



Dubroff Debris

Today's lesson is taken from *Airplane!*, for as pilot Peter Graves and doctor Leslie Nielsen so memorably put it:

"Surely you can't be serious?"

"I *am* serious—and don't call me Shirley."

We'll never know how serious little Jessica was. But her father Lloyd Debris—sorry, Dubroff (how quickly the names fade)—was deadly serious, and, if you'd called his daughter Shirley, he wouldn't have minded at all: Jessica was sold to us as a Shirley Temple for the nineties, a plucky, pug-nosed moppet with a can-do spirit. As things turned out, her can't-do ending made a much better story, at least for everyone except li'l Jess: when her single-engine Cessna splattered the drab asphalt of a suburban driveway—or, as her mom put it, "their beautiful bodies touched the beautiful earth"—all kinds of stock figures from American life, from New Age earth mothers to old-time stage mothers, seemed to fuse and mutate into one almighty mother of a story.

Jessica bounced the Unabomber from the top of the evening news, and made him look sane by comparison. Death is supposed to be the great leveler and, when it has so cruelly exposed the gulf between reality and illusion, we should be humble enough to recognize our folly. Instead, clergymen who should have been modestly ushering her into the Lord's Temple were instead abasing themselves before the Shirley Temple, conspiring in the myth that Jessica had soared above the vulgar flight of common souls. "God bless the mother, God bless the father, and God bless the flight instructor who taught that

girl to dream," the Rev. Reggie Cleveland drooled at a service in Cheyenne. "An even greater tragedy would be never to dream at all," the Rev. David Rockwood gushed at her funeral in Pescadero, California. Bad weather prevented her nine-year-old brother (or was it the three-year-old sister?) from making a ceremonial fly-by, but the mourners (if that's the word) enjoyed a fine rendition of "I'll Fly Away."

Maybe they should have opted for "Free Bird" by fellow plane-crash victims Lynyrd Skynyrd instead. Or "Careless" by Glenn Miller. Or "But You Love Me, Daddy" by Jim Reeves. Or "Baby, I Don't Care" by Buddy Holly. Or maybe, of the many American pop stars who failed to live long enough to cash in their frequent flyer miles, it's Patsy Cline who should have provided the soundtrack to Jessica's funeral: a solo rendition of "I Fall to Pieces."

Every age finds its symbols. In the nineteenth century, the railroads helped build a country. In the twentieth, the plane may yet come to symbolize our national disintegration. It is, to be sure, the perfect emblem for an age that demands instant gratification: it gets you there quicker. For Lloyd Debris, the plane was supposed to get his daughter to fame quicker: short-cut celebrity. So they took off in April, because May would have been too late: Jess would have turned eight, and the flight would have been merely a flight, not a "historic first." And they flew out of Cheyenne in a blizzard because they had to make Massachusetts in time for the "Today" show.

Yet even if they'd made "Today," we'd all have forgotten her tomorrow. That's why those wimpy clergymen's fudging of the issue is so grotesque. "Dream" is one of the most potent words in the American vocabulary, the noun to which the adjective

"American" is most particularly applied. But the "American Dream" used to be something realized by very down-to-earth methods. We all know the old joke about the tourist and the New York cabbie: "How do you get to Carnegie Hall?" "Practice." Nowadays you can forget it: practice was for the steam age. Li'l Jess wasn't a violin prodigy; she couldn't sing and dance like Shirley Temple; she hadn't put in the hours. She'd dabbled in piano and trumpet and horse-riding, just as she'd dabbled in "flying" for the last four months of her life. To quote from "When You Wish Upon a Star":

*If your heart is in your dream
No request is too extreme.*

Jessica fails that test. But, undeterred, her dad decided to fake her into the history books anyway—or, at any rate, into a TV movie (he was trying to sell the rights). They said she didn't know the meaning of the word fear. But that's more to do with the deficiencies of her mom's ad hoc "home schooling" program: she didn't know the meaning of the word *aardvark*, either.

This story's so crazy that the only one who behaved with anything approaching normalcy was President Clinton. "To visit you at the White House would be wonderful," Jess wrote, and then offered to take him for a spin. "Clearly to pilot an airplane that you would be in would bring me even greater joy." It must have been a tough call for the old photo-opportunist, but, if he ever read the letter, he was shrewd enough, unlike the rest of America, not to inhale. Instead, he reacted like a commuter who finds himself sitting opposite the nut on the bus: he declined to acknowledge her. A child of the sixties, he nevertheless had no desire to join the glorious pantheon: Buddy Holly, Lynyrd Skynyrd, William Jefferson Airplane Clin-

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ton. Daddy Debris may have taken the networks for a ride, but not the president.

