

[Home](#)

[Autumn 2006](#)

[Summer 2006](#)

[Spring 2006](#)

[Winter 2006](#)

[Fall 2005](#)

[Summer 2005](#)

[Spring 2005](#)

[Winter 2005](#)

[Editor's Note](#)

[Guidelines](#)

[SNR's Writers](#)

[Mail](#)

DEPARTURES

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Two figures rose in the darkness, the sunlight moving suddenly across their faces like a spotlight. The escalator folded into the landing up ahead like a series of small white blades. Craig reached back for Manisha's hand, knowing it was almost time, and turned to find open air. She was rising two steps behind him, head down, eyes focused on the United Airlines pamphlet in her hand.

"I'll check in," she said when they reached the top.

Manisha turned, rolling her suitcase off in the direction of the airline kiosks. And Craig stepped aside for the travelers behind him. He paused to take in the wide breadth of the atrium, the swell of early morning commuters at the conveyor belts, and the security gate waiting against the far wall. A group of Japanese tour guides were joking with one another over by the payphones.

He checked his watch one more time, then looked at the screens overhead, following a long line of Torontos and Buffalos and Baltimores.

He stopped at one.

United Airlines Flight #1126.

Non-stop to Detroit Wayne County.

Thirty-two minutes 'til boarding time.

Craig watched a pair of little girls chasing one other around the lobby, and wondered how many thousands of commuters like him were waiting in a thousand airports like this, reading these same names and numbers, watching the seconds tick down.

He paused to study the small black smear across the back of his left hand. This morning, Craig made a point not to wash off the half circle smile. It was the muddied outline of a happy face-he'd moved when the doorman stamped his hand last night at a roadside club called "The Pavilion". Manisha had spotted the place on the way back to the motel after he'd missed their exit. They'd both started with an Amstel Light, another, then Craig ordered a tequila, downed the shot. She left minutes later and waited out in the car for him, the droplets of rain padding along the rooftop, until he was spent, through.

The past few days had been one disaster after another. She was just getting over the flu. The hot water heat had broken down at the motel. And except for this morning, the weather in Providence had been grey and unsettled. Nothing like their

trip last fall when they took a drive up into the Appalachians with its dazzling sunshine, the golden leaves spilling out across the Interstate, Manisha singing to 10,000 Maniacs over the CD player. And their little car weaving its path through the mountains like they were following the turn of a vertebra.

They'd met over two years ago now. Bob Dylan had been playing a summer concert down in Centennial Gardens, the sun dipping low behind the clouds, and the frat boys and middle-aged hippie heads camped out on the lawn, ready to take in another glorious night. But four songs in, the weather turned, and a chill wind rolled up the coast into the gathering crowd. Craig scrambled for the school sweatshirt he'd left behind him, only to find an empty patch of grass staring back.

One of his buddies pointed out a Bears sweatshirt moving down front in the starlit crowd.

"Hey Craiger! There's your klepto, pal."

Bob was playing "Positively 4th Street" as Craig wound his way through the dancing figures and shadows. He trailed the sweatshirt to the other side of the stage and latched onto the back of it. He was stunned as the figure turned around in the glow of orange spotlights. An Indian girl stood there in his Brown Bears sweatshirt like some dark-eyed mirror of himself, a plastic beer cup in hand. With the crush of the crowd, the rolling pulse of the music, he had to lean in close and shout to be heard.

"YOU BETTER TAKE THAT OFF."

"WHAT'S THAT?"

"I SAID, TAKE MY SHIRT OFF."

She handed her beer over then tucked her hands underneath the sweatshirt, pulled it over her head. She leaned over to shout in his ear. Bob's drummer was kicking into overdrive. But Craig could hear her laughter very plain in the darkness.

"I THINK YOU NEED A NEW PICK-UP LINE!"

Manisha had been working as a waitress at the Refectory for the summer, saving up for school-just two months later she was off to Detroit, starting at Wayne State University on a journalism scholarship. He had wanted to get out there more than he did, but with his own studies at Brown to tie him up, life was rarely that simple. Instead, they stuck to the chat rooms, settled on the marathon calls stretching into midnight, the intensity of these brief random weekends together breathing new life into otherwise leaden veins. And always far too brief.

At the other end of the lobby, several tourists were moving towards the security gate, lining up with coats and camera bags, worn-out and uneasy, as if they were waiting for the execution to start.

Even now he could picture Manisha entering those same metal detectors, the contents in her bag moving through the security monitors-her lip balm, her dorm keys-the intimate details he'd seen a hundred times over, laid out for everyone to see, the security guards studying every move, each shape flowing past. Like surgeons tracing the path of a bullet wound.

Something moved behind him. And Manisha's carry-on dropped at his feet with a heavy thud.

"I'm ready," she said.

