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The Plane Now Standing at Platform 3

Written by E. James Chapman

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The Plane Now Standing at Platform 3

E. JAMES CHAPMAN



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Matador
9 Priory Business Park,
Wistow Road, Kibworth Beauchamp,
Leicestershire. LE8 0RX
Tel: 0116 279 2299
Email: books@troubador.co.uk
Web: www.troubador.co.uk/matador
Twitter: @matadorbooks

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I would like to dedicate this book to my loving wife and family who also endured the journey along with me, and especially to my youngest daughter Samantha who turned out to be the very talented artist who drew the cartoons in this and my next book, Telling Tales the Confessions of a Handyman!

PROLOGUE

Holidays, holidays, holidays. They are something that pretty much everyone looks forward to.

It really doesn't matter who you are, albeit single or married, everybody likes and possibly longs for the moment when they can actually go on their hols. And it really doesn't matter what kind of vacation you want, so long as it's something that you are looking forward to.

A cruise around the Caribbean islands perhaps, or maybe rock climbing in the Scottish highlands. Wind and weather permitting, a couple of weeks at the seaside could well be just what the doctor ordered.

However could it be possible, and I do mean just possible, that an eleven thousand mile round trip to stay with your mother-in-law in Canada is exactly what you've been longing for all year?

Well we've all heard stories that don't make any sense, haven't we? And, for sure, when it doesn't make sense it can't be true, can it? Like, perhaps a plane that's standing on platform three.

But every now and again what if some of the stories that don't make any sense at all are, in actual fact, the real thing.

And what if the stay at your mother-in-law's turns out to be the idyllic rest time you wanted but absolutely, positively didn't expect. And what if the rest was definitely needed following the unbelievable and totally unexpected catalogue of events that conspired to create your journey there with the wife and kids one of sheer hell!

But now your stay is over. Now comes the time to leave and you're facing the long, long trip back home.

Could the journey possibly be any worse than what it was getting there?

No, no, no! That is not possible is it? There is no way it could conceivably be, right?…Wrong!

THE HOLIDAY

Jim worked as a general maintenance man in a large urbanization. This type of work kept him constantly in demand and dealing with the many problems that naturally tended to occur.

Having been married to him for more than twenty-five years his wife, Elizabeth, knew him well enough to know when the constant pressure of work meant it was high time for him to take a much needed holiday. She knew from his changing attitude alone that he needed a rest – and preferably at somewhere far away from his work where he wouldn't have any worries chasing after him.

In fact what he needed was somewhere where he could really rest and relax or – as his Spanish-speaking kids put it – to chill out with, "¡*No problemas*!"

Carefully and very subtly Elizabeth activated her cunning plan and it was only after a couple of weeks of indirect hints that Jim finally cottoned on to the fact that his holiday for the coming year had already been decided on by his loving wife. All he had to do now was to agree with some enthusiasm that he was more than one hundred per cent behind her brilliant suggestion that their entire family, with the exception of daughter Caroline who lived in Australia of course, should travel all the way to New Brunswick in Canada to visit his mother-in-law.

Now she was actually an extremely nice lady called Rita and Jim felt quite lucky to know her as they always got on well together. The only problem was that she lived a long way

away in the sleepy village of Salisbury and a good three hours' car drive from Halifax International Airport. Salisbury was, without doubt, as Elizabeth quite correctly explained, a place full of sheer tranquillity where anyone, including him, should have *'no problema'* in chilling out! (And if you've ever stayed in that neck of the woods at wintertime you'll know that chill is a massive understatement!)

Nevertheless, Elizabeth's mum's home was, without question, the perfect location for a restful time at any time of the year.

To Jim it was only the journeys there and back that could possibly present a couple of hiccups, what with the flight connections and such like. But that could hardly present too much of a hassle, now could it?

Quickly casting his doubts to one side the next thing for him to work out was just what on earth he was going to do when he was over there. You see, all his previous visits to stay with Rita had proved to be pretty well too perfect, too restful, and definitely too uneventful to say the least.

One generously full glass of a full-bodied Rioja and ten minutes of reasonably hard thinking ended with the grudging acceptance that he couldn't think of anything. Unfortunately a second glass of the excellent wine ended with the same result, but he had started to feel a lot better about the situation.

