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ACP Story Slam Submission – *The Middle Seat*  
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Years ago, I sat in the middle seat on an international flight, engrossed in the latest *Goosebumps* horror novella. That was before I grew to five feet nine inches tall, before I brought my oversized, ailing laptop so to work while thousands of feet above the ground.

On this particular day I felt smushed, between a man who made the sign of the cross with each bump of turbulence and a woman who sterilized her surroundings with fragrant wipes prior to takeoff. “Just cleaning house,” she said cheerily as she rubbed the moist disposable napkin over the cloth of the headrest behind her.

For ten hours I thought about DVTs and the extra batteries in my bag in the overhead compartment. With twenty-three minutes to touch down, my disinfecting neighbor to the right inquired about my travels. Italy, just for vacation. And you?

“I was in Germany, visiting a very special man.”

Pause. I racked my brain for an appropriate response.

“He was my bone marrow donor,” she continued.

A decade ago, Chris was diagnosed with AML. When no match was found in the U.S. registry, the search expanded to the global network. In central Germany lived her match. The transplant succeeded; now she travels to Germany every other year to spend a week with her donor, Carsten, and his family. Once, she flew them all to Washington where they spent three weeks with her on the Olympic Peninsula.

“I wouldn’t wish it upon anybody,” Chris explained about her AML treatment, “but you do what you have to do for life.”

My mind transported back to the inpatient oncology unit, to my first patient with acute cancer, emaciated with hemoptysis, insisting that everything was ok. I thought of her obituary, which I’d read just a few weeks later. About all of the blood transfused, the seemingly endless neutropenic fevers, the faltering of confidence as hair fell out. The only patients with leukemia for whom I’d cared: those in crisis.

I looked at Chris, barely able to believe her good outcome, one I had never witnessed. Her treatment no longer dominated her life, rather whispered reminders of what she underwent for the life she lives now. Tearing; chronic rash; subtle change in eye color after bone marrow transplant, as well as loss of food allergies and development of eye shadow allergies. She had gotten a hoot out of telling Carsten that he was allergic to gray and blue eye shadow.

“Now, it’s just like managing a chronic disease.” Gesturing to her bag containing the sanitizing wipes, Chris said, “And I am very careful to avoid infections.”