Craig turned to take her all in. Unlike his black circle stamp, hers had all but faded away. But she still had her navy jacket tied around her waist. Genuine sheepskin leather. The one he'd got her for Christmas that weekend up in Boston. He blinked, noticing the sun's heat move along her black sweater, and how it didn't seem to touch her. Manisha said something about the seating and catching a few Zs on the flight. But it didn't quite register with Craig as if he'd just driven into a tunnel and her signal kept cutting out. He looked down at her bag.

"Are you sure you don't want me to?"

"Honey. We talked about this."

A black man moved alongside them with a wide mop, took a moment to wipe away the scraps by their feet.

"I know. I just thought that."

"I'll be all right. It just needs to get done."

He gave her a long lingering hug, felt the dampness of her hair, the scent of lavender oil upon her as if they were still back at the motel, and she was just stepping from the shower, warm and new. She pulled away.

"If you need anything, let me know," he said.

But there was no reply to his offer. Craig reached out to tuck a stray hair behind her ear. She still didn't move.

"Call me when it's over?"

Manisha studied the empty space at their feet. A jet roared into life overhead. Finally she nodded, placed a brief hand on his arm as if that was all he needed. She steadied her carry-on bag over her shoulder. Her mouth moved as if to speak but nothing came of it. He jumped into the gap instead, said the only thing he could.

"Bye Manisha."

Craig watched her leave and make her way through the hurried activity of the atrium, each square of sunlight flashing over Manisha, lighting her up like a flare. He stood and waited until she seemed small and faraway, her willowy figure disappearing among the passengers queuing up at the security gate.

A pair of shouting baggage handlers parted for Craig as he turned, took the nearby elevator back into the depths of the airport, walked down through the darkened parking garage, past the long shadows and ranks of vacant cars. He sat in his car for several minutes with the silence, waiting for the rumble that would come, a metal bird lifting up into the sunlight, moving like a streak against the sky.

Suddenly there was a commotion behind him, and Craig jumped as a little blonde boy, no more than seven, raced up to his car and started rattling the rear door handle. A young man and wife came into view and shouted the boy down from across the aisle, waved him over as they passed. The boy took a second cursory look at Craig's car, turned, then wheeled in the other direction, his parents welcoming him into the fold as they steered him into a similar blue Accord just a few spaces down.

Craig watched the family get in their car for a long moment before starting up his own. And it occurred to him right then that Manisha was stealing more than just his breath, and that navy leather jacket with the smooth beaten cuffs and the white

crest on the shoulder. She was stealing his life. A little piece of him. Because if he ever heard from her again, saw her pass through those gates with arms open wide, it wouldn't be her any longer-it would be someone else.

Just like that stranger in the car with him last night. The one who watched the same rain lash out, hiss against the windshield with its maddening wipers as they drove through the trees, entered the Midtown Tunnel. The one who spoke when they came out the other side, let her secret free at the side of the road, said it out loud, about the clinic, the operation to come. And then that one muttered disclaimer.

"I don't think I love you anymore," she said.

The sunlight broke along his car as Craig pulled out of the parking garage and up to the gate. He slid his ticket off the dash and handed it over to the attendant he'd seen only minutes before. She tilted her hat, ran the ticket through with a brief flourish. The red ticker readout below her elbow blinked to zero.

"You're free," the woman said with the hint of a smile.

But the word offered little solace as he pulled through, merged into the flow of oncoming traffic. At the intersection, Craig waited for the lights to turn and make his escape. For now, he would live with this legacy of doubt, this half circle smile. It wasn't open for debate.

Maybe it would all disappear in time, he thought, scattered like autumn leaves on the wind. He pictured the two of them only hours before driving along the coast on their way to the airport. Van Morrison was playing low on the radio. The trees were towering over the roadside, their branches painted a brilliant shade of red and liquid amber. And the mist streaming across their path in the early morning sun like they were headed into the clouds. He straightened his car, headed for the highway.

"Maybe this is for the best," he'd said finally.

His hand started to shake, but she reached over to stop him. Manisha slipped on her sunglasses, tried not to wipe her eyes, blink in the blinding light.

"Quiet, hon. please. Let's not spoil the view," she said.

Craig took the nearby on-ramp, a thousand commuters following his lead as he drove on, his thoughts unraveling with every turn of the Interstate. He stared straight ahead and took her advice.

Scott Leslie's work has appeared in a long line of publications including *Grimm Magazine*, *Fiction Warehouse*, *All Hallows*, *Blue Murder Magazine*, *Ascent Magazine*, *Crime Scene*, *Opium Magazine*, *Twilight Times* and *The New Quarterly*. His comic piece "Four Items Found in Hugh Hefner's Overnight Bag" was published in *Mountain Man Dance Moves: The McSweeney's Book of Lists* by Vintage in September 2006. A member of the Canadian Authors Association, Scott is currently working on several projects including a comic novel, a family history, and that next elusive short story.