

Up in the Air and Afraid

by [Sarah Voss](#)

The day after the attempted Christmas Day air terrorism, I came face-to-face with my “possum” inclinations when three hefty young men bounded through the airplane aisle and plopped down in the seats right behind me and my husband. I was already buried in a book and wouldn’t have noticed except one of them lunged at my aisle seat, hitting my shoulder. I looked up, remembering how narrow the aisles were, how easy to bump someone. No big deal. I wasn’t hurt. Still, I anticipated a polite apology. Instead, I received defiant glares from all three. “Uh oh,” I thought.

So began a miserable three-hour flight halfway cross-country. I wasn’t wearing my hearing aids, but these three fellows were *loud*. They spoke mostly in some foreign language. I understood the cuss words, though, which were in English and liberally sprinkled throughout their conversation. One of them hugged a cell-phone to his ear, using just enough English that I gathered he was telling someone they were now on board. A minute later, another phone conversation confirmed that the plane was starting to taxi, and that was quickly followed by still another call which my imaginative mind decided must be some sort of a “report.” My ears were so alert I figured the three foreigners could see them sticking straight up. I chanced another glance their way. There it was again, that same unsmiling stare.

I thought about the previous day’s attempted air-bombing by some as-yet unidentified guy who’d boarded a plane from Amsterdam to Detroit. “Nonsense,” I told myself. “If these were terrorists, they wouldn’t be drawing such attention to themselves.” That thought evinced sound reasoning. The trouble was that it didn’t seem very reassuring. I looked around. A lone kid sat in the seat across the aisle from me and ahead were many ordinary travelers, some of them large men, but all of them seemed too far away to be helpful in an emergency.

My spouse and I were seated in the back of the plane, where we’d figured (correctly) that we might have more wiggle room, such as an empty seat between us. My hubby, in his seventies, was snapping pictures out the window. Between the noisy drone of the airplane and his own substantial hearing loss, I wondered if he could detect the commotion behind us. I passed him a note saying I was worried about the three passengers who, by now, had sprawled out to cover the entire six seats of the only row behind us. “Danger?” I wrote, with a large question mark.

My husband sat quietly in a way I knew meant he was checking out the situation. By now we were aloft, so I wasn’t quite sure what he, or anyone, could do if something *did* go amiss. After a bit, he got up and (I later learned) alerted a stewardess to our concern about these passengers. The stewardess responded that she, too, was concerned. Her concern didn’t translate into any visible action, though, and I spent the remainder of the flight carefully trying to avoid drawing any attention to myself. The more rowdy the men behind me became (and, yes, that most definitely *was* alcohol they were drinking), the more I tried to hide in my seat. Like a possum peeking out, every so often I would glance at them. Always that same frozen, unfriendly stare greeted me.

Their noisy, often abusive language continued throughout the flight. Once, the stewardess told one of the men that she couldn't serve him more liquor. Apparently he'd asked one of his companions to purchase an additional drink for him, which his friend obediently did. I heard this interchange even when I was trying not to listen. In a way it made me feel more comfortable: drunks were not nearly as scary as terrorists. Still, forty-five minutes from landing, I'd had it with their rudeness and my own discomfort. I asked my husband to trade places with me.

I knew my request was taking a chance. My husband has backbone. I'd have asked him sooner, but I was afraid he'd confront them. I'd pictured the worse possible things that might result from such a confrontation. But now, near the end of the trip, I hoped he might just let it ride out.

After five minutes of sitting in *my* seat, my spouse – a smallish man long past his physical prime – was thoroughly irritated by what he was now hearing. After one particularly obnoxious comment coming from behind, he turned and said, "Shut your mouth." Then he repeated it. Several times. His voice wasn't angry, but it held no tolerance. "There's a little kid right in front of you," he continued authoritatively, pointing. "My wife's over here. Just shut your mouth." I was scared for him but also proud of him. And, like bullies the world over, when confronted these men shut up.

Yet as I reflected upon this incident later, I grew increasingly upset. No, not about the actual incident, but about my own reaction to it. I told several friends about it. One observed how intentional their behavior had been, as if they'd *wanted* to cause me distress. "Oh," I replied. Then, "OH!" That's when I began to feel the anger I couldn't seem to find while I was on the plane, where I'd only felt fear. I could have told those men to shut their mouths just as easily as my husband did. I didn't have to be a man to say what I thought. Now, I'm sorry for my cowardice.

But it's a new year now, and I resolve to change. If there's a big bully around – or even three big bullies – I'm going to speak up. "Thou shalt not bully." It's time to say so.

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