**The Worst Part**

Lawrence Watt-Evans

Sometimes he tried to tell himself that the wait at the gate was the worst part. Why they called it a gate at all, he wasn’t sure — the damn thing wasn’t a gate, it was a tunnel, and the combination made him think of the gates of Hell.

That was all too appropriate an image—a tunnel down into the Hell of an airliner’s cabin, with its sadistically-narrow seats, its fetid pressurized air, the hard, ugly plastic everywhere.

The wait wasn’t really the worst part at all. It was bad, it was very bad, but the worst part...

Well, it just kept on getting worse. The long, horrible wait in that dreary holding pen, strewn with other people’s newspapers, and then the march down the tunnel like prisoners into their cells, squeezing through that right-angle right turn where the crew greeted everyone with their phony smiles and where, off to the left, he could see into the cockpit, could see all that ominous black machinery with its colored lights, obviously too complex for anyone to actually understand and control properly.

And then down the aisle, waiting while people stuffed heavy luggage into the overhead compartments, standing there sweating and stinking of fear while those idiots blithely tried to jam in as much as possible, so that it could all fall down on him later, and then they’d bend themselves into their horrid little seats and let him past, so that he could find his own horrid little seat and squeeze himself into it.

Grope for the seatbelt, near panic for a moment when one side seems to be missing, visions of bouncing around the cabin, head battering against the reading lights and attendant call buttons, as the plane veers and swoops. Then find the belt, buckle in, and worry about whether he’ll be able to get it open again, ever, or whether he’ll sit there, trapped and struggling, while the cabin fills with smoke, with flame, with water, while the other passengers all slide out to safety and he sits there, strapped down and waiting, and they don’t hear his screams over their own relieved laughter...

And his knees hit the seat in front of him, his head doesn’t fit comfortably on the headrest, half the time they’re flying the attendants block the aisle with their silly drink cart so he can’t reach the lavatory or the exit if there’s an emergency.

And the take-off, the engines screaming so that it hurts to think, the wing deforming itself as he watches out the window, what if those flaps come loose, can those little metal struts really hold it all together at six hundred miles an hour, my God, six hundred miles an hour, how can anything hold together, how can anyone control it, at that speed?

Six hundred miles an hour, thirty thousand feet up, that’s six miles up, six miles with nothing but empty air below them, nothing holding them up but those bits of metal, those hydraulic struts that hold the wings together, the wings he can see bouncing and shimmying like diving boards that someone’s just used for that six-mile plunge, the wings that could tear off or fall to pieces at any moment, and the plane would turn and plummet earthward, falling six miles out of the sky, six miles would give him time to watch, to think, to see that he was going to die, he’d have all the time he needed to think it over, he’d be able to see the ground screaming up at him, and he wouldn’t be able to do a thing, he’d be strapped in his seat while the plane was in freefall, like the biggest damn roller coaster you ever saw going down a six-mile drop, only there’s no curved rail to swoop him back up, he’ll go down and down and down until he hits the hard earth, and his neck snaps and his bones break and his blood sprays across several counties, they’ll be picking pieces of him out of cornfields and hedges, and everyone will read the newspapers and see just another statistic and they’ll never think of the shock of impact, the incredible pain, the burned black flesh when the jet fuel ignites.

And if the wings hold up, if the pilot doesn’t go mad and dive just to see how big a crater he can make, if the pilot doesn’t die of a stroke and send them diving, if the engines don’t explode, if the fuel doesn’t spill away into the air as a toxic cloud settling over the countryside and leaving them powerless, if the whole thing doesn’t catch fire from the friction of that incredible six-hundred-mile-an-hour speed and smother them all in smoke, if the pressurization doesn’t fail and leave them all gasping in unbreathably thin air, eyes bugging out and hands clutching throats as they suck at air that isn’t there, drowning in near-vacuum like fish out of water... if none of that happens, then they’ll reach the airport where they’re to land, and they’ll drop down out of the sky deliberately, falling down through those six miles of nothing and trusting the plane and the pilot to catch them at the last minute and land them safely on the runway, not to plow into a building somewhere; they’ll hit the ground still traveling two hundred miles an hour, and those engines that have been screaming for hours will suddenly roar into reverse, sucking in everything as they try to stop the plane’s headlong rush to disaster, and the tires will squeal and shudder as they scrape along the tarmac, and he’ll sit helplessly in his seat, his life in the pilot’s hands, waiting for the impact with the terminal, with another plane that’s on the runway by mistake; waiting for a tire to blow, a strut to fail, for the plane to buckle sideways and drive wreckage in through the window at him.

