

Lost and Found

There was a soft beep and the seat belt sign turned off. The teenager next to me snorted loudly in his sleep as the captain's voice echoed through the plane, "Ladies and gentleman," the captain called. "We have reached our cruising altitude of 35,000 feet. Feel free to stretch your legs. Our flight attendants will be around shortly with snacks. For the full drink menu, please look at our airline magazine in your seatback pocket. We hope you enjoy the remainder of your flight."

I was ten years old and flying alone for my first time. I wasn't sure I was ready to confront flight attendants yet, but I couldn't resist a good root beer while my parents weren't there to scold me. They weren't big on sweets. I was excited, because I knew my grandmother would spoil me with loads of delicious desserts. She always did when I visited her in Hawaii.

After guzzling a root beer, I must have fallen asleep. Suddenly a voice jolted me awake. It was the captain back on the loud speaker. "We have an in-flight emergency," he said. "Please stay calm. It appears some object has struck us and damaged our engines. It has also created an oxygen leak, so the flight attendants will come around to assist you with your air masks. We are still over the Pacific so put on your life vests. And I repeat, 'Stay calm everyone.'"

His message had the opposite effect. No one stayed calm. Everyone panicked, even the flight attendants. It was total pandemonium. Actually, did I say, "*Even* the flight attendants?" No, *especially* the flight attendants. I saw them lose it and thought to myself, "This isn't going to be good."

I turned to the teenager. Somehow, he was still sleeping. "Wake up!" I yelled in his ear.

"What? We're there already?" he mumbled as his eyes fluttered open.

“No, we have an inflight emergency!” That sure woke him up. I didn’t wait for the flight attendants to put on my oxygen mask, which dangled from the ceiling. My parents were all worried over me before I left so they had instructed me how to do that and even how to put on a life vest.

After buckling myself into the life vest and putting the oxygen mask over my nose and mouth just like they said in the preflight safety video, I gripped the armrests and stared out at the rapidly approaching ocean. Up and up the blue waters of the Pacific rose to meet the plane. The captain shouted over the loudspeaker, “Hang on tight!”

Moments later, we hit the ocean with a plane-shaking jolt and a mighty splash. My head snapped forward and back, but my seatbelt held me fast. It hurt as my waist strained against the belt, but I was all right. Something hard fell into my lap. It was a small oxygen bottle, and the tubing from my mask was attached to it. It must have jarred loose in the crash. I was relieved to hear the captain’s voice again. “Line up at the emergency exits. We’ll inflate the rafts, and you are to slide off the wings into them. There will be one flight attendant per raft. Keep your life vests on.”

I unbuckled my seatbelt with a trembling hand and stood up. The plane bobbed on the ocean swells. I decided to take my mask and tank with me and staggered toward an emergency exit, where a flight attendant waved me out onto the wing. An ugly, neon yellow raft waited below. I slid down the wing, but as I did, my life vest caught on the edge of a panel that had broken loose. This ripped the vest off and sent me sideways, and I missed the raft – except my head, which hit somebody’s paddle.

I awoke to the sight of colorful fish surrounding me. There was a beautiful coral reef below. I looked up and could barely see the surface. I must have been more than 100 feet deep. A

cuttlefish swam past. I had learned about those in my fourth grade class! Just as my teacher had said, it blended almost perfectly with the colors below. I couldn't believe I was having a real adventure in a coral reef.

Suddenly, the cuttlefish's two long tentacles shot out of the side of its head and stretched out to grasp a small crab. It pulled the crab into its eight short arms, but before it could crush the shell in its beak and eat the soft meat, the crab pinched it hard. The cuttlefish let go of the crab right away, released a cloud of black ink, and sped off. I watched with fascination, making a mental note to tell my teacher about this. I looked around again. Fish of all colors swam above and below me. Sea anemones and urchins speckled the reef. A stingray glided past. It looked as if it was flying. There were even angelfish and orange and white clownfish like the ones my sister kept back home. This made me think about home and about Don and Mark, the clownfish. And the rest of my family and how I would ever get back to them, although I then thought I'll just enjoy the experience down here and get back to them soon. Just then I had a terrifying realization. How was I supposed to get back there once I finished my underwater explorations? I could feel enough water pressure that I couldn't swim to the surface.

To make things worse, I noticed a screen on the side of my oxygen tank that I hadn't seen before. Next to it were typed the words, "Oxygen Remaining." I must have been knocked out for a while because my monitor read "02:34." Two minutes and thirty-four seconds! I couldn't possibly make it to the surface that quickly. I was going to die.

I stroked and kicked, searching desperately for help. Suddenly, a two-person explorer submarine came into view -- and only one person was in it! The sub was from National Geographic. I could see the logo on the side. I couldn't believe it! I waved my arms like a

maniac until the submarine pilot noticed me and drove curiously towards me. He looked at me and saw I wasn't wearing a scuba diving suit. His eyes bulged with horror.

The sub was like a flat orange metal board with two glass bubbles with seats and controls in them. It had a fin on the back like a racecar, and it was onto this fin that I now clung as I turned sideways to show the pilot my monitor, which now read, "02:04." I pointed up, but the pilot didn't seem to get my meaning. I pointed toward the surface again and again until frantically I pointed to the sub, then to me, then up. Finally, he steered upward and went full gas, dragging me by the tailfin. I glanced at the monitor. Ten... nine... eight. I saw light ahead. Three... two... one... and we broke the surface! I felt the cool, fresh air on my wet face. I ripped off the oxygen mask and breathed deeply. The submarine pilot slid open his canopy and yelled over to me, "I have no clue what you're doing out here, kid, but hop in the other side and I'll get you back to shore in a jiffy!"

I swam to the other side of the sub, pulled myself up over the edge of the cockpit, and slid into the seat. The bubble clicked closed, and the sub dove back under the surface. The pilot's voice crackled from a speaker. "Hey, my name's Bill. What *are* you doing out here, anyway? Just talk. I'll be able to hear you."

I told him about the plane crash and how I had missed the raft and fallen into the sea. As I spoke, Bill glanced at me with looks of surprise. He shook his head and said, "You're one lucky kid." He was right. I was.

It turned out that Bill worked out of Hawaii. When we resurfaced near the harbor mouth, he radioed in and told the harbor patrol about me. They called my grandmother, and they told me that she called my parents to tell them I was safe. Bill docked the sub. When I stepped out onto land, my legs felt weak and shaky. A police officer met us and walked me to an office, where I

told my story all over again. Pretty soon, Gram pulled up in her car, rushed in, and gave me a huge hug. I had never been so happy to see her.

THE END