

Ready, Set, Pull Out Your Rosary!

by Morgan Berendes

I looked down at my fidgeting hands. They were beginning to perspire. My right foot was tapping uncontrollably. I had goose bumps all down my bare legs and arms. I couldn't tell if it was from the frigid air conditioning or from my nerves. I took a deep breath and tried to focus on anything but what waited ahead. I let my eyes aimlessly wander about the airport lobby. The aroma of nacho cheese and greasy burgers filled the air. I spotted a blind man with his service dog waiting by the wall. I looked to my left and saw a little girl around the age of ten, calmly reading a book, waiting alone for the same flight. I had begun to think that my fears were obsolete. If a ten year old girl who was alone showed no fear over a plane ride, then neither should a sixteen year old girl. However, my fears were reinforced when the whooshing of a plane taking off outside the window captured my attention. Suddenly, dread consumed my whole body.

To my right, the door crept open, exposing a dark tunnel. A woman's voice came over the intercom lobby announcing it was our time to board. My parents stood up and grabbed their luggage. Dad was ready to follow Ma, but decided to look back to make sure I was following. His eyes met mine, and he was ready to ask if I was coming, when I rose to unsteady feet. I slowly extended my handle and rolled my luggage behind me.

His eyes crinkled the way they always do when he watches his Saturday afternoon westerns. He pulled me into a side hug for reassurance saying, "You'll be fine, Morgy Bear. It's just a plane ride thousands of feet in the air with no way out. What could possibly go wrong?"

Ma turned around to put her two cents in, "I heard the pilots don't even fly the plane. That they just put it on autopilot."

"You know for parents, you two are cruel."

Dad just chuckled and gave me a squeeze. He released me, leaving me less confident than before, if that was even possible. I followed my parents to the desk for our tickets to be scanned. Once I heard the dreaded beep, I was admitted through the rope. I glanced back and spotted the little girl laughing and talking to a gentlemen in line behind us. Turning around, I looked ahead to the dark, uninviting tunnel leading to the plane. I took a deep breath, inhaling the stuffy air of that hot California summer day, straightened my back, and marched forward.

As I got to the end of the tunnel, I saw the door to the plane. My heart began to beat as if it were trying to keep up to a polka dance. My palms started to perspire again, or maybe they never stopped. The little confidence I had was replaced with the fear of the unknown. I once again took a huge breath before crossing the threshold. I was suddenly hit with a cold draft coming from the plane. The constant temperature changes were annoying me. I glanced at the stewardess, who gave a friendly smile. I tried to return the gesture, but my nerves overtook any other sense I was once capable of controlling. I followed my parents to our seats, the very last row in the back of the plane. My dad asked if I wanted the window. The look I gave him must have been answer enough because he decided to let my mom take the opportunity. I took my seat and tried to find my "happy place" so that I could endure this long plane ride. Once everyone boarded and the standard safety instructions were given by the flight attendant, we began to taxi out onto the runway. I was mentally preparing myself for the journey ahead when the plane slowly began to turn in the opposite direction of the strip. I looked at my dad in confusion just as the pilot came over the intercom.

"Well folks, it looks like we are having a malfunction in one of our engines. We are going to taxi back to have our mechanics look it over. Just hang tight. It should be no time at all before we are in the air."

An engine malfunction? In other words, the engine was broke. Of course this would happen to my melodramatic life at the age of sixteen.

As we waited in our seats, we passed the time with cards. After a total of two and a half hours, to my surprise, the pilot returned over the intercom and said the plane was fixed and we were ready for take-off. We were going to fly in a plane with a broken engine?! I couldn't believe it! I was more petrified flying in this broken plane than I was earlier. My dad informed me that it was no longer broken. But I still thought otherwise.

I prepared myself for the take-off as we began to taxi out onto the runway once more. As the plane picked up speed, I felt as we were lifted into the air. At that point, I said goodbye to my sanity.

