

A Bumpy Ride

We took off from Lima on time, just as the sun was dipping low over the Pacific. The plane climbed steadily to reach its cruising altitude, giving me a magnificent sunset view of the Andes mountains, the backbone of South America. Then daylight was swept away into the west and stars appeared, twinkling in the darkening sky. I love flying at night.

I was just finishing a cocktail when dinner was served. I slid over to the aisle seat to make it easier and was presented with a tenderloin drizzled with a mushroom sauce accompanied by a dollop of mashed potato and some English peas. I asked for a half-bottle of Cabernet, then picked up my knife and fork and addressed the tray of food in my lap. The steak was delicious, and the veggies were still warm. I took a sip of wine and leaned back in my seat. The captain's voice floated through the cabin. He announced some turbulence ahead, nothing unexpected when flying over the Andes, and would everyone please fasten their seat belts. Our destination, Bogotá, was perched at nearly nine thousand feet, and we were flying over mountainous terrain that frequently generated dangerous conditions.

A massive clap of thunder suddenly exploded above us, and sheet lightning lit up the angry sky. The plane abruptly, violently, lurched to the left and dropped several hundred feet. The engines strained and screamed, the lights went out, and the pitch-dark cabin was filled with flying objects, shrieking, and chaos. I would have been thrown out of my seat if I hadn't been strapped in. My tray, however, had no such restraint and my dinner levitated and spilled everywhere, mostly on my shirt and in my lap. The wine bottle spun into the aisle, bounced off the seat on the other side, and fell to the floor, rolling towards the bulkhead. The plane bucked and lurched again, buffeted by the wind, battered this way and that like a mosquito in a gale, shuddering from nose to tail.

The lights flickered back on just as the plane plunged again. One of the air hostesses was lifted off her feet, then slammed onto the floor in the aisle. I unfastened my seat belt and crouched beside her, gripping the armrest as tightly as I could. Overhead bins burst open and showered us with bags and books in the flickering half-light. She was dazed, and her eyelids were fluttering. My heart was pounding, my mouth was dry. I saw in her eyes the same terror I was feeling, certain that my time had come. The plane shivered and groaned, the fuselage creaked, the engines whined, people were wailing and praying. The young woman tried to sit up. The coffee pot she'd been carrying had glanced off her forehead as she fell and cut her just above the eyebrow. I grabbed a napkin—the dinner service accoutrements were everywhere—and dabbed it on the wound. The white fabric turned red immediately. I folded it and she took it from me and held it to her head. I helped her into the middle seat on my row, with me on the aisle. We strapped ourselves in as the plane shuddered and shook for a little longer, then mercifully emerged from the storm and started gaining altitude. When the captain assured us that all was well, we laughed and wept with relief.

The air hostess was soon back on her feet, trying to clear the debris. I and a few other passengers helped a little, and once we got the aisle clear the crew served free drinks for the rest of the flight.

There was spontaneous applause from all passengers when we touched down in Bogotá. The captain came through the cabin, shaking everyone's hand, complimenting us on our fortitude, and praising the crew. My uncle met me at the gate, took one look at me and said, "I see you had a bumpy ride. Come on. What you need is a good stiff Martini."