

Traumatic Experience  
Personal Essay

The song playing on my iPod was fading out, signaling it was time to choose another tune. I scrolled through my artists, and came upon an old song that my friends and I recorded a while ago. I pulled down the shade and momentarily thought back to when we recorded the track. The artificial atmosphere created by the cabin pressure had made my throat a bit dry and I looked around for a stewardess. Scanning the aisles, I suddenly felt my stomach rise into my chest and with a shudder I gripped the arm rest. The plane began to shake.

I caught my breath and assumed it was regular turbulence. Then the plane moved sharply to the left. I looked up at the cabin's television screen which was playing the movie *Hairspray*. Not in the mood. Besides, focusing on it was nearly impossible. I could sense anxiety wash over the passengers as the plane banked sharply yet again. A drop, followed by another roll to the right, unleashed a wave of screams – shrieks of pure terror. Not the, “Ahh, I’m on a rollercoaster and afraid but still having fun” scream, but the horrified “Am I going to die?” scream. The noises stopped, giving us a few seconds of calm to collect ourselves. I thought for a second I could actually feel my heart beating so hard it might break through my rib cage.

Another drop. No, a plummet: several seconds during which the suspended air craft dropped uncontrollably. I experienced the weightless feeling you get for a split second when landing, when the plane drops just a little bit, lifting you from your seat. Except now, it lasted for about 10 seconds, and we were three miles above the ground. Screams pierced the stiff air. My mother screamed. A noise unlike anything I had ever heard in my entire life. Just the thought of the genuine fear gripping my own mother still haunts me. The plane leveled out.

Fear and confusion filled the airplane, although there was a palpable sense of relief that we weren't yet crushed cadavers sinking towards the bottom of the Atlantic. I looked down and saw my hand gripping the arm rest. When did that happen? My knuckles were whiter than snow, and my veins stood out as if they might try to follow my beating heart right out of my body and off of that godforsaken plane. I looked over to my older brother.

He was silent, wearing a look of utter disbelief.

I took long, deep breaths in order to bring myself out of the fear-induced shock. My mother was sitting in front of me. I started stroking her hair to soothe her. She is tough by any measure, but I knew there was no way she could just shrug that one off. She looked over her left shoulder through the seatbacks. Her tear-drowned eyes looked back at me helplessly as she mouthed the words, “I love you.”

“You’re okay mom,” I said in slow, measured tones. “We’re okay.”

I fell into my seatback, and couldn't move. I began to tear up as well. *Ding.* “Hello ladies and gentlemen.” announced the captain from the cockpit. His voice was stern and serious, yet reassuring. “We’re terribly sorry about that. We hit an updraft, a strong body of wind from a storm down below us. We’ve got everything under control and are out of the storm. We hope that no one got jostled around too much, and we’re sending our staff around to make sure everyone is okay.” Okay? He had to be kidding.

In truth, I didn't know how to feel – none of us did. I sheepishly admitted I was mad he had not given us some warning we were about to free fall for several thousand feet, but I was relieved that at least the wings still seemed to be attached and the engines still seemed to be working. I lifted up the cover to my window. We were enveloped in stormy clouds. *It's not over*, I thought, and shoved the cover back down, as my heart began to race again.

The stewardess came around with a complementary tray of wine for the adult passengers. My father took a small plastic, single-serve cup of white wine. That's how I knew he was shaken up. He never drank white wine. He hates it. He clearly wasn't thinking straight, but his mind was on calming my mother down, who was still hysterically crying.

People started getting up out of their seats to use the bathroom, to walk around, or to check on family. I began to reflect on what had just happened.

They say that in the midst of a near-death experience, your life flashes before your eyes. Such was not the case with me. When I realized the nostalgic vignettes were not playing in my brain, *only then*, did I start to think of my life. I started to tear up a little again. What would happen if I died? Who would miss me? I began to think of random people. Not family, but other people: workers in my synagogue, my orthodontist, my doctor, my teachers. Would anybody remember me? My entire family would have been gone. I imagined the look on my relatives' faces as they opened the door to my apartment, speaking in hushed tones about the former inhabitants who had all died in a tragic plane crash. I could almost make out the chords of some clichéd cinematic dirge that would almost certainly be playing in the background.

I then began to think of who I would tell this story to and how I would tell it. Should I exaggerate, or be honest? I thought I was going to die, but in reality that was probably as likely as me winning the lottery. A smile crossed my lips. This experience could never be about what almost happened; it had to be about what I would do when my feet touched solid ground again and what I could actually make happen. At that moment, the script might have called for an inspirational denouement with a personal call to action to live my life to the fullest and save the world. But Hollywood isn't producing my life story, at least not yet.

I walked off the plane with my arms around my mother, humbly promising myself that the next time my life was supposed to be flashing before my eyes, I would see countless scenes of me doing what I love. For all of the triumphs and struggles I have had so far, thankfully, the rest of the script has not yet been written.