

Julie Pelc
22 Navy Street #107
Venice, California 90291
(310) 392-8708
juliepelc@yahoo.com

936 words

“Leaving Los Angeles”

It is more than two years after I survived a ruptured brain aneurysm at the age of 26. I am in the airport, clutching the blue pre-boarding sleeve for my plane ticket in an unsteady grip in my left hand. To most people, I appear young, healthy, and able-bodied, in my jeans and T-shirt, looking around the gate area for an unoccupied chair. I see one: black, faux-leather bucket seat, holding a woman’s purse but no human occupant.

“Excuse me, is this seat taken?” I ask her.

“Yes, I’m coming right back,” she replies, placing her hand possessively on the back of the chair.

I make my way to the floor, setting down my backpack and trying to lower myself to the ground only somewhat haphazardly. I wait for a cue from the boarding agent that it is time for those of us with sacred blue sleeves hugging our plane tickets to begin our descent down the ramp, towards the waiting airplane. I know I could have told the woman that I am handicapped, that I have “special needs”, or that I *need* to sit down. But I am tired of explaining myself.

For me, this blue sleeve is hard won. I must defend my rights every time I want extra time down the jet-way: ‘No, I do not have small children, nor a stroller to push, nor a wheelchair to sit in.’ In Los Angeles, the gods silently worshipped are Youth and Health, both assumed normative, and taken for granted based on visual appearance.

“Not everyone with special needs is 90 years old, in a wheelchair!” I had just cried, in an exasperated, high-pitched voice I did not recognize to the woman posted

outside the elevator doors. Her job is to check for handicaps, looking us up and down before allowing us through the shortened security line outside the elevator doors in Terminal One of LAX.

I remember the last time I tried to “pass”; tried to use the escalator like everyone else, rather than facing that guard at the elevator and needing to explain myself to her yet again. I pushed my special rolling suitcase which I use as a kind of walker on wheels, to steady myself as I maneuvered through the airport. My wheels had stopped at the edge of the escalator, refusing to exit, but the stairs propelled my feet and my body forward, forward, and I toppled over the suitcase, face first, lying on top of the large black bag, trying not to cry.

The security line – even the shortened one after the elevator – presents its own challenges, of course. Remove shoes, coat, lift heavy suitcase onto moving conveyor belt, stand in slippery socks, waiting for my turn to shuffle through the metal detector. Do not bump the sides of the metal detector, nor swerve accidentally into its sensitive walls, as this sets off the loud stream of beeping – the alarm – danger. I quickly try to grab the side of the conveyor belt on the other side, to stabilize myself as I retrieve my shoes and try to balance on one foot, then the other, putting them firmly back on my feet.

I recall the alternative: waiting in the long line, not to check my bag, but to call for a wheelchair; waiting for someone to arrive to push the wheelchair – to treat me as though I do not speak or understand English, asking them to pause as we roll past the Ladies’ Room, or Starbucks, handing them a few dollars to pay for my coffee because I cannot reach the counter from my seat in the wheelchair; giving them a modest tip when they leave me seated near the gate, as I wait to pre-board the airplane. At least in a

wheelchair, nobody challenges my use of an elevator, or my right to a blue sleeve, or my freedom to pre-board an airplane.

I want to wear a sign around my neck, or carry a note-card saying, 'Yes, I have special needs - please don't ask questions'. Nobody seems to care as they accidentally smash into me as they press through a crowded space; nobody notices how I must pause to regain my balance, to recover from the incident. Nobody shares my blurred vision or momentary dizziness after I bend down to replace my shoes at the end of the security line.

When many companies say that they make accommodations for those with 'special needs', this is code for 'those with easily identifiable handicaps or disabilities'. The rest of us with 'special needs' must constantly, repeatedly advocate for ourselves, since we look externally just like the rest of the population.

The 'pre-board' announcement is made in the gate area, and I roll from my seated position near my bags to all fours again, and I stand in line behind the other pre-boarders. Together, we are a motley crew: wheelchair, cane, and me. We maneuver slowly down the jet-way, relieved that no one is behind us, pushing us forward with their eyes or the proximity of their bodies, or their sighs of impatience. I steady myself after each step against the wall of the jet-way, and as I approach the door to the plane, I prepare to hoist my bag into an over-head bin with just the strength of my right arm. I lean the weight of my body against the edge of the seat opposite mine, to leverage the suitcase as I push it over my head, into the bin above my row. Then, I collapse into my seat, relieved that this first leg of my journey is over.