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Flying child kicks

“Welcome onboard. Please buckle your seat belt, turn off any electronic devices for take-off, and for goodness sake those of you with young children note that there are passengers seated in front of you so please prevent your child from kicking the back of the seat”. “Thank you.” I am seated tamely in my seat on a flight from Los Angeles to Copenhagen. Buckled in. As an expat and frequent traveler I have done these journeys many times. Thus it is that I find myself lost in the clouds of a day dream as I come to recognize there is a small one lurking behind my seat. I am aware that this could become an uncomfortable journey. I distract myself into dreams of a potential new kind of preflight announcement. Before long, I am drifting back to a different time and place on board an aircraft in the 1950’s.

A few passengers are seated around a small table at the back of the plane which we call a lounge. Newly acquainted friends are playing cards with the deck issued by the airline and with the AA emblem emblazoned on the card backs. The rumble of the piston engines dominate. Unfortunately, the scent of cigarette smoke can hang heavily in the air. And

there are no in-flight movies. Entertainment consists of conversation, cards, small board games, or looking out the window. There is a good fresh, clean scent to the cabin and an immaculate look to it. I've flown back to being onboard an American Airlines DC7. It's the era when my father worked for American Airlines in Philadelphia and we could fly for almost nothing. It's a time containing a different attitude. Everyone dressed nicely. Everyone behaved with the finest respect, consideration and good manners. We all share a special experience. I'm wearing my Sunday best. So are most passengers. Boarding has been done in an orderly and well-mannered fashion. Stewardesses treat passengers like honored guests. The stewardesses seemed breath-takingly beautiful to the young man. They seem to be chosen for their beauty, grace, friendliness, poise. They help make the flight a delight. An adventure made into a dream by their presence.

My mind glides farther afield to memories of stories of flights told by my uncle who was a flight engineer for TWA onboard the mighty Constellations crossing above the ocean blue. These planes are now legendary. Then, they were part of the episodes and mechanics of my uncle's work. It was like listening to the stories of St. Exupery in "Wind, Sand and Stars". It was what lit my desire to obtain my pilot's license by the time I turned 20 years old. There comes the further

memory of being present with my dad to watch the take-off of the American Airlines Boeing 707 jetliner departing for the first non-stop flight from Philly to Los Angeles. We had boarded the plane before the flight and met the lovely, kind stewardesses who were happy to take a moment to smile and chat with us as we walked down the aisle of the spic and span aircraft before passengers had boarded.

Suddenly I am snapped out of my wanderings through past air space. A behemoth shadow has loomed over my shoulder and a 'large' body has leaned over in front of me in my aisle seat and pushed a cardboard carton towards my face. "Snack" she says. It seems to be a demand. Woah, I catch my breath. I am back in the moment. Flying today.

We are at cruising altitude for our lengthy flight. I settle in to do some reading. I sip on my apple juice. I concentrate on the story. My mind wanders. It drifts to thoughts of the "her" in my life. Uff dah! Suddenly I am jolted back to the present as my head is snapped forward and my apple juice splatters to become an unwilling runner across the tray in front of me. My seat is slammed violently and shoved against my back. My first reaction is that I had nodded off and awoke with a crazy 'start'. My second reaction is "not this again". I

recognize that I have become an unwilling part of the fitness regime of a 4 year old seated behind me in row 34.

Being naïve and believing in the acuteness of the parent seated next to their little wunderkind, I think they will quickly take note of the rude behavior and put a rapid stop it. I have visions of the parent sternly reprimanding their progeny. “There is someone seated in front of you” I hear them exclaim. However, I must be from another solar system if I am to believe in this scenario. I jolt along in my motocross ride at the feet of thumper. I shift in order to try to glance back through the space between the seats. I am hoping “eye-contact” might work. It does not. My mind churns through possible solutions. I notice the parent is oblivious. She is mesmerized by the film in front of her. Forget parenthood.

As I twist further to see the little sweetheart I suddenly have visions of being accused of being a child molester. I spring back around, not because of my thought but because of a sharp pain in my back. Something has twisted wrongly in my back because of my awkward twisting motion. I recoil around to my normal position of airline seat agony. It’s not normal anymore. By now the passenger seated next to me glances

over with a look which says, “Why are you rudely turning sideways in your seat into my lap?”

I determine to sit still spasms or not. My head gets rocked forward. Ideas are knocked about as a result.

Do I summon the flight attendant? I can already imagine the blank look on her face as I ask her, “Could you please tell the child seated behind me to stop kicking the seat”? I imagine my instantly becoming the villain as she looks from the little sweetie to the man with stubble and red eyes. The big man versus the bundle of joy. Perhaps I should approach this with a more annoyed attitude, and a more honest one, and say, “would you tell little thumper behind me to cease and desist the stair-climber routine on my seat back”? Is it wise to open this can of worms? I can picture the pseudo-parent admonishing the flight attendant and leaning forward to confront me. I consider not using the flight attendant. I could climb onto my knees and face backwards and ask the parent nicely to stop the child.. Past observations of parents tells me this will likely lead to a defensive reaction. I could turn around on my knees and simply stare over the seat back until the parent becomes curious. Oops, this could lead to my seeming to be a freak. With my mind racing and my head being whip-lashed I cross off dozing or relaxation. At any rate, I convince myself to wait. They must see their child two

feet away shoving their feet against the seatback. Dreams of a better way occur flit through my head. In the background I hear, from somewhere across the plane's interior, an infant screaming.

Thus, it is that I return back to thoughts of pre-flight announcements from the flight crew. Perhaps, attempts at a smiling crash course in parenting before take-off? Cartoon characters included to make it less threatening for parents. I suddenly realize that in my tension I have the in-flight magazine rolled up in my hand and I grin as I dream of turning around and whacking the little beloved across the knees gently but briskly a couple of times. Perhaps this should be a part of passenger rights? For protection of sanity and safety. Amid the tension, tiredness and odd thoughts I find myself vividly recalling William Shatner in the "Twilight Zone" episode on board the airliner. Does anyone else see the little man on the wing?! Shatner was the crazy one. Or was he?

In the interim, I determine my course of action. I will seek peace, and deal with my "restless legs syndrome" by going for a stroll to stretch my legs. I am careful not to clutch the seat back in front of me so as to put force enough on it to cause near whiplash for the passenger in front of me who has

kindly reclined his seat almost into my crotch. In the past, I have had enough 100 kilo (240 pound) folks do sudden pull-ups on my seat back as they stood up to go to the toilet that I know to be considerate as I stand. I step into the aisle, the aircraft lights are dim, I am about to take a step. There is rapid movement low in the aisle. An urchin, unattended suddenly comes careening down the aisle. No parent in sight. I step aside making myself invisible. For now, I'll walk toward the back and imagine the lounge and the card players and the new friends and dad and uncle and the stunning, slender, helpful, eager stewardesses await me.