

Anxious eyes above the skies

By Ruth Ostrow

I'M sitting on the plane awaiting takeoff. Biding time. Wiggling, jiggling in the seat. The air is too cold, the smell of petrol is too acute. The Muzak is enough to make a person murder the next flight attendant who bares her pretty, white teeth. "Ba ... ba ... ba ... da ... da ... mmmmm." There's nothing to do but try to do nothing. I read a little of the in-flight magazine, unable to concentrate. Italy in spring looks good. Why aren't we taking off?

I'm flying to see one of my sick friends. I've been told to come urgently. I'm being collected at the airport and taken straight to the hospital. "Ba ... ba ... da ... da ... doooo."

The sound of real life percolates around me. "Why don't they turn off the bloody Muzak?" my mind screams to no one there. Don't they know people can't cope with more visual, aural, sensual pollution?

"We need peace," I tell the space above my head where the air vent is assaulting my hair. I search inside my body for the peace of mind to make this difficult journey.

"Hey!" yell the man and his wife in the seats next to me, pointing out the window. "There are our suitcases. Look! They're going in the direction of the other plane." The couple jumps up and runs towards the pilot. I take a deep breath and try to relax. "Ba ... ba ... ba ... Ohhhh, honey ..." I look for my sense of humour. Must be here somewhere.

Something is definitely wrong. Stewards are rushing about looking fazed. We've been sitting here an eternity. A piercing sound comes over the speakers and everyone covers their ears. Compared with the Muzak it's a blessed relief. "This is your captain speaking. Some of you have seen your luggage going off towards another plane. We've got a problem with weight," he says before explaining that our luggage will be delivered to our homes later.

"Later? I've got a plane to catch to America," moans one irate passenger. "I need clothes for my child," yells another.

I'm off to the hospital and haven't the time to stand in the queue behind 80 alarmed people filling out details, addresses and suitcase colours for the customer services department. "Ba ... ba ... Oooooh ..." I clutch the armrest. My white knuckles say it all. Planes are bad places for people who hate losing control. But in truth, I've been out of control for days.

Each day the phone kept ringing with more bad news. Then it went silent. I thought all was well. Turned out the line was dead. Yanked out by some tradesman working on a subdivision miles away. Telstra said that with the weekend coming, it would be four days before it could be fixed.

"Compared to what my friend is going through, this is so insignificant," I told myself in the maelstrom of trying to arrange flights and a child and a life from

other people's phones. I tell myself that now, trying to sit back and enjoy the ride.

Finally we take off. The Muzak stops. My heart rate slows. I start to read but there is too much turbulence for my liking.

"Excuse me," says a steward suddenly, putting her face too close to mine. "In an emergency, are you prepared to operate this door and help save the passengers?"

"Save who?" I gasp. "Are we about to crash?"

"It's new regulations," she says. "Those seated in exit rows must be told how to operate the door," she says, clutching the seat as we battle severe headwinds and the plane dips to the side. "Just in case."

Death. It's been stalking me for months. So many sick women around me. "We all die," said my yoga teacher. "Your turn can come at any second. Even before any sick friend. We have no control over that. It's the truth of existence."

"Just in case," I think to myself, staring at the exit door long after the steward has gone. I think of my beloved friends. I think of my child. I think of many things up here in the air, buffeted by turbulence, on my way to the visit someone I've called "sister" for a lifetime.

And I recognise something I've been trying to grasp forever. The misplaced luggage doesn't matter. The torn phone lines, the argument with a tradesman, what Joe Bloggs said on Friday, doesn't matter. People are dying every second we are alive, as we will be dying too one day soon, probably in the blink of an eye.

"Ba ... ba ... ba ... Ohhhhh ..." The terrible sound of Muzak comes on. And that doesn't matter either. We have touched down safely. I've lived to tell another tale. Love my daughter and husband one more precious moment. Nothing else counts.

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