

The Potluck Seatmate

Pausing before taxiing onto the main runway at the local airport, my seatmate opened his door. "You're ready to fly on your own. Do your thing and remember the plane will be lighter on take-off without my weight."

I was frozen in place and afraid of taking the next step without my trusty seatmate by my side. The time had come, so to speak, and I had acquired enough skills for landing an airplane. My flight instructor slammed the door shut and strode off diagonally on the grass to the terminal never looking back at his student. He had confidence in my capabilities like a parent letting the rope go one bit at a time.

Now it was up to me. I took a deep breath, hastily noticed the empty seat next to me and flew into the deep blue sky for the three required take-offs and landings before coming in for a full stop back at the hanger. Pilots gave me the thumbs-up, and at a small ceremony, my shirttail was cut off for hanging inside lined up with the fraternity of others who had achieved the first step in preparation for their licenses. I had made it proudly into the hall of fame that morning in August.

Once I was seated behind a young couple with four-month-old twins. Immediately I put on my noise cancelling headphones and tuned in to Dave Brubeck. "I can do this," I thought to myself pulling out any possible negativity that might ruin an overnight flight to Europe. The couple was very pleasant and when I asked where they were going, they shared with me that they were taking the babies to see her parents in England for the first time. I told them it is an ambitious project, but that went right over their heads. It was not to phase them the least, and each did their share of the workload. The little ones were quite congenial, too, and slept most of the night away. I thought about how excited those grandparents will be waiting for their first viewing of those precious bundles at Heathrow, and what grand a time they will all have together.

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Barely catching my breath from an extremely tight connection, I slumped into my aisle seat with a sigh of relief and a promise to myself that I would never put myself through that ordeal again even if it means waiting in an airport lounge several extra hours. As soon as I got composed and took out a book in an era before e-readers, I glanced over at my seatmate, an elderly white-haired gentleman in black clothes and a colorful woven shawl over his shoulders fingering prayer beads. He shifted a little to the other direction and I got his message that he

wanted his space. We never spoke on the flight and I recall falling in and out of sleep blissfully eyeing the prayer beads moving back and forth between his fingers comforting me as well. I would begin a visit with my sister living in England and meeting her new husband for the first time.

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On a short commuter flight to LaGuardia, I chose a window view hoping to catch a sunny day's entry into the flight space over New York's metropolitan area. My seatmate, an immaculately dressed business woman in a no nonsense navy suit, promptly informed me, "Please put down the arm rest. I don't touch." Apparently I hadn't noticed when I had buckled in, and I didn't feel it necessary to apologize as a confident woman in my own right. There was no further conversation.

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I was heading from Rochester on an hour and fifteen minute flight late in the afternoon before flying on to Dublin that evening out of JFK. A mid-forties man took the seat next to mine, and proceeded to talk non-stop all the way telling me about his business dealings at Xerox, his wife, kids, the dog and everything else imaginable about life in his Massachusetts suburb. Oh, I heard about his recent high school reunion, too. I couldn't get in a word edgewise, even if I had wanted to spill my life story. The most humbling thing that he said to me as we started our descent near Long Island was that he was petrified of flying and by talking, it had calmed him and taken his mind off his phobia. "By the way," he said on deplaning, "where are you headed?" "To Ireland." "You're a brave one," he replied.

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"Tell us all about New York City," a young Slovakian couple inquired from me in spotless English on my way back to the United States. They were coming on a vacation and I felt obligated to give them my best tourist pep talk. I was pleased that they had done a tremendous amount of homework while planning their trip, and it made my job a lot easier verifying what they already knew. The only thing that they really hadn't comprehended was the huge size of our country from coast to coast—no one does really—and their ambitious plans to spend time in Los Angeles, Las Vegas and Orlando. Somehow, I just had a sense that they would get it all accomplished as they had a precise and orderly way about them. When I pointed out the Statue of Liberty, we looked at each other a little teary-eyed, and I realized that I was grateful to be home and they were viewing a symbol of freedom that allowed them to visit wherever they pleased.

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The abrupt ups and downs of the plane coming in for landing were jarring to the best of flyers attempting to hold their nerves and stomachs at bay. When I saw a huge burst of lightning from sky to ground illuminating the night runway at LaGuardia, I became acutely aware that there is a God Creator right here, right now who gives and takes life. I was coming home to my father's funeral. If the truth is known as I look back, God was showing me my father was already where he belonged.

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On the way to Dallas to meet my future in-laws, I sat next to an African American man who was going for a job interview with a motivational company. He practiced on me for three hours. I must say that he politely asked me several times if he was disturbing me, and I didn't mind for I was intrigued with his thoughts on how being positive changes your whole perception. He had such an effortless manner about his delivery and modeled a confident person. For all I know, he could have been full of bullshit like others I have been seated with at different times, and here I was the gullible listener drawn in by his charm. By the time we landed, my own level of self-worth had increased ten-fold, and I walked into the terminal purposefully to be greeted and hugged by two people who wouldn't be strangers for long.

