

OSAMA AND ME

Osama, as I now call my mother, is a terrorist. At least that is how we view the situation. After a lifetime of being a wife, mother, and employed by various government or semi government agencies in positions of trust she has suddenly become the target of security service personnel at capital city airports. Walking at various times with or without a cane she does walk with a limp the result of having had a knee operation. Fifteen years ago a piece of metal was installed and despite failing to do the exercises required of her, Osama manages to go places where she otherwise would not have been able to but for the knee operation. Her other knee requires a similar operation but Osama is determined not to have the knee reconstruction because she feels she is too old to go through the pain and rehabilitation involved.

Going to the airport at Melbourne recently we went through the ticket and baggage check. I had to open my bag because the X ray machine alerted security to the matchbox size pair of nail scissors in my toiletry bag. I could have them mailed to my address for \$5 or have them disposed of. I couldn't be bothered filling out forms and paying any more money so gave them to the security officer.

While this was happening I turned behind to see where Osama was and just as I did a male security officer put out his hand and told her to stay where she was while another directed that a female security officer do a "pat down" search. I wondered what she had done. Was she the victim of someone planting drugs in her bag? She already had a stash of heart, arthritis and blood pressure pills so she was the perfect person to carry some more. But no.

A female security officer asked Osama, (she of the grey hair and thick reading glasses) to step aside and put her heart shaped pillow (she used it to support her back on long journeys) through the X ray machine. A quick pat search then the wave over with a hand held metal detecting wand signalled something around her knee.

"It must be the gun you're carrying," I said to my mother.

"No, it's my knee," Osama replied and eventually, when it was obvious she was not carrying anything, she was allowed to pass through. As Osama slowly shuffled along the passage and into the guts of the plane she paused to allow other more able bodied and limbed passengers pass. At Sydney airport we were again stopped at the screening section because of the bleeping beeping metal detector again.

"Haven't you got rid of the gun yet Osama?" I asked as security personnel swarmed around her. I decided to shut up as I'd heard of instances where the humour of smart aleck passengers was not always appreciated and they had missed flights and even been charged with "...being a smart aleck who irritated a security officer to wit..."

At Sydney she was not pat searched but the metal detecting wand that swarmed over her body again beeped around her knee just as I was mentioning her knee operations and the metal in the knee to the security staff. Strangely the metal buckle on my belt created no noise at all as I walked through the scanner. I said nothing and wandered with Osama to our waiting plane.

Two days later it was time to go home. We reached Dubbo airport to get a one hour flight to Sydney. A ticket checker who doubled as a gate opener and tripled as the weigher of suspect overweight bags did not bother us with metal detectors or pat down searches. But she did weigh my flight bag because it looked to be overweight, which it was by 8kg. She must have thought I was okay because she said "this time" I could go on board with the bag. We entered the plane and I put the overweight bag in the overhead locker and we took our seats along with approximately 100 other passengers.

At Sydney airport we went from the regional gate to the domestic gates where we could catch a flight back to Melbourne. I went through the metal detectors without incident despite my belt buckle and was about to warn security about Osama and her knees when I heard the familiar beep from behind.

This time Osama was made to remove her shoes, a difficult task in itself for a terrorist approaching her 80s and in need of a grease and oil change to stop her joints from creaking as they often did. Before an audience of many she lifted her shoes off one at a time with the big toe of each arthritic foot. She was pat searched again and I noticed other greying limping retired or soon to be retired people being searched by much younger security officers. Some dangerous looking retirees had their arms high above their heads as security officers pat searched and or moved the metal detecting wand over them.

I knelt down to undo Osama's shoe laces and then put her feet into each one and then tied the laces up again. I again felt like saying something smart aleck but decided it was not worth the hassle. I had somewhere to be that night and didn't want to be in remand somewhere when there were other more dangerous people than Osama and me to detain. She hobbled from the security checking area while I carried my bag, her bloody pillow and her other bags to the gate for Melbourne.

"You're an embarrassment to be with Osama," I said to my mother as she stopped momentarily to catch her breath.

"Imagine this," she said, "A terrorist at my age..." and we laughed as the metal detecting machine sounded again from behind. We didn't bother to look at who it was. I was confident it was some other aged pensioner who had a piece of metal surgically implanted to give them a few more years of mobility. This is the price we pay for 'freedom and democracy'.

-Peter Haddow