

Fuck

By Jeff Shapiro

Every fucking time.

Not that it happens often. I keep pretty cool, usually. Takes a lot for me to snap. A blatant injustice, a clear case of someone mistreating people. Silence starts to feel like cowardice. That’s when, high on indignation, pissed off past the breaking point, I speak out.

But time and again, the surer I am of my own rightness, the harder the lesson in humility waiting to hit me around the corner. Every fucking time.

Like that scene at the Italian airport thirty-fucking-three years ago. I drove my sister and my brother-in-law from Siena to Rome to see them off after their week-long visit, helpful person that I am. Problems at Fiumicino. Major hold-up. Their Air France flight (can’t remember why Air France) had been canceled, and a jumbo jet’s worth of furious passengers mobbed the check-in counter. Since I was the relative living in Italy, I seemed the natural choice to deal with European airlines and find a solution.

An hour-long wait. Twenty people ahead of us. Then ten. Then five. One more to go, and I was planning my opening line to the ticket agent. Should I stick to English or risk my embryonic Italian? Maybe I could try what was left of my high-school French...

“*Merci*,” said a voice to people behind me. “*Merci. Merci.*” A hand touched my shoulder and pushed me aside. “*Excusez-moi*,” this guy says, cutting in front.

“Hey,” I said.

And he: “*Je m’excuse.*”

Air France ticket agent should have told the son-of-a-bitch to wait his turn. Instead, I watched as he accommodated him with quiet, thoughtful care.

“We should say something,” my brother-in-law complained over my shoulder.

“I’ll take care of this,” I said, eyeing the line-skipping François or Jean-Jacques or Henri or whoever the French-fuck he was.

Good-looking fucker. Stylish loafers, loose trousers, crew-neck sweater, and a collarless black leather jacket. Three-day stubble on his jaw and chin. Reminded me of the leading man from an old *film d’auteur* I had seen once, the character who sat on a window-ledge and blew

melancholy jazz through a trumpet while on a bed behind him a naked woman slept among tousled sheets.

“We were here first,” my sister said.

I waited, madder and madder at my uselessness in setting things right.

Our turn, at last. I stepped toward the counter as the guy was pocketing the airline ticket in his black leather jacket. Enough with biting my tongue. Speak now or forever hold my grudge. “*Espèce di con*,” I whispered, proud to have remembered the best insult I’d ever learned in senior-year French class. What could top calling someone a species of cunt?

Édouard-Maurice-Antoine stopped and squared off in front of me, twice my size, I realized. A tragic look in his handsome eyes, he chewed things over before speaking. “If I weren’t rushing to catch a plane,” he said in French, “I’d punch your face in.” Off he went, pushing through the crowd.

“What did he say?” said my brother-in-law.

“Nothing.” And I stepped up to the counter.

“You were very rude,” the ticket agent told me.

“I was rude?” Outrage seethed. “What about *him*?”

“You don’t know another person’s story,” he said in French-inflected English. “His hurry is bigger than yours. His wife is dying in Paris. He had to take that plane.”

“Oh,” I said. “Still...”

The ticket agent looked at me. “Still?”

Fuck, fuck, fucking fuck.

Every fucking time.