Best thing, he thought, was to let the missus sort out all the planning, after all she was really good at that. In fact he didn't know anyone better. Best to just go with the flow, as they say.

And so it was all decided.

THE JOURNEY OUT

MÁLAGA–LONDON GATWICK

The day of departure came. Kids ready, suitcases packed and, most importantly, the flights were all arranged. These were particularly significant due to the size of the group (there was seven of them travelling together) and the length of the connection time between the flight from Malaga to London and the one from London to Halifax.

But there was no real need for anyone to worry, after all, everything was all booked and everything was all confirmed.

That, of course, is the theoretical side of it. Then there is the reality.

Now cheap flights are all very well but in many ways it's a bit like getting on a bus that's on its way to the local market. Handbags and elbows fly everywhere with folks pushing and shoving in order to get past someone who gives the impression of being slightly slower. On top of that there are those brazen types of people. Their policy is to act as daft as they possibly can and 'innocently' walk straight past all the orderly ones standing quietly in the queue. Their tactic is simply to either not notice that there was a queue in the first place or, if they did see the queue, not realise it was for their flight!

"Sorry, sorry," they would say, "I didn't realise you were in a queue." *But I'm definitely not going to the back of it now that I'm here am I.*

Another 'trick' that some equally brazen characters would use is the one when they would recognise someone they actually knew – no matter how vaguely – standing further up the queue. Having caught their 'friend's' attention they would then greet them as if they were long-lost friends and march past the line in order to have an 'innocent' chat with them. Needless to say once the chat was over there is no way they are going to return to the back of the line.

Amazingly, or perhaps understandingly, the vast majority of passengers seem to tolerate the outrageous performances of a few and suffer in relative silence.

Nevertheless, excluding all the pathetic queue-jumpers who do their very best to irritate fellow passengers, there is always the possibility of something even more sinister lurking within the queue that has the potential to cause untold and unnecessary concern to all their fellow travellers once they had found a space for their carry-on luggage, taken their seats and strapped themselves in.

No, it's not that there may be hijackers or even a gang of terrorists on board – this type of travelling nightmare is arguably far worse than both those possibilities – but it comes under the heading of … The Family From Hell (FFH)!

Now it could be said that it's highly possible that these people are completely oblivious to what they are doing and the havoc they cause. But it could equally be argued that they know exactly what they are up to, which invariably is to get some extra attention along with any perks that may be on offer – if only to just shut them up! But no matter which one it may be, having a bunch of noisy and rowdy people on any plane only serves to make the rest of the passengers even more restless than they already were.

Unfortunately, this was to curse our family's flight to London. Arriving at the gate and as soon as they joined the queue it was instantly obvious that the FFH were there, and right at the front of the queue as well!

This family must have pulled a really good stunt in order to outwit everyone and get themselves where they were. Or maybe it was that other passengers felt that they were better at the front where everyone could keep an eye on them. After all, the law of probability does clearly state that being watched is directly proportional to the stupidity of the act, and the FFH were indeed performing some pretty outrageous acts.

Jim looked at his wife but he didn't say anything, instead he just raised his eyebrows in exasperation. These people were, without doubt, the loudest and most obnoxious bunch of mischief-makers that any normal traveller would pray not to be on the same flight as.

Unfortunately, there was to be no escape for anyone who suffered with a nervous disposition because this was the last London-bound flight to leave Malaga that night.

Naturally, due to the late hour, everybody was already very tired but to make matters even worse, the plane coming in from England had been flagged up as a late arrival, which consequently meant there was a somewhat lengthy delay to its programmed departure.

For Jim and his family that didn't present too much of a problem as their connecting flight at Gatwick wasn't until six hours after their scheduled arrival. But for the noisy family at the head of the queue for sure it was an absolute disaster and they wanted everybody to know it.

"Why is it taking so fucking long?" the woman – who one presumed was the mother of the four children running wildly around – demanded in a harsh voice, loud enough for everyone to hear.

"Because the crew have to prepare the plane first, madam," the gate marshal snapped back in response, clearly irritated by the antisocial attitude of the woman and her brood.

