



## Panic Aboard Flight 4279

*Bless the Lord who crowns you with tender mercies (Psalm 103, NKJV).*

I was standing in line with my carry-on bags in Terminal K at Chicago's O'Hare airport, preparing for the last leg in our flight from Palm Springs to Grand Rapids. I was tired after two days filled with speaking sessions, a magazine interview and dozens of personal conversations. The July daytime temperatures had soared to 112 degrees, and I was eager to get home to the cool, 80-degree temperatures of West Michigan.

But as I was about to board, I was pulled aside and informed that I would have to spend the night in Chicago because my presence would cause the aircraft to exceed FAA weight restrictions.

Sure, I'd like to lose ten pounds, but why was I being singled out? And why was there no offer of a travel award? The terse response: I was (allegedly) the last person to book my flight.

As it turned out, a man by the name of Cody was a no-show, and I was allowed to fly in his place. But I was cranky as I made my way (with my husband, John) to 18C, in the last row of this American Eagle aircraft. It didn't help my mood that a woman across the aisle was nearly hysterical, pleading with the flight attendant to help her.

I soon learned she was very fearful of flying, had already been on several legs of her journey from Saigon, had apparently been bumped off her flight from Dallas to Grand Rapids, and she was now fearing she would never arrive at her destination.

She didn't speak a word of English—not even "Help!" But her tone of voice and body language (and the flight schedule and ticket stubs she was waving) spoke volumes. The flight attendant seemed frustrated by the language barrier, and she had other matters to attend to.

Having gotten my baggage stowed and settled in my window seat, my attention

turned to the young woman sitting ahead of this frantic lady. She was reaching back and holding her hand and patting her leg and then began to speak in a calming voice, nodding and looking at the ticket and saying again and again, "It's okay. Everything will be all right."

Throughout the flight she continued to hold this frantic woman's hand, and she held her close as they deplaned together and talked with a ticket agent. As I watched this young woman help a stranger, I was forced to ask myself if I would have done the same had I not been delayed in boarding the flight.

I'm not sure.

Though I expressed my appreciation to this young woman, she will never know that she may have helped me far more than she helped this distressed stranger.

As I think of her, I am reminded of Mitch Albom's book, *Five People You Meet in Heaven*. It is a fictional work about 83-year old Eddie, the long-time maintenance manager at Ruby Point Amusement Park.

The story has a lot of twists and turns, but an important aspect of the book relates to five people in heaven who it turns out, unawares to him, had a significant influence on his life. Albom's story is an interesting portrayal of heaven.

Will I ever meet this young woman in heaven? Will I have the opportunity to remind her of her loving kindness on American Eagle flight 4279?

Will someone approach me and remind me of a fleeting act of kindness that had an enduring impact on their life?

This young woman's tender mercy of reaching out to a stranger had a greater impact than she may ever realize—and so it is with the tender mercies we offer.

Bystanders may be taking note, and in the process their lives just might be changed forever. □

—Ruth A. Tucker

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