

Red Dust

“We’re going to crash,” the woman in the seat next to Manny said. The engines on their jet fell silent about ten minutes out from an early-morning landing in Denver. Through the window, Manny saw an electric blue glow on the front edge of the wing. Fine red dust rushed by the windows of the plane. He detected the impossible smell of burning ozone. He knew that odor, like sparks made by old-time electric bumper cars in an amusement park.

Oxygen masks dropped, startling the passengers including Manny’s seat partner. He heard her say: “Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now, and at the hour of our death.” In the back of the plane a baby began to cry. A man jumped from his seat in front of them and tried to open the cabin door. Two flight attendants grappled with him.

The plane jolted. Several passengers screamed. The woman next to Manny screamed so loud it made him grip his leather case even tighter to his chest. His life’s research.

He looked through the window again, stared at the red dust building up on the engines and wings. He saw the stricken engine sputter to life for a second then flame out again.

With each sputter another lurch, then another, first one side, then the other. A coughing backfire of red dust mixed with blue flame. The red powder flew everywhere.

Some passengers took out their cell phones. Manny heard a man across the aisle shout into his phone, "I love you. Tell the kids I love them."

A boy with a nose ring dressed in black used his phone to shoot video, first out the window, and then back to the terrified passengers. "This is so cool," Manny heard him say. The girl next to him, also dressed in black, hit his arm each time he said it.

The woman next to Manny repeated her prayer only much faster now, as though she was chanting. Through his window Manny watched the shimmering blue glow disappear. He saw the fields outside the airport turn into runway.

Another lurch. This time accompanied by a whoosh and a roar. Manny turned to see the left engine catch and hold. The woman stopped chanting. She opened her eyes then turned to Manny. He felt the hope he saw mirrored in her eyes.

The engine on the other side of the plane sputtered then roared back to life. Passengers cheered. The plane leveled out, tarmac rushed by a few hundred feet below. Big white stripes announced the beginning of the runway.

Too fast, it seemed to Manny. Too high. There's no way the captain would try to land now. Surely he'll go around and try again.

"Brace, brace," the captain said over the intercom.

Manny put his head down, grabbed his legs with his hands. His arthritic fingers burned with pain. Now he started to chant. "Please let me live to get my research to the conference."

Manny heard the voice of a man seated behind him increase in volume. “Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death...” Too much talk about death.

Manny felt the wheels of the jet slam down on the tarmac, then bounce. Screams erupted. “Oh shit,” the boy in black said. “Not cool.” He no longer shot video.

The plane came back down—hard. It seemed to Manny the wheels collapsed. The emergency lights flickered then failed. The sound of grinding steel drowned out the screams.

Manny clung to his legs, the pain in his hands close to unbearable. The plane skidded, slid for what seemed like an eternity, then, an abrupt stop. The dim lights sputtered back on.

The smell of jet fuel filled the cabin.

Passengers stood up, heads turned first one way, then the other. He saw shock on some faces, happy surprise on others. Sounds of “thank god” floated in the stuffy air of the cabin.

The flight attendants jumped up, opened the doors. They shouted to the passengers in the emergency aisle to get the wing doors open. The woman next to Manny cried, this time happy tears. He helped her unbuckle her seat belt. They both got up, Manny behind her. They stumbled through the wing exit, covered with red powder. He tasted something like sulfur.

The woman grabbed Manny’s arm and wouldn’t let go. The flight attendant told them to jump on the yellow chute and slide to the ground. Arms wrapped around his briefcase, Manny jumped, slid, got to his feet, paced away from the chute, stopped and looked around.

The jet sat in a ravine past the end of the runway, through the fence a few yards short of the main airport road. A red and yellow fireball rocked the landscape a short distance away. A private jet had also caught some of the red dust and crashed. No one jumped from that plane. He stared awestruck at the horrible scene, made surreal by the unnatural red haze.

An old pickup screeched to a halt along the top of the ravine. A young man in blue jeans and a sports coat climbed out. Manny clutched the worn leather briefcase to his chest, wheezed up the embankment. He felt his age manifest in his swollen joints. The dust floated everywhere, filled his lungs and made him cough.