Undaunted, the family group proceeded to continue pestering her with a series of nonsensical questions whilst

allowing one or another of their children to squeeze past her so that they could run up and down the boarding aisle. The marshal picked up a phone, spoke a few words and then replaced it.

Within seconds another lady marshal appeared at the gate and went directly over to the FFH. She spoke quietly to the husband and wife. 'Mum' abruptly turned and glared menacingly down the line of the queue. "Who's fucking complaining?" she demanded out loud.

Everyone looked the other way.

Fortunately, just then, the phone rang and having answered it the harassed gate marshal announced that passengers could now start boarding. Our FFH immediately surged forward and, taking no notice of her pleas to show their boarding cards, literally ran down the connecting passageway towards the waiting airplane.

With the momentum of a Pamplona bull run behind them, they ignored the welcoming, "Good evening," from the cabin crew and brushed aside the startled hostess who was waiting at the entrance to the aircraft.

Using an obviously well-rehearsed tactic of loudly talking amongst themselves, the family blatantly ignored her pleas to see their boarding cards by pretending not to hear her and promptly plonked themselves with some arrogance right down in the front row of seats. This, of course, meant that, as the rest of the passengers reached the plane and started to board, they were obliged to not only file past the feral family, but actually forced to push their way between them as 'Mum' continued to concentrate on distracting the busy stewardess from her task of checking the rest of the passengers boarding cards. This she did by constantly pestering her with unimportant questions like, "What's the need for you to check the cards when they've already been checked by the other cabin crew twenty-five yards away?" and, "Why can't my kids go to the toilet now? It doesn't empty onto the tarmac does it?"

It was now crystal clear that 'Mum' knew that being recognised as a difficult passenger meant that she was likely to get whatever she wanted – if only just to shut her up and keep the peace.

Anyhow, and after all the kerfuffle, at last the plane was full and everybody was more or less settled.

Over the intercom the already stressed flight crew were instructed by the pilot to get ready for departure. The chief stewardess moved over to the door banging it shut and ensuring it was locked. All that was needed now was for the gangway to move away from the airplane and folks would finally be on their way – an hour late but nevertheless on their way.

Suddenly and totally out of the blue there was a couple of loud thumping noises that echoed throughout the plane and, at the same time, it violently rocked from side to side. A brilliant flash of light briefly illuminated all the portholes on the left side of the aircraft, which was followed by the plane plunging for a brief moment into complete darkness.

It was the four kids in the front row who reacted first breaking the stunned silence. Being the nearest to the door and consequently the closest to the unexpected thud they immediately started to howl. "The machine's blown up! The machine's blown up!"

Slipping easily out of their seatbelts and clearly panicked by the close proximity of the loud thwack on the side of the plane, they began to jump up and down as they ran blindly down the passageway.

One of the stewardesses instinctively leapt from her seat in an attempt to stop them, but they all dodged around her and continued blindly running up the aisle. "It's going to catch fire! It's going to catch fire! We're all going to burn!" They screamed out loud at no one in particular.

There was an immediate – and somewhat panicked – stirring down the entire length of the airplane as passengers reacted to

the children's hysteria. People started to get out of their seats whilst others stared frantically out of their portholes looking for whatever had caused such a severe blow to the side of the aircraft.

Maybe it was an explosion. Maybe the kids were right and there was a fire!

"*Shut the fuck up!*"

The effect was immediate. All the hubbub was abruptly silenced and the kids stopped dead in their tracks as if they were playing statues.

It was of course 'Mum' screaming at her frenzied children.

Her swearing not only stunned everyone into silence but also successfully focused everybody's attention onto the events now taking place near the front of the plane, which, if it wasn't happening in such a confined place, could easily be taken to that of a stage farce. Everyone was inwardly horrified at the possibilities of what may be really happening, if what the children were yelling was true!

"Come back here and *sit the fuck down!*" 'Mum' now yelled at her brood.

Visibly flushed by the sheer crudeness of her swearing, the stewardess pushed her way past the kids as they made their way back to their seats and grasped the intercom phone. After saying a few animated words into it she promptly hung up and disappeared into the flight deck.

"The lights have come on outside," the kids then suddenly chorused.

