“Aha Moment”
by Julia Alvarez

I was in the tiny bathroom in the back of the plane when I felt the slamming jolt, then the horrible swerve that threw me against the door. Oh, Lord, I thought, this is it! Somehow I managed to unbolt the door and scramble out. The flight attendants, already strapped in, waved wildly for me to sit down. As I lunged ahead toward my seat, passengers looked up at me with the stricken expression of creatures who know they are about to die.

“I think we got hit by lightning,” the girl in the seat next to mine said. She was from a small town in east Texas, and this was only her second time on an airplane. She had won a trip to England by competing in a high school geography bee and was supposed to make a connecting flight when we landed in Newark.

In the next seat, at the window, sat a young businessman who had been confidently working. Now he looked worried -- something that really worries me: when confident-looking businessmen look worried. The laptop was put away. “Something’s not right, “ he said.

The pilot’s voice came over the speaker. I heard vaguely through my fear. “Engine number two... hit... emergency landing... New Orleans.” When he was done, the voice of a flight attendant came on, reminding us of the emergency procedures she had reviewed before takeoff. Of course I never paid attention to this drill, always figuring that if we ever got to the point where we needed to use life jackets, I would have already died of terror.

Now we began a roller-coaster ride through the thunderclouds. I was ready to faint, but when I saw the face of the girl next to me I pulled myself together. I reached for her hand and reassured her that we were going to make it. “What a story you’re going to tell when you get home!” I said. “After this, London’s going to seem like small potatoes.”

“Yes, ma’am,” she mumbled.

I wondered where I was getting my strength. Then I saw that my other hand was tightly held by a ringed hand. Someone was comforting me-- a glamorous young woman across the aisle, the female equivalent of the confident businessman. She must have seen how scared I was and reached over.

“I tell you, “ she confided, “the problems I brought up on this plane with me sure don’t seem real big right now.” I loved her southern drawl, her indiscriminate use of perfume, her soulful squeezes. I was sure that even if I survived a plane crash, I’d have a couple of broken fingers from all the T.L.C. “Are you okay?” she kept asking me.

Among the many feelings going through my head during those excruciating 20 minutes was pride -- pride in how well everybody was behaving. No one panicked. No one screamed. As we jolted and screeched our way downward, I could hear hear small
pockets of soothing conversation everywhere.

I thought of something I had heard a friend say about the wonderful gift his dying father had given the family: He had died peacefully, as if not to alarm any of them about an experience they would all have to go through someday.

And then-- yes!-- we landed safely. Outside on the ground, attendants and officials were waiting to transfer us to alternate flights. But we passengers clung together. We chatted about the lives we now felt blessed to be living, as difficult or rocky as they might be. The young businessman lamented that he had not had a chance to buy his two little girls a present. An older woman offered him her box of expensive Lindt chocolates, still untouched, tied with a lovely bow. “I shouldn’t be eating them anyhow,” she said. My glamorous aisle mate took out her cell phone and passed it around to anyone who wanted to make a call to hear the reassuring voice of a loved one.

There was someone I wanted to call. Back in Vermont, my husband, Bill, was anticipating my arrival late that night. He had been complaining that he wasn’t getting to see very much of me because of my book tour. That’s why I had decided to take this particular flight -- oh, yes, one of those stories! I had planned to surprise him by getting in a few hours early. Now I just wanted him to know I was okay and on my way.

When my name was finally called to board my new flight, I felt almost tearful to be parting from people whose lives had so intensely, if briefly, touched mine.

Even now, back on terra firma, walking down a Vermont road, I sometimes hear an airplane and look up at that small, glinting piece of metal. I remember the passengers on that fateful, lucky flight and wish I could thank them for the many acts of kindness I witnessed and received. I am indebted to my fellow passengers and wish I could pay them back.

But then, remembering my aisle mate’s hand clutching mine while I clutched the hand of the high school student, I feel struck by lightning all over again: The point is not to pay back kindness but to pass it on.