“I need to get to the terminal,” Manny said between coughs.

The young man who looked to be in his early thirties stopped at the sound of Manny’s voice. He had his cell phone out, put it into his pocket.

“I’ve got to catch the flight to Washington D.C. right away,” Manny said. He noticed a CU logo in the back window of the man’s truck. Was the man an educator? He seemed vaguely familiar but Manny couldn’t place him.

“Are you crazy? No planes can take off in this stuff.” When he heard his voice, Manny felt certain he knew this man. “People are hurt down there. They need help.”

Manny looked behind him then back at the man. “There’s no fire. Nobody’s seriously hurt. I have to catch my connecting flight.”

The young man turned away, ran down the ravine toward the plane. Manny watched him head straight for the captain who directed the passengers away from the plane.

He walked to the man’s truck. No keys. He looked up the road toward the terminal. There was no choice. He’d have to walk as quickly as his arthritic knees would let him. Manny turned and hurried up to the road, determined to get to the airport.

He couldn’t understand why the young man wouldn’t give him a ride. There wasn’t anything he could do for the passengers of the plane. Where had he seen him before? He racked his brain and walked.

This red dust came sooner than he calculated. He had to get to that science conference back East. Then it dawned on him. The man's name was David. He's that university professor from Boulder who got him thrown out of last year's conference. Arrogant educated fool. Thinks he knows everything.

A truck roared up, screeched to a halt in front of him. Again David jumped out, but this time grabbed Manny by the arm. "Where do you think you're going?"

Manny tried to shake him off. "I just got off a plane that damn near crashed because of your stupid comet, which, my dear professor is not a comet at all. But we don't have time to discuss that right now, do we?"

David dropped Manny's arm like it burned him, took a step back.

"You told people on TV yesterday we'd have some beautiful sunsets for the next few weeks." He waved his arm in the direction of the plane. "Is this your idea of a beautiful sunset? You didn't consider what the tail would do this close to earth, did you, David?"

He recognized a look of panic in David's eyes. Manny nodded his head. "Maybe you believe me now? I tried to tell you about this last year."

The young man's mouth dropped open. He seemed to fight for control. "Get in the truck, old man. I promised the captain I'd get you back. Although why he should be worried about one crazy old goat is beyond me."

For a prize winning scientist, David didn't seem to get it.

"Forget about the captain," he shouted. This red dust is from your comet. You know it is. Why didn't you tell people the truth yesterday?"

Manny watched David's expression morph from annoyance to shock. He started back for the truck. "Do whatever the hell you want, old man. I need to get to the observatory."

Manny jumped in front of the truck, pounded the hood with his fist. “Didn’t you hear me? It’s too late for that. We need to get to that conference--NOW. They’ll listen to you.”

David ignored him, opened the door.

Manny ran to the door, grabbed him by the lapels. “If you don’t come clean with what you know about that comet, a lot of people will die. They have a right to know.”

David’s eyes narrowed. He pushed Manny away. “It’s too late. There’s nothing we can do. Millions of people will die anyway. Now go away.”

Manny didn’t go away. He leaned closer. David backed against the doorframe of his truck. “What was your price?” Manny said. “A new observatory? A seat on the NSF board?”

David didn’t move. Manny had him pinned.

“I have the evidence right here.” He patted the worn leather briefcase clutched under his arm. “I’m taking it to that reporter you spoke with yesterday. She’ll be interested.”

For a moment neither spoke. David scowled at Manny. “Are you threatening me, old man?” He didn’t get in the truck. He didn’t push Manny away. Their eyes remained locked, neither moved. A fresh dusting of the red powder fell around them.

Manny held out his hand and caught some of the powder, then waved it at David. “You can help save lives. People will listen to you. Communications will be cut off in a few days. You know this. We’ve got to share this at the conference before it’s too late.”

David eyed Manny’s briefcase. After a long pause he said, “Get in. I’ll take you as far as the terminal.” Manny smiled, got in the truck and slammed the door.