My hands were the color of a corpse. As the plane continued to ascend at an immense speed, my grip on the arm rests tightened. I dreaded the fact that I was to be on this broken plane for another two painstaking hours. I tried to close my eyes and relax, but with every monumental shift of the plane, I was instantaneously awake and alert.

Just as I thought my body couldn't endure any more stress, the pilot came over the intercom. "Alright, Ladies and Gentlemen, due to the delay we will be flying as high as we can. We will be reaching maximum speeds and hopefully those passengers who need to make connecting flights will be on time."

My mind was reeling. As if flying on my first plane wasn't terrifying enough, I was on a broken plane that was going to be reaching the most treacherous height and speed! Could this possibly be any worse?

As if reading my mind, the pilot added, "It looks as if we are going to be experiencing some turbulence. Everyone needs to return to their seats and engage their seat belts."

Just great. I watched as each stewardess returned the carts and sat down in their seats to buckle up as well. Nothing had prepared me for what was about to happen next. As the plane began to shake uncontrollably, I noticed the lady across from me had pulled out her rosary. I closed my eyes and prayed, "Dear Lord, this is the end."

Seconds after, the whole back end of the plane dropped, and my eyes flew open at anatomical speed. My butt rose off my chair, and the safety belt was the only thing restraining me. I heard my dad gasp, and I impulsively let out a blood curdling scream as my eyes bugged out of my head.

The plane leveled out, and the turbulence seemed to be over. The worst had happened to the plane and apparently to everyone else's hearing as I had over a hundred pairs of eyes glaring at me, including the little girl I had spotted earlier.

My dad loudly announced that it was my first time flying. As if that was explanation enough, heads slowly began to turn around.

My tension, however, did not ease. As the two hour flight came to an end, I could feel the ache in my hands from the fierce grip on the arm rests. I was praying this plane would land in one piece, rather than a million as I continued to picture. I could feel the nose dip down as we began the dreadful descent back to the ground. I kept my eyes fixed on the red EXIT sign a few seats in front of me, wishing there was a way to exit this situation. As if the turbulence wasn't bad enough, this descent had my mind in a frenzy. The red light was piercing through my vision. All I could picture was fire. The plane was going to plummet uncontrollably to the ground in a great ball of fire. We were all going to die.

I had to peel my eyes away from that mind-controlling sign. I let them drift around the cabin until they rested on one particular law-breaking citizen. The man I was looking at had his phone in hand and was talking to his business partner, no doubt, about mergers. Hello! All electronic devices should be turned off when the plane is taking off and landing! Did he want us all to die?!

I was so terrified the electronic signals of his cell phone would mess with the plane signals that I didn't even have time to be furious at his stupidity. The baby's wails in front of me pierced through my ears, as I prepared for our inevitable fate. His petrified eyes met mine, and I wished I could join the infant in his screams of terror. Instead, I just closed my eyes and let the fear take over my body. The tires groaned as they escaped their confinement within the belly of the plane. For the second time that day, the safety belt kept me in my seat as the first tire touched ground at what must have been an unsafe speed for a landing. The wheels bounced off and on the runway, and the brakes were applied. My veins popped out of my already clenched fists. The seats rattled, and the cabin shook ferociously as all the tires touched ground. They caused a smell that resembled a fire. This was the end, I thought. The plane was going to finally burst into flames. I kept my eyes pinched shut so tightly, I was surprised to find wet tears rolling down my cheeks.

What seemed like hours later, Dad reached over and touched my knee. "Are you going to get up, Sweetheart? We have to get our luggage yet."

I slowly opened up my eyes, blinked, and looked up at my father.

His eyes were crinkled the way they always do. "How was that for your first plane ride?"

"We are driving next time," I simply responded.

As I look back on this experience, I realize how dramatic this event seemed at the time. To be honest, my whole life at that stage was dramatic. Nevertheless, I have yet to overcome my fear of flying. I think that riding in a plane that was not truly broke, but had a significant malfunction, scared me for all future experiences. I have, on the other hand, learned to keep the blood curdling screams to a minimum. They aren't appreciated. And ever since that first plane ride, I make darn sure I pack my rosary.