

Cullen A Curtiss  
142 Rio Seco  
Santa Fe, NM 87501  
510.847.0570  
[cullencurtiss@msn.com](mailto:cullencurtiss@msn.com)  
1846 words

## Always with a Lime

Were someone in the seat beside me, he or she would peer into my lap at this photograph of my daughters. My slight, knowing smile would show that I understand I am lucky.

“Lovely. Your daughters are lovely indeed.”

That would be the end of my peace. I would be queried until the flight touched down in Rio de Janeiro. Schools, boys, dreams. I would share what I know, which is not as much as I’d like.

But this afternoon in First Class, I have only myself to answer to, not to some chatty traveler with a briefcase. It’s nice that my last flight should be exactly as I like it, despite the heavy rains and wind.

“Mr. Kittredge? A vodka tonic?”

I hold the picture against my chest.

“Thank you, Marcia. In a tall glass, with a lime.”

“Of course.”

Marcia knows I have three daughters, but she is professional, and will pry only when I’ve given a little, like last week when I asked her to stow my coat in the

overhead bin. I said I couldn't do it because the pain in my shoulder was fierce and she asked why, and we went on from there about my trip to Miami for a weekend of golf. I'll miss her service; she makes a damn good drink and her perfume is not musky, like some of the other's.

I unfasten my seat belt and cross my ankles. Colleagues ask what I'll do with all of my free time. Play golf, I answer. Those already retired tell me that I'll likely lose a little of my identity without the job, without the title and the expense account. What they don't know is that I am a golfer more than I am anything else. And using the logic that would necessarily follow, my plans for retirement will put me in better "touch" with who I am.

"Your drink, Mr. Kittredge."

"Thank you, Marcia."

She turns and I smell her perfume, or maybe it's been her soap all this time.

"By the way, Marcia. This is my last flight to Rio de Janeiro. I thought you should know."

"Well, Mr. Kittredge, it has certainly been a pleasure. I'll miss our chats." She looks at the picture I've left on the tray table. "More time to spend with those beautiful girls of yours."

People tell me they are beautiful all the time. They are; their mother is. But this picture is particularly good. I took it because my wife can't take a decent one. Caught up in the moment of reunion or celebration, she forgets about the sun, the flash, and people's feet. So I usually take the camera and she gathers the girls in front of something impressive, like when I took them all to Venice years ago and she corralled them into one end of the boat next to the gondolier. The girls tease her

about picture time, but I know they love her for it, for embarrassing them in public, for tucking their hair behind their ears.

I adjust the light above my head and then re-fasten my belt as directed. The plane is not what you might call steady today and I carefully take a big sip of my drink to keep things under control. Not that it matters now, but I never took to wearing jeans or a running suit when traveling for business like some colleagues — it seemed tacky to me, but I'll bet their dry-cleaning bills are lower.

I'm startled when a passenger behind me lets out a little scream. Seems a flight attendant has capsized a Bloody Mary on her. Not surprising given the plane's hairy ascent through the cloud cover.

Yes, this is a perfect picture. It is August of last year and my daughters are tan. I finally notice the thing about the dresses that I've overheard my wife exclaiming to friends and relatives over the phone. Each one has a different pattern and a completely different style but they are the same colors: blue, white, and black. "And they didn't even plan it!" my wife says. "Can you imagine? Only sisters could do that!"

I see myself most in my eldest, Daphne. A round face with dark eyes. She is 25 now, but I still see her in a pink snowsuit pointing at a plane in the sky and shouting, "Daddy!" I guess she has always pointed to things and called them something else. With that talent, she'd like to be a writer and I don't really blame her. That life sounds more interesting than banking, which is what I do, but I have trouble advocating such a fickle pursuit. In the one story she's let me read, the father worked odd construction jobs, was divorced, and had a live-in girlfriend. I realize I know so little about how fiction works.

My daughters are sitting very close together on a stoop and they have their arms linked. They've always been affectionate — I don't know where that comes from.

That's a lie. I do know. It comes from their mother, who coddles them to no end, afraid she'll be construed as the distant and icy woman she thought her mother was.

