

Air Travel

Just once I would like an easy departure, but as usual my flight out of Grand Rapids was delayed and I knew I'd have to run to make my connecting flight in Pittsburgh. But that's nothing new. Over the past few years I have become an airport decathlete, excelling in all of the skills practiced by the frequent air traveler. I can sprint from gate to gate like a track star when necessary, leap unexpected obstructions like a seasoned high jumper, and throw my carry on through an x-ray machine like the most highly skilled discus champion. The hazards of airport navigation have become great, but we all must learn to adapt or be left on the ground.

After a stint as a jet engine mechanic in the Navy, I became slightly afraid to fly. The problem was, now that I knew how to fix airplanes, I also knew what held them together. There no longer seemed to be enough nuts and bolts holding all of the parts in place. It didn't help matters that I also now knew *who* was keeping all of the aircraft aloft, but that's another story.

As the frequency of my air adventures increased, the trepidation with which I faced each new journey began to fade. The noises and bumps made by the plane had become routine. I was sure, after all, the pilot and crew didn't want fall out of the sky any more than I did. On one particularly bone-jarring flight down the Florida coast, I realized I had pretty much closed the door on my fear of flying. While the other passengers cried aloud and perfect strangers held hands across the aisle, I took off my glasses and went to sleep.

These days, my fears have resurfaced, although they are of a different nature. My discomfort is brought on, not by the mechanical nature of the aircraft, but by the human nature of my fellow passengers. The squeaks and buzzes of the plane do not concern me as much as the way the man in seat 26 D is studying his shoes, or the strange language being whispered by the two men in the aisle ahead of me. Even the crew deserves careful scrutiny; there is nothing I want less than to be caught off-guard should any incident arise during my flight. Once in the air I always seem to feel better, although on this particular flight the bell that signals the flight attendant made me jump out of my skin, not once, but twice.

So how then do we adjust to the new hazards of air travel? Do we trade in our frequent flier miles for road maps and pit stops? During a 15 hour trip to the east coast on America's highways, I was reminded that I am not 25 anymore and any ideas of making the trip to Florida by car this year had just gone out the window. I will keep to the air, but with the attitude that "When your number's up, your number's up". If there is anything I can do to help the plane stay airborne until its scheduled to descend, I will gladly volunteer, however, if the wing I can see out of the window to the left of me should suddenly part company with the rest of the aircraft, I only hope I can ride down with some dignity, and hopefully clean underwear. I might even be able to sleep on the way down, knowing that there is a good chance I will survive if my tray table is stowed and my seat back has been returned to the fully upright position.

This afternoon I was asked by the girl at the check-in counter which seat I would like to occupy during my short hop to Pittsburgh. I asked her for the emergency exit row, which she was able to give me. However, she said, it was towards the rear of the plane and she asked me if that would be alright. When I asked her if the seat would be the same distance from the ground as all the others, she just smiled, handed me the ticket, and pointed me towards the metal detectors, armed guards, and x-ray machines.