And that was the worst; after that, it would be over, the panic would subside, his stomach would relax—he might need to vomit, he had once or twice—and he would get off the plane only shaking slightly, and he’d tell himself that there, it wasn’t really all that bad, he’d tell his friends that he was okay, he didn’t like flying but it was no big deal, there was nothing to be scared of. He knew all the statistics, the facts, the reasonable, rational attitudes, and he would convince himself that he believed them, that they applied to him, that he could fight down his fear and control it.

He knew that his fear wasn’t rational, not really, and he was a rational man. He’d relax and he’d forget how awful it was, he’d forget and he’d agree to do it again, he’d buy a ticket to fly somewhere else, and then when it was too late to back out he’d start remembering again, the panic would start to gnaw at his belly, his throat would dry and tighten, and rationality would fall away, he’d know that he was going to die this time, that this would be the plane that fell flaming from the sky, and it would be worse than ever before, every time it was worse, every time he told himself he was over his fear and every time it was worse.

But every time he forgot that, forgot what it was like and agreed to fly again, and that brought him back here, right where he was, sitting at that gate to Hell, Gate C3 for Flight 1108, his palms sweaty and his fingers shaking as he tried to control his fear. He looked down at them, tried to will them to be still, to be steady and calm and brave.

“Jack?”

He looked up, startled, and his eyes wouldn’t focus at first.

“Jack Hartman? Is that you?”

“Sharon?” The neatly-attired young woman in the dark-green skirt and jacket stood in front of him, looking down at him, a purse hung from one shoulder and an overnight bag held in front of her; he blinked up at the heart-shaped face with its uncertain smile.

“It is you!” she said, and the smile became steadier. “Jack, it’s been years!”

“Yeah,” he said, vaguely aware that he should smile back, that he should have said something clever, or at least semi-intelligent, rather than the single stupid monosyllable. He should have given some sign that he recognized her and remembered her and was glad to see her.

He couldn’t; he was too full of fear, too busy worrying about his impending death, his certainty that his plane would crash.

“Are you all right?” she asked, the smile vanishing; she dropped the overnight bag and sat down in the seat beside him, leaning toward him.

“I’m okay,” he said.

“You’re pale,” she said. “I mean, white.”

“I’m okay,” he insisted. “I just don’t like flying, and I get nervous waiting.”

“Oh,” she said, and the tone of her voice wasn’t the derision he feared, but it wasn’t comforting, either, it was simply puzzled. He started to turn away, then stopped himself; that would be unforgivably rude. She was trying to be helpful, she was concerned about him; it wasn’t her fault if she didn’t understand something as irrational as his fear of flying.

“So what are... how are you?” he managed to say.

“Oh, I’m fine. Are you sure you’re okay?”

“I’m fine, really — just don’t like flying.”

“But you — you were never scared of anything, Jack; you’re afraid of flying?”

The look her in eyes took him back a dozen years, to high school, when he and Sharon’s older brother Greg had been pals, teasing Greg’s kid sister at every opportunity, but she’d still hung around, staring at Jack with admiring eyes.

That admiration was still there.

He stared at her, amazed and glorified; if he’d ever thought about it at all he’d thought it was just a little-girl crush, that she must have outgrown it long ago, but here she was, a grown woman, looking at him with that same wide-eyed intensity.

No one had looked at him like that in years.

“It’s been a long time,” he said.

“Oh, I know,” she said, “It’s been too long! I kept asking Greg to write to you, or call you, you know, just to keep in touch, I didn’t think I should do it myself, you know how that is...” Was she blushing slightly? He almost thought she was.

