

Airplane Baby

By Dennis Kelly

The woman seated next to me appears to be in her early 30's; her sandy colored hair is pulled tight into a pony tail accentuating a full round face. Her eyeliner is tired and smudged, the lipstick is worn, showing only a hint of color at the corners of her mouth, and the matching finger nail polish is chipped and cracked along the edges of her fingers. On her lap is a crying baby.

I first took note of the baby and mother at the security checkpoint. On swollen ankles she was hauling more equipment than a Sherpa on the way to a Himalayan base camp. She's pushing an eight-wheel collapsible stroller while carrying an industrial strength baby carrier made of molded plastic with ergonomically fused-in-place padding and a hinged carrying handle. I saw security rifle through her belongings; they must have thought she was a smuggler but all I saw were toys, food, diapers, medication, clothing, wet wipes, tissue, cosmetics, magazines and personal stuff.

This has been one tough business trip. I am looking forward to dropping this suit and putting on my baggiest chinos and Gophers sweatshirt, building a tall single malt scotch, crawling up on the sofa and vegging out. And right now, I could really use some rest so I don't look like a total zombie when I get home. But my little seatmate has other ideas, and I am immersed in the rhythm of its crying inflections, breathing pattern, stuttering and volume modulations. There are moments when I think the little tike is running out of gas, exhausting itself of tears, but any brief reprieve is only a recharging pause allowing it to catch its breath to reach higher decibel readings. I listen for clues as to what is causing the baby's frustration but come up empty.

Maybe an introduction will divert the baby's crying. "My name is Dennis, Minneapolis your home port?" "Hi, I'm Carroll with two l's and two r's," she says, qualifying the introduction over the baby's fussing. Carroll allows that she's traveling from New York and is on her way to Minneapolis to visit her father and introduce her 10-month-old son. The baby breaks in, delivering a piercing note, derailing the conversation.

Carroll offers the baby Cheerios but they are quickly flicked away and hang like Christmas ornaments in the woman's hair in front of us. In near desperation she gently presses the baby's ear to her breast letting him in on the hypnotic metronome of her heartbeat. "I am sorry for all the distraction, we just haven't been able to get on a schedule have we little guy," Carroll says to me but giving her attention to the baby. She further relates that six weeks ago she flew to Beijing and then by train to the mountain village of Kuming where she waited three days in a hotel for the baby to be delivered to her by an international adoption agency. "What's the baby's name?"

"His given name is Lui. I decided not to change it or Americanize it."

"The name has a nice sound."

"Well thank you for that; I wish my dad could find something nice to say about the adoption. He is not happy about me being a single parent, and I am really nervous about meeting him."

"Look, once he sees Lui he'll just be another pushover grandpa."

"I hate to bother you but could you hold the baby while I use the rest room?" Carroll says to my surprise. Moving into the aisle, Carroll hands me Lui, pirouettes and heads to the back of the plane.

With the source of all those tears now in my lap, I take in a full view of Mr. Lui: a round head with thick tufts of black hair bobbing on a spring neck, wide-set oval eyes set on a flat face, fawn colored skin, soft and flush from crying. A pacifier is pinned to the strap of his Oshkosh bib overalls.

"Ouch!" In a cobra strike his little hand with fish scale fingernails attaches itself to my mustache and pulls me into his face. I can smell his breath: oats, sour milk, talcum and innocence. And then a giggle. The more I shake my face to free myself from Lui's grasp; the more he laughs.

Upon Carroll's return I stand to let her into her seat retaining the baby in my arms with its hand clamped to my upper lip. Carroll seeing my predicament bursts out laughing, gaining the attention of neighboring passengers who find the situation equally amusing. Suffice it to say Lui and I bond and laugh all the way to Minneapolis.