The Plane Ride From Hell

Autumn Ingrassia

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The Plane Ride From Hell

Autumn Ingrassia

3rd Place, Writing Contest

Notes from our judge:

"The Plane Ride From Hell" is an entertaining piece. The tone is consistent with what is going on in the story, keeping up with the suspense, the comedy, and the heartfelt moments. It is all around an enjoyable read.

It was a cool winters eve, back in 2006. My father and I sat in the back of a musty yellow cab on our way to the San Diego Airport. The fifteen-minute drive from my father's quaint 1950's yellow beach house seemed longer than usual, as I was jittery with excitement and soon to be reunited with my grandparents. Little did I know, this flight would be like nothing I had ever experienced in past years. At a mere eleven years old, I was already accustomed to flying, having gone to New Jersey twice a year since I was five and also having flown eighteen hours to Australia the previous year. We arrived at the airport, bags in tow, and hurried to the outdoor bag check line. Everything seemed normal.

We received our tickets; I was one row behind my father in the middle seat. Then we continued on through the airport security. I lugged around my purple Jansport backpack that was full of books and Nintendo DS games to entertain myself during the flight. I complained to my father as we stood in the security line. "I hate the middle seat. Now I'm gonna be squished between some weird old people. Why aren't we in the same row?"

"Grandma had trouble finding tickets this late, so you'll have to deal with it," he responded. "Let's just hope this plane has televisions and plays a good movie." That turned out to be the least of our worries.

After waiting what felt like an eternity to board, we finally found our seats. There was a middle aged Chinese woman on my right (the window seat) and a quiet, older gentleman on my left (the aisle seat). The plane sat idly on the runway for longer than usual. The nice, young flight attendant woman explained that there were strong winds
up ahead that had caused a delay. So I waited and played on my DS. At the time, my favorite game was Nintendogs. I had a Yorkie named Maya and a Dalmatian named Daisy. I finally heard the pilot say over the speakers, “Everyone please buckle your seatbelts for takeoff and turn off all approved electronic devices until otherwise instructed.”

Just like that, we were in the air. The takeoff was smooth and I patiently waited until I could play with my “dogs” again. The flight from San Diego to Newark International Airport, New Jersey is about six long hours. The first four hours went by without any trouble. I played my games, watched part of a movie on the overhead screen, and drank a coke, my favorite soda, which I had ordered when the drink cart went by.

Flying was not my favorite activity but I was used to it. I knew the routine and, at the time, the only part I somewhat disliked was the occasional minor turbulence. This flight was different. Overhead, the speakers came back on. “Alright folks, please remain in your seats with your seatbelts fastened. We are going to be hitting some turbulence.”

It soon became the flight from hell. We hit the turbulence hard. I grabbed the armrests of my seat and braced myself. Everyone was jostled in their seats and the female flight attendant, who had been up to ensure everyone was buckled in, nearly landed on the man she stood next to.

I peeked over the woman sitting next to me to get a better look outside her window. It was black and I could see nothing but the rain as it hammered the glass. I suddenly felt tiny, like I was lost deep in an abyss. The turbulence continued like this for some time; it seemed never-ending. I sat in terrified silence, not wanting to move or think about the fact that the only thing protecting me from the elements was a hollow, flying, metal machine. I wanted to land and be safely in the warmth of my grandma’s home, surrounded by the delicious home-cooked feast she has always prepared for my arrival.

We are Italian and every year, no matter the time I arrived, my grandma prepared a magnificent meal. It included: a huge batch of meatballs with homemade sauce, tuna macaroni salad, chocolate cake, cookies, and by far my favorite, Speciality. Speciality is basically spaghetti which has been made into this sort of dome that is filled
with cheese, ground beef, sausage, sauce, and amazingness, or
cheese, tomato, broccoli, onion, garlic, and other delicious vegetable
ingredients. My favorite was the vegetable Speciality. I imagined the
soft crunch of the hot, delicious, cheesy noodles and broccoli, the
smooth and luscious sauce as it dribbled into my mouth. I began
to salivate from the thought. I was brought back to reality when
suddenly everything inside the plane went black.

The lights flickered back on unsteadily. I heard the murmurs
of those around me nervously ask what was wrong and what had
happened. The televisions, which had been playing a movie, went to
static and were immediately closed so people would not panic even
more.

I was scared and sensed that I was not the only one. I sat in
silence once more until I felt something drip onto my cheek. It was
cold and carried a light metallic scent. The woman I sat with must
have felt something too because we both looked up at the same
time. Water had leaked through the cracks in the plane. Her entire
sleeve was wet. She quickly pressed the call button and a dazed flight
attendant slowly appeared.

She walked carefully gripping the backs of seats so as to not be
tossed onto the ground by the turbulence. Her voice shook as she
said, “What can I do for you?” The woman to my right explained the
water seeping down and the flight attendant, with wide eyes, simply
said, “We have hit a bad storm and the pilot is doing everything he
can to ensure we arrive safely.” It seemed like she said it to convince
herself more than us.

