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Invisible Melinda

Angie Mizzell Moffatt

The plane barrels down the runway and I hold my breath. As the 747 lifts from the tarmac, I worry the passengers on my side are heavier than those on the right, and that the plane will tip over and crash before it ever really gets off the ground. While I anticipate my painful death, a little girl a few rows back announces she knows her ABC’s. She belts out the tune and the audience of frequent flyers roars with laughter. I’m not laughing. But I do try to relax. No luck.

Ironically, I’m flying to Las Vegas, where I’m expecting to have great luck in the casinos. Packing earlier that day, I imagined hearing the bling-bling sounds of the slot machines, spitting out enough clinking cash to buy a red convertible BMW.

Now, thousands of feet in the air, the only thing I hear is my heart pounding in my ears and that horrible swooshing noise that sounds as if the airplane engine is turning off. I no longer feel the pressure in the cabin. “Oh my God, the plane has shut off and we’re plummeting towards the dirt.” I begin to plan my funeral. I wonder who will come, the words that will be spoken during the eulogy. I’m also thanking myself for packing my journal, so my deep dark secrets will go down in flames with me.

My wild imagination started as a young girl. As an only child, my mom pried me from her leg (to which I was clinging for dear life) and taught me how to entertain myself. Setting the stage, she surrounded me with my books and toys and created a magical scenario that always began with, “Let’s pretend...” Fascinated, I would settle into my world of make-believe, filled with friends and fantasy.

My first imaginary friend was Melinda. She went everywhere with me, to the playground, to the dinner table, even to the doctor’s office to console me as I got my immunization shots. My family became slightly alarmed when I told them Melinda had a child named Jimmy. “Now, when did Melinda grow up and have this baby?” I remember my grandmother asking. But they let the Melinda phase run its course.

Eventually, I realized Melinda wasn’t real. She and I were chatting in my bedroom, with a few other invisible playmates we had invited over. I was in deep conversation, when suddenly, my imagination turned off and I was jerked into reality. Stunned, I saw myself sitting in my bedroom alone, talking to empty little chairs. I never played with Melinda again.

Back on the plane, as I continue to convince myself we are losing altitude, the flight attendant tosses me a pack of roasted peanuts. “What would you like to drink?” she asks. Like pouring water on the Wicked Witch of the West, the sound of her voice made freak-out girl vanish.

“Snap out of it, Blondie, if we were crashing she wouldn’t be handing out snacks,” I tell myself. “Um, uh, diet Coke is fine.” It occurs to me to look out the window. It is still daylight. The sky is clear. I can see civilization shrinking. We are not falling.

I notice how flying becomes less scary when I take a moment to see where I’m actually going. I can peer out the window, admire the view—absorb the beauty and wonder of the earth below, the space in between. Enjoy my peanuts, buy some headphones and take in the flick. But when I focus on my fear and let my mind create images of its own, I panic and lose my peace.

As a child, my imagination took me to safe and exciting places. It provided an escape from boredom and cultivated my creativity. But somewhere between invisible Melinda and the doomed flight to Vegas, I got carried away. My imagination hijacked my ability to live in the here and now.

I’m certain my mind has an “off” switch, but I think it’s hiding somewhere under a pile of hair and an enlarged ego. Sometimes my thoughts take me to beautiful places—the beach, with soothing ocean waves accented by the calm of a remarkable sunset. Other times the chatter in my head sends me to the dark side of my existence. I visit some played-out drama in my mind—flipping through the Rolodex of problems yet to be solved. It’s as if I believe my superpowers will carry the world into harmony, and even keep planes in the air.

My trips to serenity and sanity are often short-lived, but I am beginning to notice when I reach that peaceful destination called the present. I arrive when I take that first sip of my extra-hot chai latte or when I open the sun roof on a beautiful spring day and let go of the steering wheel just long enough to play the air drums to that Phil Collins song.

It’s difficult to accept my inability to see or predict the future and to let go of situations I can’t control. Sometimes I peer through the window in search of safety, and the sky is blue and clear. Other times I see nothing but darkness. I feel the bumps of turbulence, and I look for reassurance. But there is none.

Lately, I’ve been telling myself that it’s okay to go at my own pace, trust the moment, and play it safe sometimes. How long is the drive to Vegas, anyway? Next time, I’m taking a road trip.

ANGIE MIZZELL MOFFATT IS A FORMER TELEVISION NEWS REPORTER WHO RECENTLY STARTED HER OWN PUBLIC RELATIONS AND MARKETING FIRM IN CHARLESTON WITH TWO OTHER LOCAL NEWS DROP-OUTS.