

While the world sleeps.

Elizabeth Shove

I was stuck in the middle between my older brother Joey and my parents: seat C24. We'd made the journey many times before and I knew it was what they call a 'long haul' flight. I fastened my seat belt and opened the special packet they hand out to children - hard crayons, some paper and a game controller you plug into the console: up, down, light and dark. At thirteen I had no use for the colouring book, but I put the controller in the seat pocket in case I got bored later on.

There was a lot happening and it wasn't until after dinner that I began to explore my options. Joey was already well into a film about dinosaurs. The blue green light reflected back from his screen. I played with the menu: TV documentaries, films, children's classics, the list went on and on, but as usual, it was channel 9 that held my attention.

The little white shape of an aeroplane left a trail through Europe. We were going East across the arc of day and night. Dusk was now somewhere over Iran. I used the buttons on the screen to switch between a closer and a more distant view. We have a model of the solar system in our classroom at school but I'm still a bit mystified by the planets. I get the idea that daylight areas are those that face the sun, that the earth spins on its axis every 24 hours, and that the moon orbits the earth. But what happens in the plane? Are we still rotating? The thought of everyone moving all the time made me feel giddy.

I looked back at the screen. Down in Iran people would be switching off their TVs and heading to bed. Owls and cats would be coming into their own as night fell. I prodded my mother's soft warm body. 'Mum, when do moles go to bed?' I asked. I was curious now. She shifted position. 'Shh, not now' she said and drew the thin blanket over her shoulder.

In the end I gave up thinking about moles in Iran and in India and China and plugged the games console into the socket. I was still on channel 9. The handset lit up and to my surprise, the controls appeared to work. I pressed the up-arrow and the globe tilted a bit. I quickly hit 'down' and set it right. A huge brontosaurus reared up on Joey's screen. I tried another button. The effect was immediate. When I pressed 'light', the margin of darkness receded.

I was impressed. I had just put bedtime back for half the population. I was about to see if the 'dark' button would send the globe the other way when the 'fasten seatbelt' sign came on.

'This is your captain speaking. There is nothing to worry about, but we seem to have some planetary disturbance. Air traffic control is looking into it. In the meantime, relax and enjoy your flight.'

I glanced around the darkened aircraft. It was me! I didn't mean to but I'd used the games controller to change the position of the earth. I had to tell someone, but mum was asleep. Joey lifted out one of his ear-pieces. 'Don't you know what time it is?' he said. 'No, but Joey, listen, listen to me, I can control the world.' He put his ear-piece back in and returned to the film. A flock of pterodactyls took off from a swamp, and the sky darkened.

I returned to channel 9. What if I pressed 'down' and 'dark; at the same time? I gave it a go. An error message flashed up: 'C24 System malfunction: please reset'. I unplugged the controller and returned to the main menu. Channel 9 was still there. I checked the edge of light and dark: I had definitely moved the boundary backwards. I plugged the controller back in, but this time nothing happened. The window shades were all down. I had no idea what time it was, or how many more hours we had to go. Joey's film had finished. All the dinosaurs were extinct.

I pulled my knees up to my chest and wondered about the little 'planetary disturbance' that I'd triggered. If I'd changed the rotation of the earth, had I also changed the meaning of time on the moon? Was it something like this that wiped out Joey's dinosaurs?

The next thing I knew, we were about to land.

Mum was checking the details of the shuttle bus into town. The cabin lights were on and the window shades were up. Outside, there was a glimmer of dawn. The air hostesses bustled about, collecting ear phones and consoles.

I gathered mine up and handed it over. The hostess looked at me curiously and smiled. 'C24?' 'Yes' I replied. She separated the controller - 'We'll have to have that one reset'. She moved on to the next row before I had the chance to ask what she meant.

Dad led the way down the steps. I looked up at the sky. It was definitely darker than it should be, but was that my fault? I shrugged. I knew I'd be wasting my breath if I tried to explain what I'd done, and in any case no one seemed to care.

In the main airport terminal we reset our watches and began the day ahead.