

No Shameless Survivor
by Sebastian Hogness

At the boarding call, a nervous chill snapped down my spine and through my belly. I stared at the steel cigar ahead and realized I didn't know what fate it would have in store for me. This led to another chill. Putting up a smile and scanning my belongings, I stepped up from one of many padded chairs and took my place in a funnelling queue of suitcases and windbreakers. To my left stood a huge sparkling window at least fifty feet high, revealing the sky over the tarmac. To my right was a beige wall.

I was about to travel to China for a two week trip with my friend Francis and a group of students from across the state. We would see the sights of Beijing, then jet down to Changsha to tour around and study Chinese. The trip was almost entirely covered by the PRC, and it was too great an opportunity for me and my friend to resist. A stay in China! I was looking forward to it already.

Everyone had met at Seatac airport, and Francis and I had made some friends already, two kids from the Tri-cities named Steve and Jonathan. We flew down to San Francisco and chatted it up, making the trip bearable. However, the longest flight was yet ahead of us. I would soon be parted from these good friends of mine.

Steve and Jonathan had the good sense to ask at the gate to be seated together. I had decided against it, since I perceived the gate-clerk as having an irritable disposition, and felt too nervous to confront her. This was not good sense, not at all!

And so I handed in my plane ticket and slapped my shoes down a corrugated metal pipe, ducked through a nice curved metal hatch, clomped past two women forcing smiles, and tip-toed down one of two aisles into a wide white tube. I passed reclining chairs with extensive leg room and separate arm rests. This was a very fancy airline, I thought! I then sauntered past a flimsy curtain and entered another section, this one hazy, cramped, and crammed with upright seats packed thin and tight. I then changed my mind as fast as I had decided it. This compartment was not a place for comfort. This was a place to shuttle as many people as possible, and then motivate them to speed to the exit of their own free will. There were seat-back touchscreens, though, and they offered comfort to me, though they were greasy and oily from the fingers of strangers.

I met my seat-row-mate. Her name was Sarah, and she was from Seattle. She was much more tired than I, since she had woken up early in the morning to get to the airport. Nonetheless, she remained cheery and we talked about the trip for a few minutes. Sarah also knew far more Chinese than I did. I was truly glad that she would be able to converse with the flight attendants. Sarah had just saved my dinner.

The plane initiated its taxiing to the runway. I made an attempt to practice my Chinese skills on the air safety presentation, but only understood about half of the speech. My second instance of gladness was for airlines giving pictures to their safety pamphlets. The jet engines shrieked. I sat upright. As the jets roared with a greater and greater ferocity, and the scenery out the window became blurrier and blurrier, I was jammed on to my seat back as if I was glued there, and I could not detach myself without an incredible feat of strength. We slipped off the ground, and I had the woozy feeling of being compressed in two directions at once.

The lights dimmed. The flight attendants ordered everyone to shut their windows. I observed this and followed by example. They then wheeled their carts down the aisles and passed us our dinner preferences, which Sarah stated fluently, like someone who had spoken the language her whole life. Perhaps she had. Regardless, the dinners were of a slimy chicken-and-rice dish that had been mummified in saran wrap. It wasn't tasty, and it had no odor, but it was a fine dinner. My tired neighbor rested her head and started to doze. I wasn't feeling too energetic myself, and after handing in our trays, I began to do the same.

For a brief moment, my head rolled over and I felt a foreign warmth on my skin. I jolted upright, as Sarah giggled and my face reddened. I had no intention to rest my neck on anyone's shoulder, and I planned not to, as I profusely gushed out my apologies. Though Sarah was cool and calm, I swore it would never happen again, and turned my head the other way.

It was just too uncomfortable, though. I couldn't sleep in this contorted position! And I could not return to my usual slump, for fear of losing what remained of my face(which would not have been much, maybe the nose and the lower lip). I had only one remaining choice. I would give up all sleep for the duration of the flight.

Of course, I thought this was an easy task. The plane had movie viewers, after all. All I needed to do was pick four three-hour epics and plant my eyeballs on the screen, letting the serotonin flow through my brain.

