

California

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Rolling Stone once dubbed Joni Mitchell the Queen of El Lay, in a sexist jab at her legendary sexual conquests in 1960s California. It's the first thought I had when I came out of my Xanax coma, the morning after, waking up in a hotel in Los Angeles. As I came to in the stiff bed, the yellow California sunlight poked through the sides of the industrial-strength hotel blinds. A Xanax hangover is plain and gentle. The brain hums and restructures its dopamine release system like a busy bee, no industrial-strength Ibuprofen needed.

If someone had given me the choice between flying on a plane or cutting off an arm, I would have asked which arm they preferred. My wife's brother lives in Los Angeles, and ever since he had announced his engagement the prior year, I began dreading the cross-country flight to his wedding. It's not so much a fear of flying as it is a fear of plummeting from the sky while being trapped in a narrow tube with everyone screaming. And it's not just the people screaming, it's the explosive decompression when the windows blow out, the oxygen masks dangling uselessly, the flight attendants who were calmly distributing cans of Coke just minutes prior now reciting the mantra words Brace Brace Brace, head down, legs tucked. We booked our plane tickets and I booked a psychiatric appointment. *California, I'm gonna see the folks I dig.*

The psychiatrist told me she hates flying, too, like it was an extra tidbit she threw in with my prescription. The way she said it made me think she must gobble a bucket full of the pills before boarding the plane. I imagine her strung out at LAX or BOS or DLH. Probably DLH. Something about her strikes me as "family in Duluth, Minnesota." I pictured her stoned in Duluth and it didn't make me feel better.

I asked her for a dosage that would make me black out. I said it dryly, with an injection of sarcasm to make her smile. But she didn't. Instead she mussed with her tight ponytail and swiveled slightly in her chair to face me for the first time, maybe ever. And she gave me directions on how to responsibly black myself out. I repeated the directions back like a responsible adult, but I knew I was going to take double the amount because the screaming people never shut up.

I wish I could feel simplistic and free, as Joni does when she sings, *California, I'm coming home*, but I have a feeling Joni has never felt simple and free.

I have a body that handles its shit. I don't burn red in the sun. I eat spicy food. I've been tattooed and pierced multiple times; it didn't hurt. I can handle alcohol without acting stupid. I've never gotten a migraine in my life. I don't even know what an ice cream headache feels like. I've never been stung by a jellyfish. Once a bee flew into my forehead and stung me, and I felt a little disappointed that a bee sting wasn't more painful. I mean, I expected to die. I've seen *My Girl* starring Macauley Culkin, and I have an anxiety disorder. That's my basic reference point for everything in life.

I could handle Xanax. Before arriving at the airport, I popped one, and then to make sure it worked, I popped two.

I found myself enjoying the airport. There's stuff here. And not just planes spontaneously combusting on the runway. Good people watching. *Lots of pretty people here, reading Rolling Stone, reading Vogue.* I wanted to know everything. I wanted to explore. There

Joni Mitchell

"California"

Blue

06/1971

Reprise

were gift shops with magnets, magazines, and neck pillows. I felt like I was studying exotic birds in the field. I wandered and marveled at the strange, abridged menus in these miniature versions of restaurants. I'll get my shoes shined! I'll get smoothies! Maybe *I'll even kiss a sunset pig*, as Joni sang.

I composed myself and got smoothies. I gleefully ordered a strawberry one, a mango one, and a Caribbean medley one. I strut back to the boarding/waiting area, where everyone looked miserable and bored. What is wrong with you people? It's the airport! I want to have my birthday party here!

I presented the smoothies to my wife and son with triumph. Smoothies! Babe. Baby. My wife raised her eyebrow at the odd gesture from me.

"Thanks? I didn't ask for one?"

My son accepted the neon cup of sugar and fruit without question. Good kid.

I'm not even a "smoothie person" in real life. But suddenly I was. This is the new me. I'm trying on travelling. I'm trying on blended fruit drinks. I was trying on drugs is what I was really doing. *Will you take me as I am?* Lit up, strung out, and handing out smoothies like I was the magical smoothie Santa Claus of BWI.

Then I looked out those wall-length windows and saw the planes on the tarmac. I started to hear the screaming, again. Go away, you terrible people afraid of dying. I took a third pill before getting on the plane. The psychiatrist had said something in her directions about three in four hours, and I was only an hour in.

We boarded and took off. The Brace Brace Brace attendant came by, but this time she was saying Snacks Snacks Snacks. She encouraged me to take as many bags as I wanted because the ride was very long. She was like a Potato Chip Jesus. I took a small bag of Fritos, which joined the pre-packed snack comrades in my bag, Pop Tarts and Twizzlers. Together they were like the Super Friends of Snacks. Potato Chip Jesus also brought me the most delicious Diet Coke I have ever tasted upon mine lips, as though it was poured straight from the fountain of heaven.

Time passed. My feelings began to flatten out, no longer euphoric, just long and forever as the Midwest plained below us. Nearby I had the vague sense that my wife was struggling to keep our three-year-old buckled in his seat during severe turbulence, and that her parents were trying to get our baby daughter to nap. But I don't remember severe turbulence or tantrums or anything. I just remember my Frito Feelings of Flatness.

At some point I came back and overheard that there were still two more hours in the air. I started to hear the screaming again, very distant and muffled, as though they were shoved in trunks in the back of my brain. I took my last pill. I might as well have gotten stung by a billion bees and died. It finally shut the screaming people up, but it shut just about everything else up, too. So that's where you pesky screaming people live in my brain—right next door to perception of self, memory, and existence.

It gets so lonely when you're walking, and the streets are full of strangers. I've decided I quite like those screaming people. The next day I came back in El Lay and dreaming / sighing / buzzing of Joni Mitchell. California.