

## TERROR

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### SHORT SHORT STORY NO.30

Harry watched every passenger who boarded the plane, hoping that no one would take the empty seat between him and the young backpacker in the front row. But after the doors were closed, a young, trembling woman was led there from the rear of the cabin by another stewardess.

'If you have any problems, just let me know,' said the stewardess gently. 'We're here to help.'

Harry was sure that he'd heard that phrase used in an advertising jingle recently but for the life of him, he couldn't remember where.

'I'm sorry,' said the young woman, pale but stunning, looking to her left and right apologetically. 'I'm a nervous flyer. I've only been on one plane before. They terrify me.'

Harry stared at her and understood what the phrase 'love at first sight' meant. He tried to think of something encouraging to say, something that might make her like him, but the backpacker spoke first.

'There's nothing to worry about, darl,' he said, betraying an Australian accent. 'Safest form of transport.'

'Then why are there always crashes on the news?' she asked.

'Because they're so rare that every single one is newsworthy,' he replied. 'There's nothing to worry about. The name's Lloyd, by the way.'

Harry could see that young Lloyd was practiced with women and was already looking at her with a view to potential conquest. He himself was picturing something more substantial. A person he might love. Who might love him in return.

'When was your first time?' he asked suddenly, blurting out the phrase so dramatically that both Lloyd and the girl stared at him, the latter momentarily forgetting her discomfort.

'Excuse me?' she asked, offended, while 'Bloody hell, mate,' said the Aussie, shaking his head.

'On a plane,' said Harry, blushing furiously. 'You said this was your second time. So you must have flown safely before.'

'Oh,' she replied, laughing for a moment. 'It never took off. It was a simulator. To get over my fear of flying.'

'I used to have a fear of intimacy,' said Lloyd. 'Now I just have a fear of commitment.'

Harry sighed and looked away. There was no point in trying to get close to her, not with the backpacker present. He simply couldn't compete. Women like her always went for the handsome option, the cheeky smile, the stubble, the loose-fitting jeans, the t-shirt, the casual air of uncomplicated sex. They never saw beyond his surface, the grizzled, unattractive features that were beyond his control. It wasn't fair. It had never been fair.

He waited until the plane taxied down the runway and its wheels lifted from the ground.

He waited until the noise of the engines was deafening.

He waited until the girl's hands and knuckles were white from gripping the arm-rests.

He waited until she took the backpacker's hand in hers and allowed him to run his index finger along her palm.

Then he leaned over towards her.

And whispered.

'Allah Akbar,' he said. 'Praise be to the Prophet.'