

Confiding in the Airsick Bag

by Dom Macchiaroli

An airsick bag is a small device made available to passengers on airplanes. Its only purpose is to collect the results of someone suffering motion sickness. It is said that frequent travelers who know they are going to get sick on an airplane will sometimes bring their own bags. I do not have one. Maybe you do. Maybe yours is monogrammed with your name on it, or your dog's name. Maybe you are proud to possess such an item.

These bags are fairly unchanged in structure and style since their creation in 1949, and while many are still made from plastic-lined paper, a large number are now made only from plastic. As part of their safety briefing before every flight, I'd like the flight attendants to also mention the presence of these bags in the 'seat pocket in front of me', or even helpfully offer them to me as I board with the following comment: paper or plastic sir? There are times when one might come in handy.

I was boarding a plane because I had been on a long trip to Seattle and it was time to fly home. I don't fly much, so when I do it is almost always a dubious and comical experience.

The plane was late arriving at the gate and the folks were getting antsy. But when it finally did, we passengers were doing the typical thing, everyone in a hurry to get on the plane and then impatiently sit, each supremely annoyed and put out that the rest of the aircraft just might happen to have other people on it.

Sensing the rush, I slithered into the line under a large sign that said "B 1-10" I had ticket B-12, but what's a couple of numbers?

Before my letter was even called, I anticipated the swell of pleading flesh streaming for the gate as the remaining flyers poured aboard; a mighty aviation epilogue of our collective humanity

crushing the already cramped aircraft aisle with sunburned flesh and “better fit in the overhead compartment or you lose a kidney” tattered samsonite banging into my knees, and all of this before we even took our seats.

This parade of the airborne idiotic would be but a brief part of the aperitif for the soon dearly departing, with a guaranteed Two Hour Fifty Minute Overbooked Turbulent Flight Endurathon main course yet to come.

And since I had an earlier boarding pass and would be able to get on with the first wave of the desperate, I incorrectly figured there just might be seats aplenty. There were not.

Now I love the negative ‘force fields’ people give off after seating themselves on a plane. There’s a certain arrogance that washes over them; that the mere possibility that me or you or someone else might try to take that empty seat next to them is beyond their imagination. There’s also a real condescension after one takes their seat; now safely placed aboard, the formally seated now look down on those who are unseated as if they are a member of the diseased. And everyone wants their row to be empty after they sit down. Some of the most earnest prayers ever uttered in human history have been said by those blessed soon to be airborne few with a cherished empty seat next to them.

Having only suffered minor lacerations getting on the plane, I spied the first open seat on the aisle to my left. Anticipating the consumption of multiple cola-type beverages, I would need some sort of near access to the ‘lavatory’. And why don’t they call it a bathroom on an airplane?

In row nine, there was already a lady on the window seat. Seeing the potential for a virtual Grand Canyon of space between us as there was no one next to her currently, I asked, “Mind if I take this one?”

“Not at all” she said cheerfully, her response giving me an obvious hint of the verbal onslaught to come, as if she hadn’t a friend in the world, apart from the poor naïve bastard now shoe-horning himself into seat 9D.

I sat down.

"What's your name?" she asked.

"Dom" I said. I figured it would be best to remain monosyllabic.

The lady might have detected a rude 'tell' in my personality as I didn't ask her name. I knew the odds were pretty good she'd offer it whether I inquired or not. I was correct.

"My name's Claire" she offered.

I immediately spied the airsick bag for advice. It rested folded underneath an old copy of "Famous Aviation Disasters Monthly," looking at me as if to say "what do you want from me pal, I lie in here day after day, the best possible outcome for me is to be quickly pulled out, even torn, while some inebriate named "Scott" blows his lunch all over my insides".

"Nice to meet you, Claire." I replied.

This was all the friendly I could muster. It was nothing personal, since I can be as amiable, amenable, agreeable, 'life of the party' as any deep introvert is able, but there are times when I just want people to shut it, you know? I didn't want to talk to anyone. It'd been a bad week of a bad month and just going home sounded pretty good.

Yet Claire was unaffected by my rudeness, she was already into Act Three, Scene Four of her one-woman play about Seattle. She hectored me about the places she'd visited, and then turned to the town where she and her husband were from, and soon to return. All I wondered was: where the hell was *he*? Another flight? Taking the train? Greyhound to Amarillo via Ulan Bator on the Oregon Trail?

I answered her immediate onslaught with a sallow smile more resembling a grimace, along with lots of 'huhs' and 'ahhs' and 'oohs'.

As she continued, I nervously eyed the seat between us. Was she going to want to move closer? Would anyone else serve as a human buffer between us, all the while being slapped with phrases on one cheek and personal pronouns on the other?