Or maybe it takes a phony to smell a phony, an emperor with no clothes to spot that there's nothing holding up the plane. Look at Jessica's letter, written in her own child's hand and reproduced in a Dallas newspaper: clearly, her "clearly" is not the adverbial deployment of a seven-year old. It's the voice of Daddy telling her what to do. As much as any other celebrity—like supermodel Naomi Campbell's "novel" and superwoman Hillary Clinton's treatise on child-rearing—Jess needed a ghost-writer. Everything about this story was fake: a non-pilot taking a non-flight for a non-record in order to get on the non-news shows. Who needs a TV movie with Jess and Dad played by actors? Everyone involved—from Jess and Dad to Katie Couric and Forrest Sawyer—was already acting out his or her role.

In a strange way, the person who emerges with the most integrity is Jessica's Mom, the "spiritual healer": she's so crazy she can't even fit into the media craziness, insisting that "grief is something we invent" and "emotion is unnatural." At the Clintonian level, it surely is. While the president was carrying on like a distraught mom over Ron Brown, it was left to the real mom to come across like a chilly, distant chief executive, refusing to play along with the grief junkies.

"The report of my death," Mark Twain famously wrote to the *New York Journal*, "was an exaggeration." Today, reports of celebrity deaths are all exaggerations. Death has become the final round in the beauty contest, the ultimate celebrity streamlining: almost any of the chief execs on Ron Brown's ill-fated flight over Croatia was doing a more useful job than the secretary or his entire Commerce Department. But as their families, and that of Jessica's flight instructor, were to discover, a plane crash leaves room for only one Buddy Holly; the rest wind up playing Richie Valens or the Big Bopper. Brown's fellow passengers had no celebrity to beat the drum for them as the president did for his friend, in a week of formal mourning and daily eulogies which would have been the envy of a long-reigning monarch. The pomp worked so well that, before long, commentators were crit-

icizing senior Republicans for being insufficiently grief-stricken and maudlin. Bob Grant was sacked for saying, as news of the crash was still filtering through, that he didn't want to be "a pessimist" but that the rumored sole survivor was bound to be Brown. By Grant's standards, it was comparatively restrained in its offensiveness; perhaps, if you were related to the plane's hapless supporting players, it wasn't offensive at all.

And perhaps, when we weigh the transparent nastiness of Grant against the ever-swelling armies of grief junkies, we might recognize that the former is less harmful to the nation's health than the latter. That's to say, the banal redaction of a celebrity's life to the most convenient stereotype on hand is far more degrading of his humanity. There is, after all, a more recognizable grain of the real Ron Brown in Grant's jibe—he was a wily political survivor—than in, say, Ted Kennedy's eulogizing of him as a "Will Rogers in reverse: everyone who met Ron Brown liked him." That's just a mawkish all-purpose Hallmark greeting card: Insert name of deceased here.

And if the real Ron Brown in all his complex individuality was in danger of being smothered by the eulogies-to-go of the nation's Pain-Feeler-in-Chief, then what of the real Jessica Dubroff? Even in her moment in the limelight, even as she stared out at us from every front page, she was curiously invisible. As Jessica's famous first turned into a famous last, the media struggled to attach one after another contradictory stereotype to her. Maybe she is a famous first, the first program-your-own "virtual celebrity," a projection of everyone else's fantasies: To her mom, she was a New Age earth-child living "in a state of being." To her dad, a ticket to deflected fame. To the big-haired, big-shot female interviewers, a feminist comrade-in-arms (the "Women Fly" cap was a nice touch on her dad's part). To the citizens of Cheyenne—people who never *knew* her except from TV and radio, but who piled on the blacktop a mound of polyester teddy bears and garish balloons with cheery slogans intended for school graduations ("We'll Miss You")—she was, most implausibly, an all-American mopet. And to all her seven-year old chums, she was...ah, but li'l Jess doesn't seem to have known any other seven-year old girls.

Truth is stranger than fiction, and thus too complicated for the sound-bite age. Pescadero, we're told, is a "tightly-knit community" of "mom 'n' pop stores." But, in real tightly-knit communities, it would not have taken Jessica's death to bring to the town's attention that the Dubroff kids were not enrolled at school or in any "home schooling" program; some of those moms 'n' pops would have noticed earlier.

Somewhere, underneath the twisted metal, underneath the memorial mound of teddy bears (which Jess had never been allowed), underneath the networks' candy-coating and her dad's showbiz huckstering and her mom's experiments in self-expression, there must have been a real Jessica Dubroff. But in our search to find meaning in her death, few of us want to accept that its only meaning is its exquisite meaninglessness: for almost every word applied to this pathetic story—"achievement," "community"—in this context is utterly meaningless. In the sixties, Marshall McLuhan foresaw "electronic interdependence" leading to a "global village." In the nineties, Jessica's deformed childhood reminds us of how routine social isolation now is, and the travesty of her unearned celebrity confirms only that a "global village" is no substitute for a real one. Her mom, it should be said, has no regrets about her daughter's brief, experimental life. And, in her cool, calm voice, there's an eerie echo of the old surgeon's line: the operation was a complete success, even though the patient died.