All the passengers on the left side of the plane instinctively turned to their portholes and peered through them. It was true, the bank of lights that illuminated the walkway were back on again. Those who peered hardest could just about see people rapidly moving about on the runway below them. There was however, and thank God, no sign of a fire – wretched kids.

Without warning there was yet another loud thump on the side of the plane and once more everything rocked violently

from side to side. This time the force caused a couple of the overhead lockers to spring open spewing some of their contents onto the people below them.

Instantly the kids began screaming again. "We're trapped, we're trapped," they cried and people once more jumped from their seats – and not all of them to put their belongings back in the lockers. There was now a hint of panic in the air.

Could these events become part of a future episode of Air Crash Investigation on the Discovery Channel? one wondered. *But hang on a tick, we're still at the airport and haven't crashed yet… But hang on again, that could be why we'd be on it. We would be the first plane to crash whilst still parked at the airport terminal!*

This time an even louder yell from 'Dad' jolted the kids and everyone else in the plane back to their senses.

Well, if 'Mum's' swearing was bad enough then 'Dad's' stream of expletives had everybody shocked into silence.

"If you bastards don't shut your fucking mouths, I'll take my fucking belt off to you and whip you into silence!"

Fortunately for everybody it was at that point of time that the pilot's voice crackled through the plane's intercom system, which had the effect of breaking the super-charged tension of the moment.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he announced. "It appears that the motor that drives the wheels of the boarding ramp has failed for some reason and as a result the ground staff cannot disconnect us from boarding console," he paused. "I am afraid there may be some delay."

And as if answering the pilot, 'Mum' responded in a loud voice, "How long?"

But because the pilot didn't reply – as he obviously couldn't hear her – she then shouted louder. "I said how fucking long?" This time loud enough for all to hear.

Including, evidentially, the pilot as he immediately replied, "I'm afraid I don't know."

One of the stewardesses moved over to her and hastily spoke in a low voice.

"But I need a fucking drink," was 'Mum's' loud response.

Again in a hushed voice the hostess spoke to her.

"Water! I don't want fucking water. I want a fucking gin and tonic!"

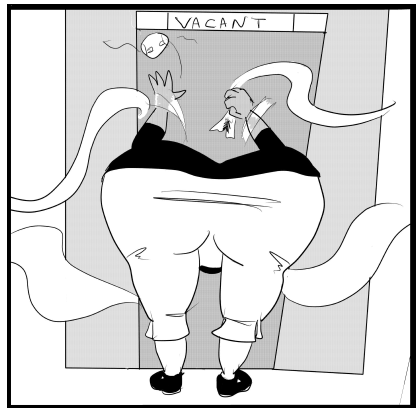
Now people in the plane began to talk animatedly amongst themselves. Not only had they clearly got the family from hell on the plane but this lot were also a foul-mouthed and drunken bunch as well!

Attentions then dramatically changed when a large woman carrying a crying baby now shuffled her way down the aisle, impatiently pushing arms and elbows to one side as she did so. Finally she forced her way right up to the front of the plane and as the woman passed each row of seats, everyone in turn became very aware very quickly of just why she was in such a hurry. One sniff told them that a nappy change was urgently needed.

She looked at the stewardess and muttered, "I think he's got Spanish tummy."

As the toilet had been put out of service prior to take off, the sign above it read 'Occupied'. However, as the aroma drifted towards the stewardess it took only a single whiff to prompt her to her feet and, nodding knowingly, she hastened over to the toilet, unlocked the door and wisely stepped to one side.

Unfortunately, due to the space-saving smallness of the aircraft's toilet cubical and the natural space-occupying largeness of the lady's ample backside, it was clearly physically impossible for the lady to change her baby's nappy with the door closed. As a result she had no option but to perform the service *au natural* and, as the filter change slowly progressed, more and more people became acutely aware of a very powerful stink – to put it mildly – that slowly permeated its way down the entire length of the plane.



Meanwhile 'Mum', who apparently seemed to be the only person who was totally oblivious to the urgent need for either air fresheners or the opening of the plane's doors, evidently felt that her most pressing need now was actually to phone home back in England. "I need to phone Dicky," she told the stewardess. "He's meeting us at the airport and I've got to tell him that we're going to be late."

