carefully, to the amazed stares of onlookers, step-by-step we descend the steep, spindly, "companionway" stairs, as they are called on a ship, down the side of the superstructure six or eight levels to the main deck.

At the foot of the steps, she leans against a gun tub. "I think I can walk, now," she tells me. Holding hands (did she plan this?), we head aft. At the rear of the ship, she climbs onto an anti-aircraft gun-mount. I take her picture.

After a while, having toured the entire battleship, we step back down the gang-plank. "Ready to eat?" I ask.

The girl glances at the lowering sun. "I need to get back home, soon." A pause. "Yeah, sure . . . I could go for some food."

We stop at a restaurant. By now, she is laughing at my jokes.

The two of us go out every night the rest of the time I'm in Houston. But on Friday, I have to take the company car back to Arlington, near Fort Worth, and catch a flight to Denver, where my own car has been in long-term storage for a month, and drive back to the West Coast.

A few days later, I'm on my way to Hawaii for a long-planned vacation.

We get together the next time I'm in Houston, the following January, and she actually moves to San José with her two boys in May, to live with her sister, exactly a year after we had first met.

It took a while, but we married in December, 1982, and have been ever since. Together we produced another son to go with the two I "inherited". The three boys are now all fine grown men. We have four grandchildren.

And it all started on that memorable midnight flight from Chicago to Houston when I first saw the girl in the window seat.