Daphne occasionally hooks her arm around mine when we are walking. At first, I was taken aback, but now I rarely see her. She has always tried hard to make bridges — she used to give me and her mother the cold shoulder when we fought. If only I were brave enough to explain how irreconcilable things happen between people. I guess she will learn that from someone else in time.

We are flying above the clouds now. The sun is strong for the moment and buoys my mood, not to mention that it puts me at ease. I am reminded that I'm leaving the February winter of the northeast for another hemisphere where it is summer and I don't speak the language, not even after all of these business trips. The time to learn would obviously have been some time ago. I've recently thought about the kind of relationships I might have formed if I had taken a beginner course.

"Mr. Kittredge? Another vodka tonic?"

"You're good, Marcia."

"Just doing my job," she says and winks. "But I envy you, retiring early — what I wouldn't give to see more of son .... that is, if he'd have me." She puts a hand on her hip. "Kids seem to have so many other priorities these days, you know?"

I stare at her for a second longer than is polite. I don't know the answer to her question, but I say something that surprises me. "Deep down I think we all know family is the most important thing, don't you?"

But she has to attend to someone emerging from the cockpit and mouths the word, "Sorry."

I can see where the sun has touched a small section of the wood door behind my middle daughter's head. Although it lights all of their faces, I think there is a certain justice that it should warm and glow on the wood above Nicole's head. As a middle child, she's been characteristically frantic, not knowing which direction to go. I'm not sure I've helped to point a way. When she invited me to lunch last summer, I don't know who was more nervous. We were finishing our lattes when she finally got to her point. She asked to borrow money to get her teaching degree, and then placed a spreadsheet in front of me, and explained the repayment schedule she'd devised. What she doesn't know is that I would have given her money to start an exotic ant farm. I don't know how people get these things across to one another. I've thought of asking my golf partner who has two daughters, how he handles it.

While driving back to the office alone that day, I recalled how Nicole used to read to imaginary students for hours. She couldn't have been more than seven or eight, just learning to read herself. Sitting on the edge of the toilet, she spoke slowly and clearly to a bathtub full of bright-eyed pupils. Though she looked like a boy for a long time, with dark bangs and a bony body, there's no confusion any more; she resembles most the Native American Indian princess I have on my side of the family.

The arched door behind the girls is that of a church in the South End of Boston. My wife kept our table at a restaurant across the street while the girls posed. Daphne would return to California and her book publishing job the following morning and my youngest, Clancy, would begin her first week as an assistant account executive at an advertising company. Nicole would be teaching at a new elementary school come September.

It's fitting that Clancy is most aggressively pursuing the camera — her short, blonde haircut looks so smart. She is such a go-getter. The top half of her short-sleeved dress is all black and it's a nice, conservative contrast to the bare shoulders of Daphne and Nicole, who sit on either side of her. I think she is tired of my teasing her about her power suits. Though I offered, she wouldn't let me pull any strings for her when she graduated from college last spring. She said, "Thanks, Dad, but I'd like to take the credit." I've analyzed that one a dozen times, something I criticize my wife for doing. But such an exercise can only remind you of your insecurities.

I know that my wife made a mental note of my asking for a picture to take on this trip. I have never asked for anything like that before. I do know where she keeps this sort of thing — I could have just taken one. She will tell our daughters that I wanted their picture with me on my last trip and maybe the gesture will mean something to them.

Darkness comes over the cabin and I look out the window to see that we are approaching some undeniably sinister weather. Marcia passes quickly in the aisle and shoots me a glance. I tighten my seat belt and squeeze the lime again before finishing my drink. I will not be up here so often any more. My wife won't fly. She says she'd rather die any other way than falling out of the sky. At the moment, I understand what she means. The captain is telling all of the flight attendants to be seated.

Maybe we'll take a road trip to California this summer to see Daphne's new house, or maybe we can all converge somewhere in Montana at one of those dude ranch places. I think the girls would like that. Or better yet, a spa. That would probably be more appropriate. Perhaps I'll call my wife the minute this bird is safely

on the ground and see what she thinks of the idea. Some of those spas even have golf courses, but maybe it won't matter.