

Frank Mazer

Houston Airport

She is moving very rapidly up and down the aisle of the aircraft. We are on final approach, the last 10 minutes into the George Bush Houston International Airport.

As a frequent flier I note her journeys are not of the ordinary variety by a flight attendant as the plane is nearing landing. I stop for a moment to consider that it is a good thing she is lythe and slim. She needs to move gracefully past the other flight attendant who is far from slim. In fact, I had taken note earlier than the other attendant was having trouble with fitting down the aisle without turning to the side. This had taken me on a journey in time to my early days of flying in the 1950's as a child. I begin to recall being seated in the DC-6 propeller aircraft and the "stewardesses" being of the most friendly and attractive variety. I float back in time for a moment until brought back to the present by the strong scent of sulphur in the cabin. This smell like "rotten eggs" is no laughing matter in these enclosed quarters. For a moment I consider there must be a passenger responsible. Soon enough, as the stench

grows, and the frequency of the flight attendant's journey's increases, I am suspecting the aircraft is the culprit.

I overhear the flight attendant speaking loudly to the flight crew telling them she "sees nothing here" after she had zoomed up and down the aisle. I suspect they are not looking for a lost in flight magazine. Soon enough we are on the ground. My suspicions the meanderings may have something to do with the aircraft are confirmed by flashing lights of fire trucks chasing us as we taxi off of the runway. I consider they are happy to see us because of some wondrous celebrity aboard. Perhaps an important Texas oil man. This is not a routine greeting I have seen before. The captain comes on to tell us we will be delayed a moment by a minor maintenance problem as I watch the fire trucks surround us. As he speaks on the Public address system, unfortunately for him, we can hear the cockpit radio in the background crackling "is the smoke in the cockpit?" This does not lead to a sense of ease. We sit off the runway for a few minutes before leading a parade to the gate.

It all turns into an entertaining light show as we lurch to the gate. As I depart through the door onto the gangway I overhear one of the crew members telling another with a pleased tone of voice,

“hey, look, I’ll be damned , this compartment is where something burned”. There is a sense of satisfaction in knowing the mystery is solved. I also know I face one of those traveler’s mysteries ahead. I am making a connection to another flight. I am on a return trip to Europe after visiting family in the states. Our flight had departed late and landed later. I have a very short time to de-plane and locate the direction to my next flight. Being a seasoned traveler, brimming with too much confidence, I know I can find a way to locate and handle this smoothly. Little do I know, Mr. Travel humility awaits me with a smile.

I proceed to speed my pace up the gangway. I find I can go nowhere. Ahead of me there walks, very slowly, a very large American man. I feel badly for him for a moment. I know he is struggling forward and up the space ahead. For an instant I think I can swerve around him and hurry onwards. This hope is squashed as I approach his side and see that there is simply no room for even my skinny torso to fit. I resign myself to the slow walk as a chance to take a breath. We break free into the gate area and I see I must make the dash from gate B84 to a different terminal! Then onwards to gate B79. I lunge between persons. Making headway along narrow corridors. It occurs to me that these Houston airport

corridors must have been designed before so many of America had become so enlarged. I am forced to come to a complete stop for a few moments in order to find my way through a line of people which stretches across the corridor waiting to order at a junk food “restaurant” selling fat hotdogs and assorted heart disease. I am now beginning to have serious concern about catching the flight. Not to worry the way appears open ahead for a good distance. Suddenly a child, running chaotically in a zig-zag pattern in front of its playful mom, bolts in front of me and with carry-on bag in hand and feet flying in various directions I manage to avoid the disaster of slamming into the undisciplined little angel turned loose in the airport. This comes at the cost of my balance as I reel sideways and attempt a ballet move which I, unfortunately, had not practiced ever before. With no balance I find myself glancing off of one of the metal chairs bolted to the floor as my carry-on bag flings itself into painful places I wish it had chosen not to visit. I mutter words better not heard and then herd myself and bag forward with renewed zest. I move along in a blur past the tv screens which seem to be everywhere. They dangle from the left. From the right. At every eating place. They proclaim in bold letters “Fox News”, “The liberal threat to America”, “terror everywhere”. A glance away from one screen

leads to my eyes beholding another screen displaying the story of bludgeoning and murder. A crowd of people has gathered seemingly mesmerized at the next screen with the image of Texas' President George W. Bush speaking to them of tax cuts and wars to be waged and terror.

There is still time. I find myself lurching forward in a fast walk, never daring or able to break into a run amidst the narrow corridor and its looming denizens. I weave my way for a half-mile, my previously injured back beginning to show signs of resentment. I stumble, now sweating, to the gate for my flight. I am proudly informed by the smirking young agent that I had just been "de-seated". I look down at my crotch startled by "de-seated" His look seems to say, "that will teach you a lesson about being late by having that extra beer at the bar". The agent looks at the expression on my face checks and sees that it was his airline which brought me here as a late arrival and in his godlike manner proclaims that he can "re-seat" me somewhere perhaps. I take the boarding pass and hurry onboard.

Down the aisle I go with relief as my buddy. Soon I find that the aisle seat I am assigned at the rear of the plane is occupied by a woman and her infant. So I stand. Immediately see I am cast as

the villain. I must make the mom and child sit where they were assigned to sit. She explains, it is my good fortune to her original seat which is across the aisle between the two people already seated. I accept the offer, happy to be seated. Pleased to be on the way. Now we are prepared to zoom into the sky. Or are we? The plane's captain comes on the public address system. He informs us the entire traffic control system for the region has endured a computer breakdown. Thus, all flight plans must be re-filed and re-approved. The flight attendant begins to make her way down the aisle. My thoughts reach back to being seated, as a 10 year old, near the back of the aircraft where there was a lounge area for people to sit around a small table and play cards. I note that times have changed as people still play cards solo on their phone screen.

Later, as I stumble through Chicago O'Hare airport to my international flight I find myself waiting in the gangway as people talking on their handy phone bump into me forgetting where they are. I turn and see a gentleman who looks to be older than I am.

He has noticed the collision I just experienced. He grins and says "it wasn't this way when I used to fly with the prop driven Constellations across the pond". I tell him, "Somehow I can relate to the changes in America and the changes in aviation. My uncle

flew for Trans World Airlines in those Constellation aircraft.” But that is another story for another time and different stewardesses.