Meanwhile, people continued to board, and the later in the queue they were, the more desperate and panicked looks on their faces as they scanned the aisles and rows for anything resembling a tolerable

seat, preferably not next to the obligatory diarrheic screaming toddler, but also not next to Texas' next Sumo wrestling hopeful.

Toward the end of the line, a smallish couple of (to me) foreign origin wandered onto the aircraft. The husband (I assume) gestured to his wife to take the seat next to me. He would venture a shade farther down the aisle and take his chances on the potential exploding toddler.

The little old lady gestured to me and the seat beside me, "Do you mind?"

"Not at all", I fairly yelled. It was the happiest thing I'd said all day.

She seemed smallish enough that my elbow wouldn't sustain permanent ligature damage as we politely fought over the solo inch wide arm rest between us. Yet she was also big enough to involuntarily serve as a human shield from Claire's incoming sonic barrage.

Claire immediately started in with the now familiar salutations: "Hello, my name is Claire, and that's Dom next to you. He's going to Phoenix, I am connecting to Albuquerque. What's your name and what is your final destination this lovely afternoon?"

What an amazing experience: a person I didn't know introducing me to another person I knew less than that, and all in the third person besides. I summoned a thimbleful of hospitality but remained mute as I gave the kindly little woman a nod. She nodded silently back to me, as Claire continued her monologue toward the back of the poor gal's head. I wondered what sins she'd committed to deserve *her* seat. I already knew what mine were.

"Me name ess Gupta and I go to Feenish" the little lady said. I assumed she meant Phoenix. As she said this, she turned to me with a face both horrified and pleading. Then she turned her body quickly to spy her husband back somewhere to the rear of the plane. I never found out where he sat but I guarantee that if it just happened to be next to some nineteen year old cosmetics intern pageant runner-up, or worse, an actual open seat, this man was going to get his

proverbial backside kicked all the way back to Mumbai or Karachi. Or Albuquerque.

She looked back at me as Claire yet continued. My sheepish but devilish smile said, lady, you are on your own.

For awhile, Claire would reach across the poor gal to make her point to me, with an emphasis on wholesale personal space violation. Then the taco salad came out. Most of this ended up in Gupta's lap by way of Claire's teeth.

Meanwhile, I contemplated how slowly and non-descript(ly) I could reach into my backpack, grab my iPod, and gently settle in one earpiece into the ear opposite Claire, and then work in the other earpiece while she actually took a breath or looked out the window.

I pondered how once both ears were in, with her still gesticulating and talking, I would then look at Claire unhearing and shrug, as if the earplugs had put *themselves* on either side of my cranium and there just wasn't a darn thing I could do about it. Then I would slowly close my eyes, signaling the one-sided termination of our conversation. See you in Phoenix, Claire. Have a super flight, time for Dom go nighty-night. It was three in the afternoon.

While I mustered the courage to actually do this, the steward came up the aisle, intoning, sodas are free, cocktails are five dollars, window seat muzzles are market price. I had three drink coupons in my fist gripped tighter than a life vest on the Titanic.

The guy spied my row, the little lady between us now cowering in her eighteen inch seat, with Claire now into the third stanza of her unwanted Northwest travelogue. He and I made eye contact as I loosened my death grip long enough to hand him all three coupons at once. I didn't have to say anything to him.

"I'll keep 'em coming", he said, and then gave me a know-it-all smart-alecky grin since he'd seen my predicament before; five times that very day, probably.

Meanwhile above Claire's din, I looked again at the airsick bag resting benignly in the seat pocket and considered how I could use it to escape the personal hell I found myself in:

1. Put it over my head.
2. Put it over Claire's head.
3. Give both women a greenish look while I raised the bag to my face, all the while leaning toward Claire in a precarious and lecherous manner. I would do the hypothetical vomit dance of the crestfallen passenger, which seemed justified since she was vomiting words, which can be just as offensive when no one wants to hear them.

Soon after to my surprise and just as abruptly as she'd started, Claire stopped talking and the taco salad shower ended too. Finally verbally exhausted, she spent the rest of the flight sleeping with her head against the window. Gupta read a book silently and I listened to my music, contemplating home and all that that notion entailed.

I never did get a drink. They didn't serve any because of summer storm turbulence for the duration of the flight. The attendant kept my coupons. Please get them back for me if you ever see the guy.

Once we landed, I wished both women well and apologized for my relative silence, hoping the evening would be great for both of them. Claire was just being nice, and the rude on my part wasn't cool.

As for the airsick bag, I didn't touch it during the flight, but took it with me as one might steal a relic or talisman from a temple or ancient place, as a reminder of this weird trip. Then I thought better of it and threw it out once I was in the terminal. I figured it had gone through enough. So had I.