Evidently in order for 'Mum' to do this she did however have two problems to deal with. The first was that the use of a mobile phone was not allowed on a plane. But that, of course, wasn't a problem really as she simply ignored that silly rule. The second problem however, was far more important – the battery on her phone was flat.

"Oi!" she called to the hostess.

At first the stewardess ignored her, being preoccupied trying to calm down couple of agitated passengers who had developed breathing problems.

"Oi! You, miss!" she shouted again.

Slowly the stewardess turned to face her. She forced a smile. "Yes, madam?"

"I need to phone home."

The stewardess looked back at her almost in disbelief and shrugged her shoulders as if not knowing what to say.

"Lend me yours, love," 'Mum' demanded. "I won't take long."

More than likely hoping that it was best to keep what was still a rapidly deteriorating situation from getting any worse the stewardess rummaged through her private bag and handed her phone to 'Mum'.

Another lady carrying a baby then arrived at the end of the aisle and took her place next to the still protruding backside of the other woman that was still sticking out of the toilet door.

"Oh no, not another one," the kids chorused holding their noses.

"Hello, hello is that you, Dicky?" 'Mum's' voice interrupted their attention as it echoed down the plane. "Oh, it's you, Fanny… Yes, yes, I'm fine… But could you tell Dicky that we're going to be late… The girl says about two hours… No, no we haven't even left Malaga yet… Why? Well, would you believe that we're stuck to the fucking stupid walkway thing…What's that you say?… Super glue?… Yes, yes I know they did it to all your door handles, but… Oh, I didn't know about your toilet seat, but… Have you any idea how much flaming superglue they'd need to do that!…Well I think maybe it's 'cause a stupid wheel's fallen off… What?… Yes, yes, I do know the song, three wheels on my wagon. Yes, yes very fucking funny isn't it… What's that you say?… Oh, we're only allowed to have water… I know, I know, but would you fucking believe it, they won't give me a fucking G and T until we've taken off…Yeah, yeah, I know they are, but what can you do, it's their flipping rules… The kids? Oh they're just fine, as good as gold."

At that many of her fellow passengers burst out laughing.

'Mum' peered over the top of her seat and glared down the length of the plane as if she had only just realised that her conversation had been overheard by pretty well everybody else.

"Got to go," she whispered in a voice just as loud as her conversation. "Yeah. Yeah, okay… Thanks, Fanny. I can't wait to give your Dick a good squeeze when we're back in London."



With that, pretty much all of the passengers within earshot burst out laughing again and even the stewardess was finding it hard to keep a straight face as she took her phone back from her.

'Mum' stared back at her with a puzzled look on her face and shrugged her shoulders as if to say she didn't have a clue what all the laughter was about.

Dramatically, all the hilarity came to an abrupt end as the plane suddenly rocked violently again from side to side again. There was a collective gasp by everyone as this time the shake felt slightly different.

"It's moving away," the children shrieked as they peered out through their porthole. "It's moving away!"

With that the plane jerked unexpectedly backwards, as if it had just broken free from its embarking station. The distant roar of a powerful tractor unit motor sounded as it started

to manoeuvre and push the plane away from the terminal building.

Jim looked at his wife who was sat across the aisle with a couple of their kids. They nodded at each other and blew silent kisses. *Let's hope that's the last of our troubles*, they thought.

Just then another lady brushed past them holding a baby.

LONDON, GATWICK–ST. JOHNS, NEWFOUNDLAND

Even though it was still only four in the morning, Gatwick Airport was unexpectedly busy. It also seemed that pretty much every available seat was occupied by someone trying to get some sleep, and all the corners had groups of future passengers huddled around their luggage, waiting, just like Jim and his family, for their connecting flight that will take them to their final destination.

The check-in for their flight opened at six so the family had two hours to kill before they joined the surprising long line of people who had miraculously appeared from nowhere.

Finally it was their turn.

"Mr. and Mrs. Chapman," the check-in girl observantly remarked as she looked at her monitor. "My word, what a coincidence," she added, "there are five other Chapmans on this flight."

"Yes, of course," replied Elizabeth with a smile. "It's our children – we're all travelling together."

