

Learning to fly

By Iris Wiener

ften, when people are afraid to fly, it's easy to understand why. They're claustrophobic, hate the idea of not having control of a situation or are convinced the plane will crash. My fear, however, had nothing to do with the usual reasons. I was afraid of how others might feel if they were seated next to me.

A year ago, I slowly walked through a plane door with a bowed head and knotted stomach. Halfway down the narrow aisle lay a terrifying fate—a woman whose glaring eyes instantly told me she did not want to be seated next to a bigger person during the five-hour trip.

I walked toward my seat despite her rolling eyes and aggressive whispers. I wished she'd give me the chance to sit before making a scene. My body wouldn't have taken space on her seat; I had specifically asked for an aisle position so

I wouldn't inconvenience anyone. I could lean into the aisle, occupying little to none of her elbow room. The woman ignored my pained expression and raced to the nearest stewardess to complain, cruelly creating a spectacle in front of all the other passengers.

Sitting down, I tried to make myself comfortable even as my face turned red and I fought to hold back tears. The woman returned to the seat next to me,

but only to grab her bags and move to another spot. A man sat down in her place.

Too embarrassed to use the restroom or stretch, I tried to sleep, certain that the other passengers were feeling sorry for the poor man who had been relegated to the horrible spot next to me.

After we landed, I trembled as I gathered my carry-on bags and chastised myself for my size. As I filed out, I overheard the woman complaining to the

stewardess once again because she'd been sandwiched between two "loud-mouthed" passengers after her seat had been switched. "I was better off where I was," she said miserably. "They kept me awake the whole time."

Suddenly, I realized I was angry more than upset—but angry at myself. This passenger was just an unpleasant person who found fault with everybody. I never should have allowed her

to make me feel guilty. Her insensitivity, not my size, had created the unpleasant situation. I promised myself that from then on I'd take the space I was entitled to, and take it proudly.

As I exited the plane, I passed the woman, still sitting as she applied makeup and scowling at a couple across the aisle. I smiled broadly. At least she'd helped me take what had turned out to be a very refreshing nap.

