

I am flying to Houston. I have a good seat- I'm a nervous flyer and like to be near the front of the plane. My class is finally called- basic- the last of the last. And the airline has to check my carry on- there isn't enough room in the bins anymore. Oh well, I have a good seat. The stewardess scans my ticket in. A printout comes out; I have a new seat assignment. I know this was too good to be true, but I look at it and I'm really in the front now. Maybe first class? What luck! I board the plane I'm right behind 1st class in the upgraded economy part of the plane. I see there are no bags in the overhead bins. Why didn't I get to take my bag? And why are all the seats around me empty... no one is sitting here. I hear the stewardesses complaining, "They should be boarded by now...where are they?" They both look at their phones and tap their screens frantically. "Why isn't the family app working?! They should be boarded by now... is your app working?" They both storm off. I wonder what is going on. Soon enough a steward comes in with a group of children. They are about 8-12 years old there is one boy about 16. He's seated in the front seat of first class. The steward holds up files. There are names and numbers at the top. He reads their names and assigns each one a seat. "Sit there... the siblings here". The children are ushered into the seats around me. They sit down quietly and obediently. The stewardess asks how many are there? 6...7? The steward calls out "I have 6", a stewardess in 1st class calls out "I have 1." The steward speaks to the children quickly in Spanish. He tells them they are going to Houston. Stay in their seats and let him know if they need anything. They will get free headphones for the TV. He said a lot more but I didn't understand.

The children sit there. They all have backpacks and sit with them on- most won't take them off for the entire 3 ½ hour flight. They all have purple plastic bags from one of the airport food stands- all the bags are identical sitting tightly on their laps. Some children open them a crack and snack on the french-fries and chicken fingers in the food containers within- but nothing leaves their lap. Everything is held tight. I am sitting next to a little girl. She confidently clicks her seatbelt together. She knows what she's doing. Then she is still. She looks straight ahead, her backpack on, her purple airport bag held on her lap.

The inflight safety message plays. Afterwards I lean over to her introduce myself, and say in broken Spanish, "I speak a little Spanish, I can help you if you need...if you have questions let me know." She nods and look sat me quizzically. I look around as I am want to do- I'm a nervous flyer so I'm always checking my surroundings. A young boy, about 10 or so looks sat me suspiciously out of the side of his eye. I wonder who these children are.

Thoughts run through my mind...Could the airline be transporting migrant children? This thought put a pit in my stomach. Maybe they are just unaccompanied minors visiting family for the summer....but is school even out yet? And why such a large group? Maybe they are all part of a rich family travelling the US? But then why do I have the feeling no one speaks any English? They can't have spent much time here. Reluctantly I allow myself to ponder, what if they are separated children flying to a new destination. A nerve is hit. I am a Licensed Creative Arts Therapist. I feel I have a responsibility to assess the situation, to know if these children are cared for. I pray they have been treated well. I try to inconspicuously look them over. Have they showered? I see their hair is washed and styled; and all have their hair styled differently, so no institutional conformity. They all have fresh clean clothes, they

don't look like off handed donations, they seem fed, and they look like they have been out in the sun. Maybe they have been in loving foster families? I was on an email list at one point with local NYC families clamoring to take in separated children. I hope that's the case. But the children all seem close. Too close to have been living apart. I just get this sense. I pray they felt safe and cared for wherever they were coming from.

We take off. The little girl is unmoving in her posture- backpack on, purple airport bag on her lap. Other children continue to snack on their french-fries or are already fast asleep.

Once we are airborne I venture to ask if this is her first flight. She nonchalantly looks at me shrugs and responds "no I've been on many" and turns to resume looking at her airport bag. Eventually she opens it up and eats some of her fast-food lunch.

I don't know much Spanish. I've taken a few courses to help me with my art therapy work and my art practice. But I realize she speaks quickly and my ability these days to express myself is poor. As much as I wanted to allow her a space to process what stories she might want to convey, I resigned myself to only ask simple easily answered questions that I could understand the responses to. It wouldn't be fair or ethical to give her the opportunity to begin to talk about her experiences if I couldn't be present to hear them. She didn't deserve that from an adult on top of potentially everything else. Plus what if she was coached with answers? I didn't want to put her in a difficult position.

Once we are at cruising altitude I show her, as if I know a subversive secret, how to access the movie screen tucked beside our seats, as well as the hidden tray in the arm rest. The movie player is a hit. She instructs the boys across the aisle on how to bring them out. AH! The joy of figuring something out coupled with free movies. She's excited. But the boy across the aisle tersely says he doesn't want it. He continues to stare at his lap. He seems more adult than his years. I sense a weight upon him. He's holding everything together. The other boy in the middle however happily sets himself up.

I then mention that she can put her airport bag on the ground by her feet if she would like. She doesn't have to hold onto it... and I'd be happy to get it for her if she wanted it. She agrees, settles a bit more comfortably in her seat. She asks if there are games. Part of me is happy she feels comfortable initiating a request of me. I show her the games- the glimmer of gaming enters her eyes and she immediately sets to playing. Now she and other girls in the seats behind chatter about which games to play and what movies are on.

As we fly on she asks about when and how to use the bathroom, can I pick up her purple airport bag? Can I help her with the tray table? I hope I am doing my part in helping her feel comfortable. I'm glad she feels ok asking me things. I try to be silly when I can.