The girl threw a worrying smile at Elizabeth.

"Aren't we?" she questioned.

The girl glanced back at her monitor then back up at Elizabeth. "Well… err… No, I'm afraid you're not," she replied.



"That's impossible!" Elizabeth reacted in an agitated voice. "I booked everyone in together."

"Well… err… no, not exactly. According to the computer you booked in twice," she responded, "in two groups. One for four and one for three, it seems."

"Yes, that's right, I did," said Elizabeth. "But that was only because on your booking forms four was the maximum you could book in at one time, and I booked in the other three immediately after," she added.

"Oh, did you?" the girl replied.

Elizabeth took a deep breath as if she was about to say something long and forceful.

Jim jumped in and asked, "So we're in two groups then? Four and three?"

"Well… err… no, I'm afraid you're not," the girl replied nervously.

"We're not!" both Jim and Elizabeth chorused together.

"Then where are we?" Elizabeth continued.

"Your seats…" she hesitated again, "appear to be spread throughout the entire economy class." She blurted the news

out in the most official voice she could muster under the circumstances.

"What!" came the instant answer back from at least five of the group – and all at the same time!

She quickly cleared her throat. "I am afraid none of your seats," she coughed again, "appear to be together."

"But our granddaughter's only two years old," protested Elizabeth.

Loud sighs began to come from the queue of people behind them. Jim turned around and glared angrily at everyone in general who was stood there.

"I'm very sorry," the girl responded. "There's nothing I can do as the plane is fully booked. It seems you were placed in the only seats that were available at the time you booked. Perhaps you can persuade other passengers to change places once you're on board?" she added with a rather hopeful-looking smile on her face.

"Good grief," said Elizabeth.

"I don't believe it," responded Jim.

Elizabeth grabbed the boarding cards and they stomped off.

Jim turned back and glared at the girl, "At least with Easyjet we had a fighting chance of being together."

She smiled sweetly back at him.

Downhearted he turned away from the check-in desk and started to usher his family away.

He caught up with both Elizabeth and Anthony, their eldest son, but neither spoke to him. They had already worked out that ahead of them not only lay yet another queue before boarding, but also there was the delicate task of requesting seat movements with complete strangers.

The time for boarding arrived.

"Is it possible you could sit over there so my two daughters could be together?" Jim asked one passenger.

"No," came the abrupt reply.

"Could you take my seat so my daughter could be with…?"

"What's this, bloody musical chairs?" was the impatient response.

And so after a series of increasingly rude and offensive rebuffs the family were forced to accept the fact that nobody on that flight was prepared to help them out and that they had no option but to sit all by themselves.

As for Jazmyn, their two-year-old granddaughter, the family decided to take turns to hold her, but she only wanted to stay sat on her mother's, Natasha, lap. This she did for as long as she remained awake, which was much to the discomfort of her mother as she never seemed to stay still for more than a few minutes at a time.

Elizabeth was fortunate in having an aisle seat, and as she was fairly close to Natasha, the two of them were able to share Jazmyn whenever she became too restless.

Jim, on the other hand, found himself one seat in of a mid-aisle row of five and next to a quiet book-reading lady in the aisle seat to his right and a rather elderly but, as it turned out, friendly couple on his left.

Being a naturally gregarious fellow, it didn't take too long for him to strike up a conversation with them, and by the time the first meal of the flight had been served Jim had just about swapped life stories with the couple.

Eric, as it turned out, was a professional conductor. Not of the bus kind, as Jim had foolishly asked, but of a philharmonic orchestra. He had evidently just put on a performance in London somewhere and was travelling home with his wife Joan. Evidentially she had never been to England before and had taken the opportunity to visit the country with her husband.

Shortly after the meal, Joan interrupted Jim and Eric's conversation and asked her husband if he could get her bag

from the overhead compartment. Her simple request meant that he, Jim and the 'book lady' all had to get up so that Eric could get access to the overhead locker and retrieve the required bag.

After a couple of 'Excuse me's', 'Sorry, was that your foot and 'Thank you's later, Eric managed to reach the aisle and locate the bag.

