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The Funny Pages | True-Life Tales

Mile-High Anxiety

By TODD BARRY

I can't remember for sure where I was flying to, but I know it doesn't matter, and I think it was Denver.

The trip started out perfectly. At the gate, I whipped out my Silver Elite frequent-flier card, which entitles me to "space available upgrades" - my thank-you for all the miles I've racked up as a touring comedian.

The agent made a few clicks on the computer and handed me my boarding pass. Well, I guess there was space available, because I was going first class. Hello, guys in suits. What do you think of my untucked T-shirt? A bit wrinkled, huh? Are you enjoying that book on "Dynamic and Effective Management Techniques"? Don't mind me if I eavesdrop on your conversation, because even after listening to you for four straight hours, I still won't be able to identify the industry you work in.

Then I sat down, and I saw it. Jutting out from the top of the seat pocket in front of me was a syringe - as in the type used to give various types of shots. I waved down a flight attendant and pointed to the syringe. I didn't want a passenger on the next flight finding that and hurting himself. And more important, I didn't want to be discouraged from grabbing my complimentary copy of the in-flight magazine - I'm sorry, the "award-winning" in-flight magazine.

"Hmmm," said the attendant. "I'm not sure what to do in this situation." She huddled with the other flight attendants. There was talk of rubber gloves and the fact that they didn't have any. I imagined Keith Richards sitting in the same seat on a previous flight. Then I wondered: If there are dirty syringes in first class, what's going on in *coach*? Maybe there are diseased pythons hanging from the beverage carts.

At this point, the man sitting next to me chimed in, in a really annoying know-it-all voice, "We use a syringe to feed our baby." I don't remember punching him in the face, but if this were a perfect story, that's what would have happened. Then a group of special security guys entered the plane. They stared at the syringe, concluding that removing it was not enough; they had to yank off the *entire seat pocket*. Wow, I thought. That's hard core.

As they planned this, the pilot walked over. He assured me that they took the situation very seriously. The guy next to me told the pilot about his baby-feeding technique, then followed up with, "Or the syringe could've come from a diabetic."

The pilot fired back, "It could've come from a diabetic with AIDS."

Score! The man next to me was silent. I should have given the pilot a standing ovation, but since I've never gotten one, I just sat there with a look that said, "Well, I guess we're done talking about your kid."

The pilot went back to the cockpit and got on the P.A.: "Excuse me, folks. You may realize we're a bit delayed in departing, and the reason - and in my 15 years of flying I've never experienced anything like this - a passenger has found a hypodermic needle in his seat pocket."

Did he have to give the specific reason? Couldn't he just have said there were some last-minute technical difficulties? Now everyone knew I was the one who delayed the flight.

Then another security man walked over, replacing the previous group. He looked at the syringe for a second, then put his ungloved hand in the pocket and pulled it out. It actually had no needle attached. The guy next to me miraculously suppressed his desire to say: "No needle, huh? I guess maybe they used it to *feed a baby!*"

But the hazmat expert was not finished. He reached into his pocket and pulled out three reassuring moist towelettes, which he used to gently wipe inside the seat pocket. I'm not sure if they were special high-security seat-pocket wipes or if he just had them in his pocket from lunch at the Rib Shack. But I do know we were ready to fly.

After several minutes in the air, a surprise visitor approached my seat. The pilot. Um, hello, I thought. Aren't you a bit busy?

"I just wanted to make sure you're comfortable with the way this was handled," he said.

"Yes," I replied, not mentioning my disappointment about the cancellation of the seat-pocket demolition.

Then he asked an odd question: "Do you have a business card?"

A business card? I'm a comedian. I have a Web site. Do you think Elayne Boosler has a business card? "No, I don't have one," I said.

"Well, why don't you write down your name and address and leave it for me," he said. There was an unspoken "if you know what I mean" at the end of his question. And I did know what he meant. Captain was going to hook me up. I found a dirty syringe and didn't make a stink about it. It's reward time. Fifteen minutes of inconvenience parlayed into a Tahitian vacation.

A few weeks later, a letter arrived from the airline. It said it got the message from the pilot that I was satisfied with the way it handled the situation. And as reward for my trouble? Two first-class upgrade certificates. That's what I get for finding medical waste in the first-class cabin: another chance to fly first class. Well, I'm not sure I want to. It's too dangerous.

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