“I should’ve written myself,” Jack said.

He didn’t really mean it; he and Greg had drifted apart, and neither of them had been much interested in staying in touch once Jack moved away. Some friendships lasted, some didn’t, and his friendship with Greg had been one he outgrew.

But Sharon obviously hadn’t outgrown her interest.

He started to ask what she was doing here, then stopped himself. What else would she be doing at an airport gate with an overnight bag? She was waiting for a plane — for the same plane he would be riding.

They would be flying together — maybe they could arrange to sit together. That would be...

That would be horrible. He would be white-faced and gasping for air, and she would be laughing at him. She’d see him for the coward he was, and that admiration would leave her eyes forever, his goddamned phobia would do what years of separation had not.

But maybe her presence would help. Maybe he could hide it, fight down his fear; after all, for several seconds, while he looked at her face, he had managed to forget that he was waiting to board the airplane that would carry him to some horrible humiliating death.

And maybe...

“So you don’t mind flying?” he asked.

“Oh, I love flying!” she said. “Watching the ground fall away, sailing through the sky — I love it!”

Hardly a fellow sufferer, he told himself mockingly. “I don’t,” he said. “Bad food, cramped seats — I hate it.”

“Oh, that’s silly, it’s not so bad,” she said. She blinked. “Oh, is that what you meant, about not liking it? I thought it scared you!”

He forced a smile, and said nothing.

“I should’ve known you weren’t scared,” she said. “You were never scared of anything. What are you doing now, anyway? Are you married?”

She blushed again, he was almost certain — she must have realized just how blatant her interest was.

“No,” he said. “Not at the moment. What about you?”

“Never,” she said.

“I remember you worked at that drugstore; you still there?”

“Of course not! I have a real job now!”

They chatted, and for first seconds, then minutes at a time he forgot his fear. Color came back to his face; his hands didn’t shake as he adjusted himself in his seat, as he patted her hand. While she told him about decorating her apartment on the cheap he found himself thinking that maybe this time, maybe this time, he could hide his fear, maybe if he had her beside him to talk to he could forget about fire and smoke and falling and asphyxiation.

And maybe when they landed he could ask her out somewhere, if he hadn’t made a fool of himself on the flight.

“Now boarding, rows 16 through 23,” the PA announced, and Jack groped reluctantly for his briefcase; Sharon snatched her overnight bag out of his way.

Together they walked toward the entrance to the jetway, still talking; at the door she stopped, and he stopped as well, assuming that she must be sitting in one of the rows further forward, the rows that hadn’t been called yet. A momentary surge of panic flooded through him at the thought that they would be separated on the plane, that she would not be there beside him to help him stay calm, but would see him when he burst out screaming in terror.

Surely, though, they could trade seats around somehow. He knew that if she was beside him, the flight wouldn’t be so bad.

At least, not until the crash.

“All seats, now boarding,” came the call.

“I guess I’d better say goodbye,” she said, stepping back, away from the gate.

He stared at her, thunderstruck. “Aren’t you coming?” he croaked.

“Oh, no!” she said. “I wish I was.” She giggled. “I’m sorry, I guess I didn’t explain. I’m just here to meet Greg — his plane’s delayed, it’ll be arriving over there in another twenty minutes or so.” She pointed at another gate, Gate C5.

“But the overnight bag...”

“This?” She hefted it. “Oh, this is Greg’s; it got checked onto an earlier flight by mistake. I’m sorry, I should have explained. Goodbye, Jack; write sometime, why don’t you?” She was receding, somehow, backing away from him, and he was drifting down into the jetway, down through the gates of Hell, toward the plane that would carry him to fiery destruction, and he could not turn back, could not reveal himself to be a coward to her as he watched her carried away from him, lost forever. He could feel the blood draining from his face, could feel his hands trembling more than ever. His last hope was walking away.

She turned and waved.

“Have a good flight!” she called, smiling.

And that was the very worst part of all.

*end*