He clearly knew what he was looking for as, without asking, he quickly unclipped the bag and removed what looked very much like a decorative pencil case. Replacing the bag in the locker, Eric then side-footed his way past his two travelling companions' empty seats and plonked himself down in his seat, handing the pencil case to Joan. He turned to Jim who had just sat back down in his seat. "She's diabetic you know," he whispered. "Got to have her insulin injection."

Jim nodded in an understanding sort of way, although he didn't really have a clue what that entailed. He glanced at Joan who, for some reason, seemed to be experiencing a fair bit of difficulty undoing the zip of the pencil case. Curious, he watched a bit more out of the corner of his eye.

Her attempts to open it rapidly became more and more forceful until suddenly and, just like somebody who's trying to cut through a tough piece of roast beef during their Sunday roast, they finally do it with such force that the peas go west, the potatoes go east, and the gravy goes everywhere giving everybody in the near vicinity a good splattering – and so it was with the contents of the pencil case. When the zip finally surrendered to her violent tugging it literally burst open shooting everything upwards and outwards! Pills, make up and various other miscellaneous ladies items flew in all directions with such force that they were scattered over a distance of at least five or six rows of seats!

Even at thirty-two thousand feet gravity was still in force and as fast as the items went up, so they cascaded back down

onto the unsuspecting folks in the seats all around her. They reacted almost in shock from the unexpected objects that were raining down on them from above. However, although startled at first, the people quickly realised what had happened and began to collect up the miscellaneous objects before holding them up and passing them over to Eric.

The event certainly broke the ice and as the passengers faced one another above the tops of their seats they started to talk more openly and jovially amongst each other. For some reason – more than likely to save Joan's embarrassment – passing back the contents of the bag quickly developed a humorous side and as they found them some started to call out what they'd found, holding it up at the same time before handing it over.

Then someone shouted, "I've got a pair of knickers here!" which prompted everyone to burst out laughing.

Eric shook his hand at the fellow. "No, they're not hers… Too small… Maybe…?" he nodded towards the lady sat in the seat next to the fellow.

The laughter renewed with fresh merriment.

"Here's half a pound of sausages!" A yell from someone else kept the roars of laughter going.

"Isn't that a washing machine over there?" Another man called pointing down the aisle.

Instinctively everyone turned to see where he was pointing, and then having realised the stupidity of it, laughed even more heartily amongst themselves. Jim glanced about at them all standing up with tears of laughter in their eyes. How could people who were so unhelpful when he wanted help, be so different now? Finally, and as the hilarity died down, no one called out that they had found anything more from her bag. However, the most important thing that Joan needed was still missing – her hypodermic syringe. She leant over and whispered the bad news to Eric. He nodded and stood back up again looking about him as he did so.

He cleared his throat and called out in a reasonably loud voice, "Has anyone seen a hypodermic syringe?"

A voice from somewhere down the plane responded, "My God! Now we've got a drug addict on board!"

There was instant uproar and everyone seemed to start talking vociferously amongst themselves.

The commotion caused Eric to hold his hands up and out in front of him. "No, no, no," he started to say.

But with that a hand to his left shot up into the air and a woman's voice called out. "Here it is!"

Everyone turned to see the source of the voice, which also prompted Joan to get up from her seat. Doing her best to look as ladylike as possible she quickly worked her way over to the aisle and, having got there, she went over to the lady, quietly thanked her and gratefully took the syringe. Clutching it firmly in her hand Joan hurried off towards the centre of the plane which was where the nearest of the toilets were situated. She disappeared into the first of the two vacant ones.

Still consciously aware of the drug addict accusation that had started all the commotion, Eric cleared his throat again and announced in a loud voice for all to hear. "My wife has sugar diabetes you know and after her meal she urgently needs to have her insulin injection," he hesitated as if waiting for a comment from someone. But as there was complete silence he continued, "If she didn't have it then the chances are that she could go into a coma." Still no one said anything. He glanced at the toilet door again, which was showing the 'Engaged' sign. "Err… it doesn't normally take very long for her, so I guess she should be back any minute now."

Again there was silence.

Then a voice piped up, "Maybe she's dropped it again."

Titters of amusement echoed around the passengers. Hearing them, Eric twisted his head anxiously towards the toilet door.