

An hour into the flight and the wailing behind me had not abated. I turned around, kneeled on my seat—the middle one in a row of three in an airplane filled to the hilt—and peeked over its high backrest. The child had been wailing since takeoff in Denver; what was the matter? Came a moment of instantaneous impression and conclusion that, as Malcolm Gladwell would say, happens whenever we “meet a new person or confront a complex situation.” It was a morning in late October, 2012, when icy roads and commuter traffic conspired to barely allow reaching the airport on time.

My eyes locked eyes with a young father by the window holding a toddler on his lap while the seat next to him was empty. Obviously, daddy had purchased a seat for his small son but neglected to bring any toys or books that might distract the child. A woman my age occupied the aisle seat.

The father’s face was heartbreakingly young—twenty-two, maybe. It was a face I recognized as familiar. I had met dozens, hundreds such faces during my teaching years. I wiggled my fingers at the child, which made him quit screaming. He eyed me as I played peek-a-boo. Eventually I motioned the father to lift the child up so I might hold him. As I took the toddler into my arms, the proximity of the overhead lights and vents caught his interest. His chubby fingers reached up. I manipulated the vent to blow lightly to fully. Next to the lights were the light-bulb symbols, which I pressed to turn off the light above my seat.

The child reached for the same effect but his little fingers lacked strength, so I repeatedly did it for him, on-off. Meanwhile his padded bottom emanated a ripe smell.

Daddy noticed. “I need to change his diaper,” he said, stepping over the occupant of the aisle seat. I handed the toddler across my own aisle seatmate. Father and son headed for the restroom.

“I’m glad the kid no longer bangs his feet into my back,” said the youth to my right. Earlier, as I gratefully sipped my first morning coffee, he had accepted no beverage from the service, asking for two bags of peanuts instead, which he scarfed down.

“What brings you to Oakland?” I asked.

He was visiting his mother, he said, adding that in Denver he was in a drug-rehab program. I nodded and mentioned Recover Wyoming, which had started up in Cheyenne. He said his program allowed him to attend the local gym for free, so long as he abided by program directives.

“I’m happy to hear that,” I said.

Before long father and child were back. The wailing recommenced. I turned around once again to gaze down the row of seats behind mine. The woman in the aisle seat

eyed me curiously while the toddler in his dad's lap stretched its chubby arms toward me, smiling.

Just then the captain on the intercom alerted us of the coming descent. We needed to buckle ourselves in. Daddy jerked back the child but made no attempt to buckle him into the seat next to his. The shrieking started up full force.

"I'll come over," I said to the father, squeezing myself past my aisle mate and the aisle mate in back and plopping into the seat meant for the child. I took him on my lap. Immediately the boy reached up with both arms toward the lights and vents.

"No, we can't go there," I said.

He looked around and his glance landed on a colorful box in the meshed backseat pocket in front of his dad. He reached for it.

"It's empty," the father said, attempting to stow it further down. He thought the child wanted more of the gummy bears the box had held. Actually, the toddler was interested in its colorful pictures, and I indicated to the father to let the boy play with the box. As he held it in his chubby fingers, I pointed to the pictured gummy bears, counting them over and over. When he showed signs of losing interest, standing up in my lap to reach for the lights again, the woman next to me hit on the idea of singing "pat-a-cake." She, too, was on her way to visit grandchildren, I later learned.

"Pat-a-cake" was a hit with the toddler as both grandmas sang and acted out the play. Eventually the father remembered that he knew the ABC song and began to sing it. As both grandmas joined in, the child was all ears (and round eyes). And so we negotiated the landing without further ado.

Strolling toward the luggage carousel I briefly wondered why the aisle-seat grandma had not reached across the empty seat to soothe the distressed child during the first sixty minutes of its wailing, but I guessed the answer. The father's face was less familiar to her than to me; in fact, to her it may have presented a forbidding entity. Like that of the toddler, it was the face of an African American. How often have whites drawn implicit negative associations at the sight of a young black male? I, however, associated the face with that of my students in the South, when I taught in an HBCU—Historically Black College or University.

A question I ask myself as I remember that encounter: The toddler stretching his brown arms toward me, his oh-so-dark eyes shining with hope, his mouth with its few teeth shaped into a grin: What did he see? Certainly not "white." Probably not "old," either, or "grandma," or even "woman." What was it then?