

My chronicles of air travel began with the idyllic season of childhood, when the sound of the engines revving up for takeoff sent a tingle of pure excitement right through me. Those were the days when I would eagerly await the meal cart because how cool is it to eat cheese and crackers at thirty thousand feet? The season of adolescence saw my increasing dependence on in-flight entertainment; if there wasn't a screen close by, I'd have a near-existential crisis: WHAT AM I SUPPOSED TO DO WITH MY TIME?!

But then a very different season began on a September day in 2001. Almost overnight, I became a frequent flyer who now suffered from a significant fear of flying. But as with so many ailments of this kind, the remedy has worked its slow and steady course through the years. So it is high time that I express my gratitude for those individuals who have played no small part in this story. I'm speaking to you, Flight Attendant.

I cannot profess to understand why you would choose such a career, since I would sooner apply to give daily tours on a live volcano before applying for your job. By some miracle, you have elected to deal with cranky passengers, nauseating turbulence, insane schedules, and dry skin. And for that choice alone, I think you deserve a special award.

You've met me at the door of the aircraft, and you don't see the extra piece of emotional carry-on baggage that I've snuck past the check-in counter. So you wouldn't have known how your cheerful greeting already helps me feel like I'm more than merely Passenger Someone in Row Whatever.

At the start of each trip, the pilot informs us that you are responsible for the safety and comfort of the cabin, and I've learned to trust that. Oh, it was hard at first. I wanted to quiz you about every tiny noise or movement. Your concise words command our attention, but your tone and gestures could just as easily apply to the preparations necessary for going on a picnic as they would to the preparations for a possible catastrophe. I know they train you for this, but still, I think you must have some supernatural powers that help you out.

There I am, after the flight, with the disheveled appearance of someone who has been on a deserted island for six weeks. And there you are, defying all the various curses that come with air travel. I can hardly string three words together, but you speak to me in complete and coherent sentences, beautiful little reminders that I still have some dignity, despite feeling yucky and subhuman. And thank heavens you are there, or else I might try to stumble into the cockpit instead of exiting the plane, thus accidentally

setting off an international incident which would delay the travel plans of thousands of people.

For all my converted sentiments towards air travel, I do think I would need to be under the influence of a powerful drug before admitting that I actually *delight* in the many hours spent in a cramped space, bouncing through the heavens like the gods are tossing us about just for fun, while listening to the symphonic range of a one year old who is experiencing the wonders of sinus pressure at high altitudes for the first time.

But already, I dislike flying less. And trust me, that is saying something.

Trip by trip, almost imperceptibly, you have helped me overcome a fear of flying. And it's not because each of you became my new best friend. That's not your job. Your job was to keep things running smoothly and safely, and in that ordinary work, you have been like heroes to me. Even if your smile is strained or your cheerfulness stretched to its thinnest, even an ounce of that manifest kindness is a treasure to someone who'd rather be running with the bulls than flying on a plane. You made it more bearable to be in the one place I wanted to run away from. But that one place is also the only way to be reunited with my family, so I thank you for helping to bring me home.