As she walked away we hit another big wave of turbulence and
one of the overhead compartments abruptly opened. Bags spilled out
into the aisle. This caused an uproar. Some people cried, while others
stared blankly. There was a crack of thunder and then lightning, just
outside the window. I now knew that everyone was in danger.

I reached through the seat ahead of me and for the first time
since the flight began, I made contact with my father. He and I have
never gotten along but, in my time of distress, I felt the need for some
sort of condolence, even if it was from him. I grabbed at his sleeve.
He turned to look at me. His big brown eyes glistened with terror. I
had never before seen my strong 6’4”, 270 lb. UFC fighting dad look
so afraid. I cried and asked him if we were almost there. He looked at his watch and said we should be there soon, that hopefully this would all be over with. He was wrong.

Another flight attendant, an older woman with salt and pepper hair that stood nobly atop her head in a bun, went to the front of the plane and explained the situation. We were above our destination but there was a very long line of planes that waited to land because of the storm. Needless to say, we were at the back of that line.

I thought the six-hour flight of doom would be over but it had hardly just begun. We flew in circles above the airport for two more hours! The plane was tossed around in the air like a toy. I had my seatbelt on but my head and upper body were continuously thrashed back and forth within the seat. I felt sick. My stomach turned and my mind raced through all the possible events that could take place.

The overhead speaker beeped to life and a panicky voice spoke, “Excuse me please, as you are all aware we have been circling above Newark International Airport for about two hours which has used up our excess fuel reserves. The pilot is attempting to make contact with any nearby landing bases. Please for the safety of those around you, remain calm.”

Now, I don’t know if the flight attendant had expected this type of reaction, but chaos broke out. Those few who had not already broken down did so now. I looked around and saw the young flight attendant as she cried in the back of the plane. A man in the row across from me stood up and began to pace the length of the plane with a zombie-like stare. The flight attendants tried to restrain the man and force him back into his seat. The plane swayed back and forth and the man fell onto the older gentleman next to me. He was wearily lifted by the flight attendants and placed back in his seat.

Once the man was buckled back into his seat the speaker came back on, “The pilot has made contact with a military base in upstate New York. We have been granted permission to land.”

The plane flew for an undetermined amount of time to this military base. All the while, lights flickered and water dripped down through the plane. My leggings had a huge wet spot on the thigh and the woman’s shoulder next to me was soaked. When it finally came time to land, things were just not right.
It took two dives before we landed safely. The first, you could feel. We came down way too fast and way too quickly. I had butterflies in my stomach, my heart raced, and sweat beaded up on my forehead. We were not angled horizontally or at the slight diagonal slope most landings should be. We came in almost vertically. My upper body could not touch the back of my seat. We fell straight down. Gravity pulled at us uncomfortably. My mind raced. My life flashed before my eyes. I clutched my armrest so hard my knuckles turned white. I braced myself for impact. Just when I thought we were going to crash into the earth and die we were swiftly thrown against the backs of our seats as the plane soared back up into the sky for attempt number two.

After that first attempt the anxiety rose. The air felt stagnant as if everyone was holding his or her breath. I tensed, ready for this second attempt to be the end of us. However, as the descent began I felt positive. I think we must have come down from further away. I was not unnaturally thrown back and forth in my seat like the last attempt. This one seemed better and it was. I slowly released my iron like grip from the armrest, watching as my finger indents slowly dissipated from the leather.

Although bumpy, we landed safely at the military base. I do not know where exactly it was located but, from what I heard around me, it was in the middle of nowhere. We sat on the plane for what seemed like forever. The plane was most likely being worked on while the pilot debriefed the people here why we had landed. Those too shaken up over the whole event were permitted to leave the plane and find a different way to their final destination. While my dad and I, well mostly he, decided we must stay because we had no other way to get to my grandparents, almost everyone else exited the plane and left. I sat alone and waited anxiously.

The plane sat on that runway for a lifetime. Eventually, we were told the plane was refueled and fixed well enough that it could fly safely to our destination. This next short flight was a blur. There was still turbulence but I cannot remember much else. I thanked God that I was still alive and tried to calm myself down. I did not want to think about the fact that I had stayed on a plane that nearly went down.
Once we finally landed, it was extremely late. My dad and I were shocked to see that my grandparents had waited for us this whole time just past the security line. They were in a panic. They had only been told minute details over the course of multiple phone calls about what had happened. When I saw them, I ran up to them. I had tears in my eyes as they engulfed me in the warm, loving embrace I always remembered and had dreamt about during that flight. They held me until I was composed and could breath without snifflers.

The drive from the airport to their huge beautiful house in Watchung, New Jersey went by in a flash after everything that had just happened. As my grandfather's black Escalade pulled into the garage, I could hardly contain my anticipation of what was to come. I walked inside and was greeted by their little dog Henry. He was very spoiled so normally he acted like a brat because he hated when my grandma gave me attention instead of him. This time, I did not even seem to notice. There was so much food. SO MUCH. I thought I was in heaven. I was hungry because I had not eaten since breakfast, which at this point was ages ago. Finally reunited with my beautiful Speciality, I was at peace.