

Fly the Friendly Skies

by Michael Gillan Maxwell

The well-known slogan fly the friendly skies runs through my head as I board the monstrous plane that seats 10 across in coach. I'm in the middle of the plane, aisle seat in the center section, surrounded by a large group of public school teachers traveling to attend a conference. We're settling in for the six-hour flight from New York City to San Francisco.

As the last few passengers straggle in, a young man in T-shirt, jeans and sandals, with a short beard and unruly mop of curly hair passes by. He stops directly behind me, shoves his attaché case into the overhead compartment, and slides into the window seat across the aisle. He smells a little funky, as if he hasn't showered for a couple of days.

The attendant closes the curtain that separates first class from coach, as the last passenger to board walks up the aisle. The passenger is a young woman with lustrous shoulder-length, black hair and hazel eyes, wearing a short, white sleeveless dress, nylons and red high heels. She's as glamorous as a runway model, and I don't think there's much chance she's traveling with the school teachers, but I can always hope. She's laden with glitzy shopping bags from various 5th Avenue stores and maneuvers up the aisle holding the bags in front of her. She apologizes for all the commotion, smiling and nodding her head at passengers as she passes by and heads for the center seat directly next to the man who just sat down. The aisle passenger gallantly volunteers to move to another available seat, so she'll have more room for all her things. Window Seat Guy looks delighted. He should be.

On the other hand, I'm crammed into my seat next to a mountainous and dour woman who's reading a Bible. The headphones clamped over her ears make it clear there'll be no small talk; which is fine with me since I'm seriously delinquent in my Bible

studies. She's already claimed the armrest between us and is even spilling into my space.

I briefly consider offering to switch seats with her to give her more room, but I realize I'd really be trapped and possibly crushed. I quickly change my mind and thumb through a magazine article about marijuana farming in Humboldt County. Window Seat Guy and Glamour Puss are chatting up a storm about all the wonderful things New York City has to offer. He helps by carefully tucking her shopping bags under the seats in front of them. I raise an eyebrow. I see where this is going. Lucky bastard, he gets Glamour Puss and I get lady wrestler who's giving off the vibe she'll bludgeon me to death with her Bible if I make one false move.

The plane takes off and climbs to cruising altitude. Passengers talk, read books, listen to music, work on their laptops or adjust the seat back and rest. Window Seat Guy and Glamour Puss lounge across all three seats like they're lying around in their living room. Ensnared in pillows and blankets, they're drinking wine and giggling themselves silly. Bible Lady is already fast asleep and snoring like a buzz saw, head lolling on her ample bosom. Every so often she stops. Dead Silence. While this may be preferable to the harsh rasping and gurgling, it's also disconcerting as I'm thinking she must have sleep apnea. This goes on for at least the next hour and I do my best to shut it out by eavesdropping on Window Seat Guy and Glamour Puss. They're drinking more wine and carrying on about Broadway shows and shopping and restaurants and God knows what all. I sigh and go back to my magazine article profiling Humboldt County as the vanguard of high-octane marijuana farming in California.

It sounds like Bible Lady's breathing has stopped altogether. I'm alarmed enough to start mentally reviewing CPR and mouth-to-mouth resuscitation protocols. Just thinking about it makes me sick to my stomach. Still no sounds of breathing. I grit my teeth and lean closer. Just as I get my ear up to her face, she erupts with a violent

snort and a loud gasp that sends spittle flying in all directions. I pull back so abruptly I bang my head on the seat in front of me.

Bible Lady settles back into a regular breathing pattern and I settle back into my seat. I notice her Bible has fallen off her lap. I gently pick it up and slide it into the seat pocket in front of her. I'm just starting to enjoy the quiet when I realize it's too quiet. There's no sound coming from Window Seat Guy and Glamour Puss. I know they can't possibly have sleep apnea too, so I turn to look. They're lip-locked, tongues down each other's throats. I jerk back around in disbelief, my mouth hanging open.

The other passengers stick their noses in books, snooze or watch the movie, which ironically enough, is *The Wild Wild West*. I whip open the magazine again and fix my eyes on the page, but I can't concentrate enough to read. The cabin is dark except for scattered reading lights and the flickering movie monitors. The other passengers are at least pretending to mind their own business. They read, do crossword puzzles, chat and do everything but pay attention to Window Seat Guy and Glamour Puss, who are now rustling around and muffling giggles as they rearrange themselves in the mountain of pillows and blankets. No way can I ignore this and I sneak a peek back to see what's going on.

Glamour Puss is sitting on Window Seat Guy's lap, facing him. They're wrapped in blankets doing their own interpretation of "the beast with two backs." Once again, I turn away in disbelief. Am I the only one who knows what's going on here? I can't believe Window Seat Guy got so lucky. That could be me back there, except he's the one with the cojones to reach out and grab a once in a lifetime opportunity and I'm a rule follower. I'm a rule follower sitting next to a snoring giant who might be suffocating while Window Seat Guy gets to act like Caligula.

I eventually drift off until the captain's voice jolts me out of my slumber. "We've begun our descent to San Francisco International Airport and will be landing shortly. It's been a pleasure having you aboard." I look back to see the couple sleeping like babies. Window Seat Guy is resting his head upon Glamour Puss's shoulder with a

blissful smile on his face. I shake my head as I turn back to fasten my seatbelt. I gotta hand it to the guy, I think, and actually chuckle out loud.

“Did I miss something funny?” Bible Lady asks.

“Oh good morning,” I say, “I didn't realize you were awake. You certainly are a sound sleeper.”

“I took a sleeping pill,” she says. “It helps with my fear of flying. I could have slept through a hurricane. Did I miss anything?”

“Nope,” I reply. “Just another long, quiet plane ride.” The plane arrives at the gate.

“I put your Bible in the seat pocket,” I say. “I was afraid it would fall on the floor, and I didn't want to wake you.”

“Oh that's sweet,” Bible Lady says. “You didn't have to be so worried about disturbing me.”

“Well, blessed are the meek,” I reply.

Window Seat Guy and Glamour Puss stand in the aisle beside my seat like they've just been introduced at a cocktail party.

Glamour Puss says, “My name's Adriana. What's yours?”

“Josh,” he replies. “Here's my card. Look me up if you're ever up my way. I'm an organic farmer up in Humboldt County.”

They move a little way up the aisle. “They seem like they'd make an awfully sweet couple,” Bible Lady says. I smile and nod as I stand up and move back in the aisle so she can exit. I see the graphics on Window Seat Guy's T-shirt: a marijuana leaf surrounded by the words, “Organic farmers do it in the dirt.” I realize I'm still holding my magazine and toss it in the pile of blankets on Window Guy's empty seat.

