I know that the experts say you’re more likely to get hurt crossing the street than you are flying (these, of course, would be the street-crossing experts), but that doesn’t make me feel any less frightened of flying. If anything, it makes me more afraid of crossing the street. As soon as the light turns green, I run across the street as fast as I can, screaming like a madwoman. I arrive on the other side out of breath, wheezing, and clutching my stomach (or if I’m in a whimsical mood, the stomach of the person standing next to me).

So, to conquer my fear of flying, I decided to write down my feelings on a recent trip. I kept an in-flight journal (which is like an in-flight movie—but without anyone standing up in front of you so you miss the good parts, and with better sound).

I felt edgy the moment I stepped into the aircraft. That could be why I snapped at the woman in front of me. In my defense, she did ask the flight attendant a pretty stupid question: “Excuse me, where is seat 27-B?” I mean, really. But I see now that I overreacted when I screamed at her, “Well, moron you walk in the only direction you can, and it’s the 27th row seat B—next to seat A. All righty?!” That sort of response is probably one of the many reasons why I’m not a flight attendant.

It was only when the woman (27-B) turned around to look at me that I saw she was a nun. I guess that sort of hat-like thing she wore on her head should have given me a clue, but sometimes I don’t have that good an eye for details.

I tried to apologize by smiling and giving her a playful punch on the arm to let her know I was joking. Well, either my playful punch carried more of a wallop than I intended (due to the tension I feel about flying), or her advanced years made her frailer than she appeared, or she was just a big old ham (which is my theory), but the nun shouted out, “Owww!” and rubbed her arm like she was in pain. She rolled up her sleeve and...you know, that bruise could easily have been there before I hit her.

My good friend Jasmine (at least I think that’s her name; I’m so scared that it’s affecting my already rattled memory; I know that it’s the name of a tea, so if it’s not Jasmine, it’s either Earl Grey or Hibiscus) told me that a good way to combat fear is to chant. So all the way to my seat I was chanting, “I’m going to die, I’m going to die, oh sweet Lord, I’m going to die.” It didn’t work. If anything, I was more petrified when I got to my seat (27-A). Even seeing the familiar face of the nun in 27-B (who seemed to flinch when she saw me) didn’t calm me down.

So here I am, sitting in my seat, working on my journal. Hey, there’s a fly on this plane. I am so scared of flying, I can’t imagine how flies do it all day, every day. But, then again, that’s what a fly does, fly. It’s his job. What’s going through
that fly’s mind? He’s looking out the window and probably saying to himself, “Wow, look how high up I am. I’ve never gotten up this high, I am going very, very fast, and I’m not really working any harder than I usually do.”

This fly just happened to wander onto a plane in Los Angeles. Several hours later it is going to get off in New York, but more in a *Home Alone 2* kind of way.

A bunch of flies will probably be waiting as it gets off the plane. They’ll all be hugging, blocking the way. Nobody will get by. There will even be a chauffeur holding a tiny sign that says FLY. I’ll be relieved to see he has friends there. Well, I’m assuming it’s a he. It’s so hard to tell unless you hold them really still and look closely, and I don’t want to do that on the plane with people around. That’s something you should do at home—alone.

Aghhhhh! What was that? “Fuck, we’re going to crash!!”

Oh, I wish I hadn’t shouted that out loud. It was just the beverage cart rumbling by. Being on a plane just freaks me out. Any little movement, and suddenly it’s like I have Tourette’s syndrome. Anything at all—“Fuck! Shit!” I don’t even curse. I never curse. It’s so embarrassing. “Pardon me, Sister, I am sorry, I... I was frightened. Pray for me.”

Now she’s going to turn on that little air thing above her. Maybe I’m paranoid, but I think it takes power away from the plane somehow. I get mad if people next to me use theirs.

“Sister, don’t use that, that’s... Dang! Shut it off! I’ll hit ya! Shut it off!!”