Old flicks would be the longest, I figured. So I tapped the greasy screen a few times and fired up *Rio Bravo*. The problem with that plan was that the movie wasn't holding my attention very well. Far too campy, and my ears were tired of listening to the word "pardner". I gave the seat-back another shot with *Ocean's Eleven*, and I had a different problem. I couldn't hear the dialogue and the characters seemed blatantly arrogant. It wouldn't be great if Sarah woke up and saw it.

I flipped to the music section. Maybe my ears were the secret to my attentiveness. I tried the Chinese music section, but I didn't understand any of it. My oily fingertips tapped on the oily screen again a few times, but nothing was appealing! The cheap airline headphones weren't helping either, with their bizarre little two-plug system that I couldn't manage to get straight. Still, I trudged on, the touchscreen getting more and more slick, less and less responsive. Then I discovered the "Greatest Hits" section.

These songs were American! Songs I had heard before on the local radio stations! I played straight through albums, and when I finished an album I moved on to the next one that I had heard from. After I'd had every song in Air China's possession that I knew about, I went over them all again. I passed about five hours that way. My eyes were long tired and the sound of the Eagles had long been stuck in my head.

During that time, my mind wandered. What would await me in Beijing? How far would my lack of Mandarin hold me back from basic functions in society? How many long hours would drag by until I would find out? Could I even stay awake that long? I drifted into a state of semi-sleep, too scared to close my eyes. I observed everything around me, and I knew everything I was doing wrong, but I didn't have the motivation to correct any of it.

But I couldn't keep it up. Halfway through the flight, I felt the groggy call to the restroom stronger than ever before. I took a slow glance down the aisle to find it. My legs cramped up on themselves as I pushed myself out of my seat. After struggling to unclip my seatbelt, I stood up on my shaky legs and, staring ahead, realized my true problem.

Sarah had fallen asleep and was planted in the seat row like a boulder blocking the end of a tunnel. Waking her up just to make her move would have taken too long. I needed a quick and simple solution.

I placed my hands on the front and rear seats. As I steadily dropped my body weight onto them, I began pulling my legs up. Gently and quietly as a summer breeze in a valley, I started to swing them, back, and forth, and back and forth. I had to time their movement, waiting until the moment I almost kicked Sarah in her side. I loosened the grip of my hands.

And then I released them. I soared over Sarah's sleeping body and landed in the aisle like a feather, letting my knees bend and take the impact. If anyone had noticed, they gave me no sign. I was free! I raced to the lavatory, and its lights blinded me for a second, I went in so fast.

After having done my business, I crept back into the dim, hazy compartment, which was lighter and clearer now. I repeated the swinging motion and shot back to my seat. I had a newfound energy now, and I was restless. While this certainly solved my sleeping problem, it gave me trouble sitting still, and I could feel the passing time boring into my cranium.

Nevertheless, the time passed. I developed a pattern of listening to music, gazing blankly into the flight map, and scanning around myself in the dim haze to see if anyone was awake. If I saw someone who was, I would notice moments later that they were dead-eyed and engrossed in the new *Robocop* movie. I was mere feet away from other passengers, yet I felt alone. Time passed in minutes and hours, but I felt days and weeks.

Then, after I had counted a month of time spent doing nothing, the lights snapped back on. I heard yawns and groans and witnessed the squirming of a hundred bundled forms. The captain announced that we were in our final half-hour (*ban*, I had learned, in Chinese). This was the end. My insides felt jittery, like I had a tap-dancing digestive system. The in-flight dinner could have done that to me. Everyone rolled up the window shades, and my eyes bulged as I caught glimpses of the lush green scenery shaded by clouds and smog. This was fantastic! I turned to Sarah, who was finally unlocking her eyelids. After widespread gasps of anticipation, the ground grew nearer, and the landing gear hit the airstrip with a terrific THOMP. I couldn't manage to wipe my smile off my face.

I had done it! Eleven hours had passed, and bleary-eyed me was now in Beijing. After I had exited the plane, I saw myself in a new light. I was not a shameless survivor. I was a person who would risk anything to keep from getting rosy-cheeked.