



Honorable Mention - Memoirs/Personal

95th Annual Writer's Digest Writing Competition – 2026

Seatmates by Design

The Plane Ride That Changed My Mind About Tattoos

By Judith Glynn

Flying together through billowy clouds, a decades-old memory jabbed at me. I, too, had a passion and driving desire to be different, similar to his story, when I was his age. And people who didn't have a clue who I was judged me harshly.

As I waited at the gate for my cross-country flight from Newark to San Francisco, a young man several feet away stretched and swayed his willowy body, arms raised hallelujah-style. An enormous tattoo began at his wrist, encircled his forearm, and disappeared into an Army-fatigue jacket scrunched at his elbow. I disliked ink on anyone's body, thankful my adult children didn't have any. His poor mother, I thought, and returned to my AARP magazine.

When I boarded and buckled in, to my horror that inked arm fastened its owner into the middle seat beside me. It then crammed his backpack under the seat, filling the space with a jacket. Somehow, his feet squeezed around his stuff. I inched closer to the window and opened my book.

"Hi," he said looking at me while simultaneously adjusting his wavy hair. Long auburn locks cascaded down his back to remind me of a woman's shampoo advertisement. My return hello was cordial but short. *Why is he talking to me? I'm not in his age group.* At cruising speed, he reached for the flight magazine, traced the carrier's route with his spindly finger, and asked me to guess where we were.

"We're probably over Western New York," I assumed and looked down to read.

When the meal cart arrived, he declined. Although I hadn't asked why, he said it couldn't compare with the turf-and-surf meal he had the night before at a pricey Manhattan restaurant. He'd been on a business trip to promote a music video game to the chairman of the board of a major toy store chain.

My interest in him peaked when I learned he was the lead guitarist for an award-winning game that simulated a rock band. As the players' skills improved, the venue changed from a home basement to a stadium performance. He rattled off words such as SG guitar controller, fret buttons and whammy bar when describing the game's elements. The one instrument I played was a plastic ukulele but that was as a kid and only until its strings broke.

"So, this game? No drug references, violence, or vulgar lyrics? Just guitar playing that teaches hard work can produce good results?" I asked.

"No bad behavior," he smiled. "And I don't do drugs either."

"It's a pleasure to meet a positive role model in your business," I said as his full-blown decorated arm grabbed his mane into a ponytail, which he flipped to one side of his head.

His passion for the guitar began at age 14 when his mother bought him one at a pawnshop. When his friends drove around, drank or did drugs, he practiced. When his parents' screaming marriage, which ended in a divorce, ripped him apart, he played punk-metal music to drown them out. After many years of playing guitar, the fingers on his talented left hand were slightly lengthened.

"How's your hearing?" I asked with motherly concern. He assured me that he was careful to protect his gift of perfect pitch.

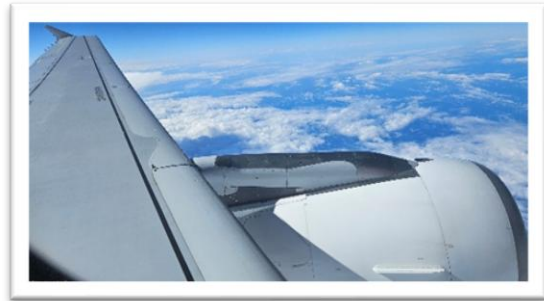
"I'm beginning to experience what fame feels like," he said since people ask for his autograph. An *American Idol* finalist sent him a signed poster that now hung in his West Coast office. *He has an office?*

Although he expected to marry his corporate-world girlfriend, when an attractive blond returned to a seat across the aisle, he fantasized about her and The Mile High Club.

"You'll need a nighttime flight and an empty back row with some blankets to join that exclusive club," I said.

"You seem to know what you're talking about," he said and leaned into me. It was then that I noticed his blue-green eyes that revealed a wizened soul.

"I'm guessing at specifics. I travel a lot," I said and smiled.



Somewhere over the Midwest's open plains, my travel companion prepared for a nap. He shaded his eyes with wrapped around sunglasses and tossed the Army-fatigue jacket over his head. He resembled a captured fugitive beside me. But I was the imprisoned one sitting in plain sight with my prejudice against people who looked like him. As he slept, one of his long legs reached under my seat. With our knees touching, I asked the flight attendant for water since I knew he'd be thirsty when he awoke.

Flying together through billowy clouds, a decades-old memory jabbed at me. I, too, had a passion and driving desire to be different, similar to his story, when I was his age. And people who didn't have a clue who I was judged me harshly. I saved that recollection until he straightened, yawned and asked if we were close to landing.

"About another hour," I said, adding. "Hey, we're close to being kindred souls."

I felt his shoulder against mine as I revealed my years of being in an unhappy marriage, despite motherhood that I adored. Driven with an innate and insatiable desire to write, I spent lonely nights at my kitchen table, pre-computer days, typing articles that were mostly rejected. When I daringly enrolled in my first writer's conference in California, my oppressive husband warned our marriage was finished if I attended.

I borrowed money that would take years to repay and went anyway. On the return flight home, I cried about the pending divorce but had no regrets over my exhilarating one-night stand at the event. When I told my seatmate the story and the long, solitary years of hard work and unimaginable sacrifice it took to realize my success, he nodded in agreement.

"It's important to face life without a mask rather than pretend conformity. It's also important to touch and to be touched," I said. "But I was younger and hotter in those days," I added wistfully. It struck me that I would not have told my grown children that story.

"You're still hot," he said softly.

But despite our budding kinship, I could not get past his outrageous tat I had first seen at the airport. "Why would you do that to yourself?" I asked and pointed to his arm.

Sensing my disapproval, he gave me a get-over-it-lady glance about the octopus design that had caused hours of pain to apply. And when he lifted his shirt to reveal a Celtic vine that began at his armpit, swirled down his side and disappeared into his jeans, I was horrified while stifling a gasp.

"Don't you know that when you're much older your skin will turn a putrid blue and sag with deformed designs," I scolded him with my jaded wisdom.

He lowered his eyes as he absorbed my insult. "Well. I knew early on I wouldn't sit in any boardroom. Everyone in my generation with ink will sag, too," he said to me, a woman who needed an attitude adjustment in real time.

And he was right. He was living with his peers, much like I lived with mine. I had shocked many people in order to follow my dreams and to be me, just like he did. We both wore permanent and distinctive markings for the world to see who and what we are. The only difference was mine were internal. His were external.

Eventually, we buckled up for the plane's descent and taxied to the gate. When he stood up, he waved to a spiked-haired friend seated a few rows away. He had a nose ring and body art on his arms. "Nice talking to you," my now charming seatmate said to me and grabbed his belongings.

"The pleasure was mine." *If only he knew the impact he had made on me.*

At the baggage carousel, our eyes met briefly. We were strangers again. Then he was gone, leaving me a changed and better person about judging others who don't look like me. Thanks to him, my harsh judgment of people who chose to decorate their skin would never be a negative reflection on them. It was simply a lifestyle choice they'd made.

A year later, my son met me in his kitchen. A burly crane operator, he was a Deadhead and a family man with a personality that filled a room. "Hey, Ma," he said, lifting his shirt as he turned around. "Like it?"

On his back was a perfectly etched portrait of his family. When he moved his shoulder, the trio moved. And what did I think about a skull and crossbones for his arm?

"It looks great. Whatever you want, go for it," I said with an immediate flashback to my tattooed seatmate who taught me a valuable lesson about acceptance.



Judith Glynn writes travel articles and books, but her favorite genre is personal essays.
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