She switches from games to movies. I look over. I think...she's a child what is she going to watch? She seems to ponder the titles "how to train your dragon" "the Lego movie" – I think: good, she deserves kid friendly entertainment- fantasy, happiness. She decides on "happy death day to you part 2". I want to say what I usually say to my patients who extoll the amusement of horror films. That I can't watch them... they are too scary. My patients usually laugh at me and say I'm too sensitive. But I don't say anything – I don't believe it's my place. This is her privacy. The movie comes on- the parental consent screen appears. I am reminded she has no parent to consent- she presses 'yes' and the movie plays. She watches intently, giggling at times. There's a scene with knives flying around and she laughs heartily. I'm

hoping there's some comedic value here, or, maybe she's bigger than this...maybe this holds little weight on her scale of fear. She turns to a friend in the back and they giggle and seem to compare opinions. Then she switches the screen back to playing games.

I pull out the inflight magazine and begin to ruminate. I'm an Art therapist why don't I have crayons with me? Or paper? The crayons would be a great idea- they are instantly inviting. They'd be a gift. I then think back to an article I had read the day before. It was about an Art Therapist using origami in her practice. That would be perfect now. We could use the in-flight magazine, tear out the pages and fold cranes or puppy dogs. I search my brain for some recollection of the origami lessons of my childhood. I took origami classes after school when I was a child. The knowledge had to be in there somewhere. It wasn't. I stared at the page of the in-flight magazine. But in my fantasy I was tearing out pages and teaching the children how to fold cranes. Maybe this would soften their experience. Maybe this would be a tool to help them through whatever happens after they land. Maybe they would be excited to control a process, master something, and smile and be kids for a few minutes.

We are close to Houston.

It seemed to me we'd created a bit of rapport so I felt I could start a simple conversation. She had gotten up from her seat a couple times so her backpack was off and tucked to her side. She was sitting with her back to the seat- no longer propped stick-straight forward. We could talk with just our heads turned- there was an intimacy about it. My dread however was that the children would continue on to their home country. I ask with a brick in my throat; is she was taking another flight after this one? "No" she responds, she is going to see her mother at her house. I feel some hopeful relief. Could this be one of those happy reunifications? I donated money to help women fight their detentions and travel to recuperate their children...so it's possible. Maybe this is her case? But she's a child...could the government be on the right side of this? Does her mother have a house? I desperately hoped so.

I reply "you must be excited to see you mother". Silence. She shrugs but does not smile. Her eyes don't seem to show any happiness. She seems to internally retreat. Her face is blank. There is stillness and a quietness in her body. "Yes".

I allow her some time then ask if she has family in New York. She replies with more energy "no" she quickly and cheerily says something I don't understand then continues "but I went to school". I see a glimmer of pride and confidence in her eyes. She mentions "the others" and introduces me to her older brother who is 12 and sitting across the aisle next to the boy who seems filled with tension. Her brother smiles at me and waves. I smile broadly and say hi. Then I smile more gently and say hi to the other boy. He gives me a brief smile.

I ask: Will your mother meet you at the airport? She replies "No"...but with a confident air reports information that I can't fully understand. I tease out that she is going to "another place" "then to meet her mother, then to her mother's house".

I ask where she is from. "Honduras. Where are you from?" I reply: "New York." She looks at me intently for a moment.

I ask if she knows some English. She seemed proud of school. They must have taught her some English. She says she knows some words. I ask which? I receive a blank look. I decide to lead with "my name is...how are you..." I expect her to repeat or say a word she knows...I expect her to respond like other

children, demonstrating their command of knowledge. She nods with each phrase but offers nothing. Some how I have lost her. Her look is blank as she nods and watches me say the words. Either she's not interested, has never learned English, or is somewhere else. I don't know.

A voice announces: it is time to prepare for landing.

The Spanish speaking steward who ushered on the children comes forth, and talks quickly and in a perfunctory manner. He's the camp counselor guiding his troop along. He seems warm, but has a job to do. This is his job. They are customers, nothing personal. He will get them to the next stage. The children listen and nod, absorbing their instructions.

Now we are landing. All the children open up the shades to watch. They seem excited and chatter amongst themselves. I help the girl with her video player and tray. She asks if she can keep the headphones. I say "yes, they are for you" She looks at me like I'm mistaken. I repeat "they are for you". She tucks them away with a smile.

We lower into the clouds. The girl and I are looking through the window. I ask: "how do you say this?" And point to a cloud. I want to show her she can know more than the adults around her. I want to have an immediate command of Spanish. I want to be able to talk with her and befriend her. I want to apologize on behalf of all adults for our capacity for stupidity, for cruelty, for complacency. She looks at me somewhat surprised that I didn't know 'cloud', and says "nube". I repeat after her, "nube" and look for her approval. In this moment she is my teacher.

Then, amidst the children's chatter and pointing we land.

It's time to say good bye. How do I allow the children to go on? How is this OK? Where are they travelling from? Will they really see their parents? Is there really a house? Is there really an app to transport children? How often does this happen? Will they find refuge in the USA? Will she go to school? Will they be sent back to their country and be subject to violence or death?

Again, in my fantasy: I'm an expert. I've done this before, so I know what to do, what to say- I have heroic words. I can change her path. I can guide her to make meaning from her experience. She will rise as the hero. She will conquer this. She will make change. I will offer those words that move the course of fate.

Instead I say: "It was a pleasure to meet you. I hope for you, your mother and brother and all." She looks down with a shy smile. This shouldn't get heavy I think. So I say: "and thank you for talking to me and for helping me practice my Spanish." She giggles and looks me in the eye with a child's accomplished smile.

I wave goodbye to all the children and they wave back with excited, nervous energy. The boy on the aisle looks me in the eye. He holds my gaze, smiles and gives a solemn nod. I couldn't help but think "I think he is hurting. I wish I could help." But I must turn to go. I'm holding up the plane.

Later when I'm in my hotel, some words come to me: "Continue to learn. Study how to write. Write your story. Your story is important for the world."