

Hawaii Unplugged

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I’ve heard it said that your entire life flashes before you when you are about to die. It’s true. All of my 52 years fast-forwarded that December afternoon as I lay counting the ceiling tiles of the Honolulu International Airport Emergency Clinic.

Our holiday trip began well. My husband, Tim, and I were joining friends in Hawaii to celebrate our 30th wedding anniversary. Before boarding, I remembered I needed earplugs. At the nearest counter in the Atlanta airport, I tried to purchase the Ear Planes I used when flying. The only ear plugs available were those intended for children. Tim said, “You have small ears. I’ll bet they work fine.”

Flattered at having small ears, I made my purchase and happily settled into the Delta aisle seat. On take-off the earplugs worked well. When we reached cruising altitude, I removed them since they had little blue plastic antenna. I didn’t want to look weird in front of strangers propelled hundreds of miles an hour at 35,000 feet. The stewardess brought the hamster rations passing for dinner. Undaunted, Tim and I toasted our anniversary and limited our trip to the broom closet bathroom. However, 10 hours IS a long time.

We had our usual discussion on how air travel has changed, how it no longer is a glamorous experience, and reminisced over past luxury flights. Tim may even say to a fellow traveler “air travel is a bus ride in the sky with peanuts.” One this trip just for fun, we didn’t pay the \$5 for the earphones, but made up our own dialogue to the in-flight movie. Some of the other passengers even joined in. A few hours later after working

the crossword and reading the airline magazine cover to cover, the pilot announced we were ready to land. I dutifully inserted my earplugs, fastened my seat belt, and put my tray in the upright position.

As the wheels touched down on the asphalt, the air pressure in the cabin changed. My ears popped, but it was until later that I realized that my earplugs had been sucked deep into my ear canal. The pressure, pain, and panic drowned all my excitement of landing in Paradise.

I scrambled for my purse and a mirror. My adrenaline pumped. I managed to force the left earplug out. I cocked my head and strained to see the right ear. No sign of the blue tips. The jet taxied to a stop where our friends were waiting to give us the traditional Hawaiian greeting of a kiss and flower lei.

Flushed with a combination of embarrassment and pain, we headed to the Emergency Clinic. Dragging our luggage for two weeks down ramps and stairs, we finally located a tiny room labeled "clinic". After ringing the bell and waiting, we were directed to another location. Finally, a thinly built man of Polynesian extraction opened a "speakeasy" window and admitted us to the clinic.

I sat in a chair with a curtain dividing the waiting room from the examining room. The paramedics' hands trembled as he turned my face to look in the ear canal. I didn't have to know Hawaiian to feel the prognosis was not good. When I heard he spoke the word "hospital", my nurse friend, Sue, went into action.

"Sheila, do you trust me?"

"Yes." I feel the tears coming close to the surface.

“Don’t move. I have a needle. I’m going to remove the plug. I can see it but the tweezers aren’t long enough. Are you okay with that?”

My eyes answered. With one swift motion, Sue plunged the hypodermic needle into the rubber earplug. I hugged Sue and wiped the tears. I could hear again.

When friends asked about our 30th anniversary trip to Hawaii. I described the silvery sands edged with black coral, the coffee and macadamia plantations we visited on the way to Kilauea Volcanic National Park and a ride on the “sugar train” through the cane fields. Of course I’d never leave out swaying coconut palms at sunset or the dancers at the Hula Grill. But the first thing I said is that I was “unplugged in Hawaii.” They always nod and think they understand.