Unattended by doctor or midwife, li'l Jess was born in a birthing tub: her mom wanted her to have a sense of "floating." Jess liked flying, she said, because she liked "floating." But flying isn't floating, and that basic confusion tells you all you need to know about the kid's understanding of what she was doing. "I came like Water, and like Wind I go," wrote Edward Fitzgerald in *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*.

But that's too high-flown for poor Jessica's epitaph. No man is an island, said John Donne, but li'l Jess is a "Fantasy Island." Like that show's opening titles, where what's-his-name—the dwarf, the one who later committed suicide—tugs the sleeve of Ricardo Montalban and points up to the sky, Forrest and Katie cried, "Dee plane, dee plane!" and rushed to greet the fantasists of the week. ✻



Riverside Drive West

By the way, how does Mexico treat its illegals?

It was Rodney King all over again, with a reminder of O.J. Simpson. An 80-mile chase on California freeways ended when a truck carrying twenty-one illegal Mexican immigrants finally stopped. Videotape shot by a helicopter news crew caught two sheriff's deputies clubbing the driver of the truck and a passenger with nightsticks. The videotape was shown over and over on CNN, and it made all the evening news programs. Cries of outrage immediately followed. The Mexican government charged racism, while the White House expressed concern, and civil rights and immigration groups held demonstrations. Hypocrisy lay thick on the ground, along with intrusions into domestic politics. Republican rhetoric, apparently, had led to the beating of the Mexican driver and his passenger. Actually, they were lucky they only got clubbed.

Consider the provocations. The truck evaded a Border Patrol checkpoint. Various police units then pursued it, reportedly at speeds up to 100 miles an hour. Passengers in the truck threw beer cans at the pursuers. When the camper frame on the truck became loosened, they threw chunks of that. Meanwhile, the driver of the truck sideswiped cars, presumably as a diversionary tactic. When the truck stopped, the occupants bolted, except for the driver and two passengers. Two sheriff's deputies from Riverside County then approached, while the news crew hovered overhead. An international incident was born with the resulting fifteen sec-

onds of videotape. It showed that the Mexicans offered no resistance when the deputies hit them. The driver of the truck, Enrique Nunez Flores, suffered a hair-line fracture of an elbow. His companion and perhaps common-law wife, Alicia Soltero Vasquez (or Leticia Gonzalez, depending on which paper you read, and when you read it), required no immediate medical attention, although apparently she suffered bruises. It was unclear what happened to the other passenger—he wasn't on the videotape—although his lawyer said later that he also had been beaten.

Grant now that the deputies acted improperly. As the *Los Angeles Times* and virtually every other California news organization reported, they had violated Riverside Sheriff's Department guidelines. The *Times* noted that on the videotape, "neither deputy can be seen discharging pepper spray, and neither appears to display his baton as a warning to the suspects before striking them." The *Times* also reported that one of the deputies "once was associated" with a group of deputies "who adopted a swaggering attitude to make it clear they would not tolerate lawbreakers." A few days later, the *Times* disclosed that the deputies had yelled first at the illegal immigrants in English and not Spanish. An audio tape made by the California Highway Patrol had revealed that the deputies shouted "Get down" at the driver and the two passengers. Then they hit them; only then did they say, "*Manos aqui*"—Spanish for "hands here."

Presumably, the two deputies will now be punished, although hopefully not because one was once associated with other deputies who swaggered, or because

neither, at a time of high stress, spoke in English and not Spanish. On the other hand, you never know. Media coverage focused more on the big picture—incipient racism, police brutality, immigrants' rights—than it did on the actual incident, and someone has to pay. Reporters and correspondents do not empathize with cops the way they once did. After leading the police on an 80-mile chase during which he sideswiped other vehicles, while his passengers threw beer cans, Enrique Nunez Flores may be thought fortunate to have suffered only a fractured elbow. The coverage, however, suggested otherwise.

At the Radio-TV Correspondents dinner in March, Marc Morano, Rush Limbaugh's man in Washington, asked Walter Cronkite to comment on CBS correspondent Bernard Goldberg's charge that the media had a liberal bias. "Everybody knows that there is a liberal, that there is a heavy liberal persuasion among correspondents," Cronkite replied. "Anybody who has to live with people, who covers police stations or covers county courts, brought up that way, has to have a degree of humanity that people who do not have that exposure don't have."

Cronkite, though, had it backwards. In the media age, correspondents do not cover police stations or county courts. They drop in only for the really big story, and miss almost everything else. Police stations and county courts deal with bad people who make good people miserable. If the correspondents hung around more, their humanity would be widened considerably, and they would be more sympathetic to all the rest of us, even to, or perhaps especially to, the police.

At the same time, some things simply had to be reported. In the same story in

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