

René Houtrides

an excerpt from

Knife, Barn, My Harvey

I carry a knife—not a switchblade or a machete or a Bowie blade with a little groove in it for the blood to run down like on the tv show from years ago, but a little red Swiss Army knife which I use for opening mail, or cutting fruit, or doing things around the house because I'm handy in a way which is unusual for a woman but I've always been like that. I'm only mentioning it, the knife, because of my husband's third nervous breakdown, which he had when he was on a business trip down in Raleigh, North Carolina, whereas we live on Long Island. We didn't always live on Long Island, either. We used to live in the Bronx where we met, at the Temple Emanuel Synagogue on Tremont Avenue, not a safe neighborhood anymore now like it used to be then.

But this day I'm talking about now is on Long Island. I was out in the rickety barn, potting plants and using my knife to cut twine, when I heard the phone and I could have let it ring but something about it sounded so upset and nasty I ran to the house and answered and I found out. About Harvey.

The airport had a plane going soon, and if I left in less than ten minutes I could take it to where they said my Harvey was slumped up against a water cooler and refusing medication and among strangers.

Of course you know that the ticket sales counter was crowded and the girl behind it was so slow in her blue polyester sweater that it was almost time for the plane to leave when I rushed to where the departure gates are with my carry-on bag (which was the only luggage I had) bumping against my thigh, and I'm not a young woman.

But my knife set off the metal detector at LaGuardia and created a hub-bub. At first nobody got excited when the alarm sounded. They just asked me to empty my pockets. I was hurrying, and still in my jeans pants with even some potting soil on them, and when I did empty my pockets and poured out

change and keys, everything was all right until my knife clinked in the steel tray and then one security guard “oohed” and a “tsk” came out of the other one and they had a conference I couldn’t hear. The next flight after this one down to Raleigh-Durham wasn’t until the next day so I didn’t want to miss this one and I said to them, “Confiscate it, the knife, give it to the pilot, do whatever it is you do in a situation like this one, just do it fast.” That’s what struck me then as the sensible, intelligent thing to do. I was even, because of my worry for Harvey, so ready to sacrifice the knife, which is my only one and favorite. And maybe someone, somewhere, was being mugged in trouble in a hallway where the street door didn’t lock right and maybe screaming, and no one came to help because the authorities were so interested with my knife. Like somebody like me, a Jewish senior citizen and female from the Bronx, would be a terrorist. Of course not. Anybody would know that.

They, the men with the uniforms at the airport, had another conference while I thought of Harvey, who’s had such a hard time from when he was a boy, and then they started saying how they might arrest me. Until I began crying on account of Harvey. It was a big cry and for a long time. And while I was crying the men asked me a lot of questions, which I don’t remember what all of the questions were, and then they called the hospital in North Carolina to see if my story was true or a lie and the doctor at the hospital said yes that Harvey was broken. And meanwhile the men in uniform, there were a lot of them, stopped the plane I was supposed to be on from taking off, because they wanted to make sure I didn’t have accomplices on the plane for doing bad things. And I just kept crying and telling the truth about how I needed to get to Harvey, and finally the men in uniform decided they wouldn’t arrest me and instead they would let me on the plane and not even confiscate my knife because it would be better instead to put it in a cardboard box in with the luggage. They said—I could hear them talking to one another—that I might be less upset if they didn’t confiscate the knife, which the knife wasn’t the reason I was crying so bad. I was crying, like I said before, on account of Harvey’s breakdown. But they said they would put the knife in with the luggage—they were making a BIG exception, they said. And I could claim it, the knife, from the luggage, when the plane landed. The world would be safer this way but first they had to fill out the papers and discuss with one another how last week Kathy, their coworker, had gotten in trouble for having allowed a hand grenade through. It was a spot test with a fake hand grenade carried by an airline inspector disguised as a passenger, but Kathy got in trouble anyway and now the union—I

think I heard them say it was the union—was trying to fix it so Kathy would still keep her job. After filling out forms came a phone call they had to make to get another security guard to bring the box, and the only box they could find was one for shipping bicycles, and it had the airline's logo on the outside of it, and they put my little penknife inside the big box where it looked lonely. But the plane, the boarding of which had been delayed because of me, already had all of its luggage loaded on the little motor carts and someone would have to carry the bicycle box, with my penknife in it, to the departure gate to be given to a worker to put in the luggage area by hand, but it couldn't be me since I was the perpetrator, and one of the security guards would do it even though they were so busy.

So one of the security guards, a very rough-looking man (in my opinion) who, if you saw him get on the elevator when you were the only one on it, you would get off, carried the box. Me, I was just grateful that I wasn't in handcuffs anywhere and I followed him down the airport corridors and every once in a while he held the big box up and tilted it so he could hear the knife slide from one end of it to the other until we got to gate 6 and he handed the box over to the gate employees and said, "This is the woman with the knife, and this is the knife," very loud and indicating me and then the box. All the passengers who were wondering why they hadn't been allowed to board the plane yet, which was late from being held, leaned forward in their waiting-area seats to see the woman in the messy clothes with the knife, and when they saw the oversized box their eyes got very excited.

Nobody talked to me on the plane, which was fine with me because I was thinking that Harvey was having breakdown number three and here he was oh so close to retiring, and maybe even he should have retired a few years ago, and why did it happen now, the breakdown.