The nun just left to find a different seat. Some people are so touchy. I’m sure she didn’t learn that little hand gesture in her convent, either.

As scary as this flight is, it’s nothing compared to those tiny Buddy Holly planes that I’ve had to fly in to get to different stand-up performances. Oh God, those little propeller planes, those little eight-seater tiny planes where you can actually see the pilots in the cockpit. They’re reading through some manuals like *So You Want to Be a Pilot*. They’re just flipping through the pamphlet trying to figure out which buttons to push to land the plane.

I’ve got to relax somehow. Why didn’t I think of this sooner? I’ll recline my seat. Oh, that makes all the difference. That 3/4 of an inch between upright and reclined is the difference between agony and ecstasy. I never thought 3/4 of an inch could mean so much. Now I can sleep. When I get home, I’m going to put some gizmo in my chair so that they go back 3/4 of an inch, too. I wouldn’t overdo it like the guy sitting in front of me. His seat goes so far back that his head is practically in my lap. I can pretty much read his newspaper.

I’d better not get too comfortable in my 3/4-of-an-inch recline because toward the end of the flight, the flight attendant is going to say, “You’re going to have to put your seat in the upright position for landing.” They’re so adamant about that every single time, like that’s gonna make a difference. Because if we crash, the investigators are going to say, “Oh, that’s a shame, her seat was reclined 3/4 of an inch. When will they learn? What was that—30,000 feet? She could have made that. Sheesh. If only she’d been upright.”

Being reclined isn’t working. I’m still freaking out. I know what I need. “Oh, flight attendant. Oh, ma’am.” You have to talk nice to the flight attendants because they’re all arrogant little bitches. Unless, of course, you happen to be a flight attendant or are related to or are friends with one—then you are the absolutely lovely exceptions to this rule. But the rest of them, they have this attitude. And they can afford to have the attitude, because they have the power—they have the peanuts.
They have these six peanuts that we need. Six peanuts. Somebody could offer that to you on the street, and you’d say, “I don’t want that shit—get that away from me. Six peanuts? No—oh.” Somehow they’ve done research. They know that the higher we go, the more we need nuts. And we go crazy if we don’t get them.

“Miss, I didn’t get my, uh—my peanuts. And I’d really appreciate it if you gave me some. They’re good, aren’t they? I’ve never been able to get them on the ground either. At least not ones this good. Thank you. Oh, thank you.”

Fuck, what was that! “We’re going to crash!” Oops, false alarm. It’s just the food cart coming down the aisle.

I think they only give you six peanuts so that you don’t spoil your appetite for the disgusting meal that’s soon to follow. You never hear anybody say, “You know, I can’t finish that. Could you wrap that up for me please? That was delicious. It’s just too much, I’m stuffed! What was that, pigeon?”

But we do get excited about it, don’t we? “Oh, here comes the cart, put down the tray! La la la la. Put down your tray! They’re starting on the other side first. Hurry! Hurry! Those people over there—they’re eating. Those people are eating.”

This is the tiniest food I’ve ever seen in my entire life. I guess they figure everything’s relative. You get that high up, you look out the window, “Well, it’s as big as that house down there. I can’t eat all that. Look at the size of that. It’s as big as a house. Me thinking I could eat all that! Ha! Split that steak with me. Now that’s a steak.” Any kind of meat that you get—chicken, steak, anything—has grill marks on each side, like somehow we’ll actually believe there’s an open-flame grill in the front of the plane.

Salads are always two pieces of dead lettuce and salad dressing that comes in that astronaut package. As soon as you open it, it’s on your neighbor’s lap. “Could I just dip my lettuce, ma’am? Hm, that’s a lovely skirt. What is that, silk?” But you know, should that happen, club soda’s gonna get that stain out immediately.

That’s the answer to anything you ask up there, I don’t know if you’ve noticed that.