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I made a promise to myself, that if I came off this flight alive, I would never take a small turbo-prop airplane again. The lake effect snowstorm over Ontario was beyond horrible, and I couldn't see a thing from the window other than streaks of white flashing by while I was tossed in my seat in every which direction. Neither did I care that my then boyfriend would be meeting me in the terminal, and we would be having a few days together. I don't remember much conversation on the plane among the passengers, and seated by myself I kept my eyes focused a head listening to what radio chatter I could hear from the open cockpit door (before the FAA rule after September 11th). Every few minutes one or the other pilot would turn his head around to check on us, and that was it for flight service. The plane landed safely in Syracuse after a couple aborted attempts, more circling in the unsettled sky and a final run for it when the weather opened momentarily. The relationship didn't fare as well, and it ended up in the clouds never managing to lift off into reality.

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As far as I am concerned, one request takes the cake above all others. I've had all sorts of pleas from seatmates, and when I am able to oblige, I will try to be a reasonable human being. On this particular flight from San Francisco across the country to Washington D.C., I had taken my position in my chosen aisle seat. It is something I plan when I book my trip, as I want the control of getting in and out without disturbing someone else. I move a lot and walk the aisle for exercise. A young twenty-something female dropped into the middle seat, the exact

seat no one wants, but often the only available option if booking late. She looked at me and said snappily, "I have a bad back and need to get up every twenty minutes. The flight attendant told me to ask you to change with me." Maybe it was her attitude that got me, but I firmly replied, "I will be more than willing to get up when you ask me during the flight. I am not switching seats." She harrumphed and settled in her seat like a spoiled child. I don't recall her ever asking to get out once on the long flight.

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On a fifteen-hour flight to Johannesburg, South Africa, I was traveling solo to join a tour group in a couple days. I would be on my own until then, and I had made plans to hire a private driver to take me on a tour of the city, in particular, all things having to do with Nelson Mandela and Soweto. Once during the early evening I got up to wait in the line for the restroom when I spied a woman of nearly my age who was wearing the same tour company logo shirt. We started to chat and it turns out that two others and her were following the identical itinerary. We agreed to meet in baggage claim and get the van to the hotel together. I went back to my seat happily that I had made a connection that would help me be not so alone on my month's safari. The couple I was sitting next to paid no attention to my glee busy in their own world. I loved how she put her head down resting on her lover's lap all night.

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It's hard not to listen in to a conversation that your two seatmates are having together, especially when their voices begin to escalate in anger and tension cuts through air. Apparently, they were flying to Paris to celebrate their engagement. The woman was using this opportunity to convince her fiancé that she wanted children, and he should be agreeing with her. Why they had waited to this point in their relationship to bring up this serious subject, I have no clue. I was on an international carrier that freely serves wine to its passengers, and I believe it was the smart thing to have the second glass and put on my noise-cancelling headphones.

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Hollywood couldn't have made a better movie starring a sobbing teenager being dragged away from her two high school friends at the gate on the final boarding call by her two horrible parents yanking her away from a life with little promise for her without a college education. The true story goes that my ex-husband and I decided to go together to help our daughter enroll in college and get adjusted to her Texas residence. She wasn't co-operating and wanted to stay with her two friends, both would be spending the year rustling around getting their acts together. She felt we were forcing her, and sobbed the entire trip. Helpful people handed over Kleenex; one man offered to lay hands and pray over her. Our pleasant family bonding wasn't happening on this trip. Years later, my daughter thanked us for being firm and sticking to our guns.

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On a return trip from Costa Rica, my husband and I settled into the last row of the plane. These are the seats no one in their right mind wants thanks to a limited slant of the seat back and next to the smells of the bathrooms. "How did you manage that?" a kindly flight attendant asked us while other passengers were boarding systematically in the rows a head. I explained that the airline had cancelled its Saturday run and our only option was to return the day before leaving our lovely beach retreat behind. To make the flight enjoyable and help us leave with a good impression of the airline, the flight attendant subtly took care of us exceptionally well. We weren't expecting those extra perks of wine and cheese, but it didn't hurt.

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The best seatmate that I ever had was my young flight instructor when I took the controls of a single engine Cessna at my home airport in the Genesee Valley of Western New York. I had turned fifty and my husband figured that I had every possible present imaginable, and as a complete surprise, gave me a gift certificate for a flight lesson. Little did either of us know, including the pilot who took me up for an introductory flight, that I would sign up for lessons that very morning. It hadn't been an ideal day in the sky with a lot of little bumps and nudges a pilot must learn to manage.

I grew to love the easy-going instructor, who encouraged me to spread my wings and take on a new challenge in my middle age. He had been chosen especially for me by the owner of the flight school, and from our give-and-take conversations, I received a thorough education. Perhaps, that is what turned me into a better passenger when upon the take-off roll I visualize out the cockpit window to the horizon and beyond.