



# The Moth

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## MY JOB WAS TO SURPRISE PEOPLE WITH KINDNESS

BY FAYE LANE

FROM THE BOOK *THE MOTH*

**I** GREW UP IN my mama's beauty shop in Texas. It was an old A-frame house with mirrors and swivel chairs in the front room and shampoo bowls in what had been the back bedroom.

My mama had this long line of hood dryers on one wall, and I'd wait

until all the ladies were held captive under their dryers and give mandatory concerts. When I wasn't putting on shows, I would play stewardess and push this little manicure cart around the beauty shop.

"Miss Helen, Miss Melba, would y'all like a magazine? Would y'all like

a cocktail?" And the ladies would say, "Baby, you give great customer service." I was all about customer service.

Well, about 15 years ago, I was living in New York City, working as a performer. Bad pay, no job security, no benefits. I really needed a job. One day, I met this lovely girl who asked the question that changed my life forever: "Have you ever considered being a flight attendant?"

Three weeks later, I was training in Miami with a brand-new airline that had seven airplanes, a handful of destinations, and a lot of great buzz. They had buzz around their live TVs at every seat, their blue potato chips, and their attendants' designer uniforms. But most of the buzz was around their amazing customer service.

Perfect!

When the founder and CEO of the airline gave a speech to our training class, I knew I was in the right place. He said, "Every one of you is here for a reason, and that reason is your ability to smile and be kind. We can teach you how to evacuate an airplane. We can teach you how to handle a medical emergency. We can teach you how to serve. But we cannot teach you to smile and be kind. Your mother did that. Please thank her for me."

He said he saw his company not as

an airline, not as a corporation, but as a humanitarian experiment. He said his goal was to bring humanity back to air travel. I was right on board with this vision.

I couldn't wait to get out there on the line—to surprise people with kindness and, in the process of moving people from Point A to Point B, actually move people.

And then I started the job.

My epiphany came almost immediately: This job is hard, and people are horrible.

First of all, the job was physically exhausting. In the beginning, I was on reserve, which meant I was on call and had to be within two hours of New York's Kennedy airport at all times. So either I was running to the airport or I was waiting for a phone call asking me to run to the airport. I was constantly on edge.

Then, when I did make it on the plane, there was a whole world of hurt.

My feet hurt. There's something that happens where you get bruises on the bottom of your feet from turbulence. And new flight attendants get sick a lot—the job is kind of like being a kindergarten teacher; you're exposed to a lot of germs. At one point, I had pink-eye in both eyes, a sinus infection, a

**THE MOTH**

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double ear infection, and strep throat all at the same time. I couldn't see, I couldn't hear, I couldn't talk. And it was mainly because I was taking garbage from everyone all day, saying "thank you!" for it.

It's hard to be mean when someone is smiling at you and handing you a cup of coffee and a cookie, but people can be. Because a lot of times, they don't see you—they just see a uniform.

I tried really hard to keep my CEO's vision to smile and be kind, even in the face of meanness. But I hit bottom one day when a passenger had a heart attack on my flight. He was lying in the aisle, and we had opened his shirt and put a defibrillator on him. I was holding an oxygen bottle.

This woman sitting to the side of me kept tugging on my blouse. "Excuse me. Excuse me!"

"Just a minute, please. We're trying to save this guy's life."

She kept tugging, and I said, "Just a minute!"

And then I thought, Wait a minute. Maybe she has an emergency, or maybe she knows something.

So I said, "What is it?" And she held up her coffee cup and said, "This coffee is cold." And I learned that people can be cold.

There's also something that happens to your psychology when you fly a lot because you see the world from above. And I saw a lot of really horrible things from the air—devastating forest fires, New Orleans under water, and, most upsetting for me, Lower Manhattan smoldering for weeks and weeks.

In late September 2001, I was working a flight, and a passenger came on with a garbage bag, which is kind of a flight attendant pet peeve because, "Really, sir, a garbage bag? Get a roll-aboard." But we see that. Sometimes people just throw things in a garbage bag and bring it on.

So he opens the overhead bin and puts the garbage bag in it. Now I'm thinking, What's in that garbage bag? Because in late September 2001, we were all still a little edgy and paranoid. I kept my eye on him and the bag as he closed the bin and stood there with his hand on it, guarding it.

My instinct was to go up to this man and say, "Sir, please sit down." But I let it go. Just smile and be kind.

I also didn't say anything when he got up while the seat belt sign was on and stood waiting for the bathroom.

If the seat belt sign is on, it's because the captain knows something that we don't, OK?

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*I said, “Are  
you traveling  
for business or  
pleasure?”  
And he said,  
“Neither.”*

Finally, I said, "Sir, the seat belt sign is on."

He said, "I know, I know, but I really need to go." Again, I thought, Let it go. Just let it go.

I was sitting on the jump seat next to the bathroom door, and with him standing so close, I felt like I should say something. So I said, "Are you traveling for business or pleasure?"

And he said, "Neither. I came to New York because my son was a first responder at Ground Zero, and he died there. I just picked up his uniform, which is all I have of him. It's in a bag in the overhead bin."

And then I remembered why I was there and why I was hired and why I had wanted that job in the first place. Because I remembered that everybody has a story. People fly for a reason. Maybe they're going to a funeral or to see someone who's sick, or maybe it's something joyful, like a wedding or

a birthday. I don't know what their story is, but for that little piece of time, I'm a part of it, and I have an impact on their experience.

Yes, I've seen a lot of horrible things from the air, but I've also seen a lot of amazing, beautiful things: the Grand Canyon, the northern lights, fireworks from above.

Now when I go through the cabin with my garbage bag, saying "thank you" and smiling, I mean it, because I'm making a gratitude list in my head. Every time I say "thank you," I think of something I'm grateful for. "Thank you" (for my job). "Thank you" (for these comfy shoes). "Thank you" (for my life). Because my job enables me to be part of something bigger than me and to be connected to other people like this. So thank you. **R**

Faye Lane is an award-winning writer, performer, and motivational speaker. For more information, visit [www.fayelane.com](http://www.fayelane.com).

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