“Excuse me, I have an upset stomach.”
“Club soda, be right back.”
“Excuse me, I spilled something.”
“Club soda, be right back.”
“Ooh, the wing is on fire!”
“Club soda, be right back.”

I thought the food would make me feel less frightened. But it didn’t. Maybe if I stretch my legs and go to the restroom it will help.

That was the tiniest bathroom I’ve ever been in. I guess they figure since the food is so tiny, the bathrooms should be minuscule, too. I read a book once where two people had sex in an airplane bathroom. I don’t see how that’s possible. I barely had enough room to sit down. There is a lit sign in there that reads: “Return to Seat. Return to Cabin.” Why do they think that needs to be lit? Because we’ll relax in there for a little while? “Miss, bring my peanuts in here, please. This is beautiful. The water is so blue, it reminds me of the Mediterranean. I don’t ever want to leave.”

You have no concept of time when you’re in there—it’s like a casino: no windows, no clocks. I could be the only one to get up out of my seat to go to the bathroom—everybody else is sound asleep when I go—but after I’ve been in there for what I think is thirty seconds, I open the door and everyone in the plane is lined up, looking at their watches, making me feel like I’ve been in there forever.

And now I’ve got to explain the smell that was in there
before I went in there. Does that ever happen to you? It’s not your fault. You’ve held your breath, you just wanna get out, and now you open the door and you have to explain, “Oh! Listen, there’s an odor in there and I didn’t do it. It’s bad. You might want to sprinkle some club soda, if you uh…”

I think my only hope of escaping my mind-numbing fear is to sleep; to sleep and perchance to dream. The only trouble is when I fall asleep on a plane, I always have a nightmare….

Ellen DeGeneres is a stand-up comedian, has hosted the Emmy and the Grammy Awards, and has starred in two sitcoms, Ellen and The Ellen Show, as well as three Hollywood films. Recipient of the American Comedy Award, she has penned a humorous book, My Point…And Do I Have One, from which this story was excerpted.

Early the next morning I took the wheel of our bed in a shed. Suddenly, I was Columbus. I was Lewis & Clark. I was Huck Finn with AAA maps. Look out territory, here we come! But that first turn out of suburbia is a trickster and a shower of Legos, ketchup, sodas, and shampoo crashed down on the floor in the back half of the RV. Our kids, seated in the midst of the ruckus, thought this was great entertainment. My husband peeled himself off the roof of the truck cab. I headed for the nearest café.

And then I drove and drove and drove. Not because I am the road mama I imagine myself to be, but because I really couldn’t stop. I was terrified to change lanes, much less veer toward an exit. My hands were white-knuckled into a permanent grip on the steering wheel. I couldn’t see over the hood of the beast, there was no rear-view mirror, the side-view mirrors were too far away, and the cars around me were too close. The whole thing was noisy as a school bus full of third-graders and felt like a top-heavy trash truck on a windy day. I wasn’t Huck anymore. I was Jonah in the belly of the big fish. In short, I was freaking out.

—Dawn Bonker, “Bed in a Shed”

I HAD JUST COMPLETED MY FOURTH TO-DO LIST WHEN it occurred to me that all these lists might just end up eating me alive. I stared at the tasks that stood between me and my week of absolute freedom, a week of what I knew would be amazing fun: sleeping bag, tent, flashlight, dust masks, water, goggles, body paint, baby wipes (substitute for showering in the desert), food for ten days, costumes. Costumes. One little word, and yet it was staring at me with daunting intensity. I was heading off in less than a week to be part of a community based on creative self-expression and I knew I couldn’t arrive in jeans and a t-shirt. I needed to find some clothes to express my inner something—other.

Determined, I jumped in my car and headed to thrift stores and costume shops. A ticket to Burning Man is a ticket that enables you to finally wear that wedding dress and blue wig combo you’ve been dreaming about. You can finally be a roller-skating disco diva, and it’s not even Halloween. Four stores, six hours, and 100 bucks later, I arrived home, exuberant with my purchases.