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EVEN WHILE TRAVELLING
IN FIRST CLASS, MY KIDS
ARE STILL TREATED LIKE
SECOND-CLASS CITIZENS.

BY CHITRA DIVAKARUNI | Last winter I did one of the bravest, most foolhardy things I've ever done. I traveled to India with Anand and Abhay, who were then aged 4 and 2.

What's brave about that? you're thinking.

Wait, I'm not done. It was my first trip with the children, and I did it alone -- that is, without the aid and succor of another adult. This is how it happened.

Murthy and I had been planning this trip for the four of us for a long time -- ever since the children were born, in fact. It would be a marvelous experience, a worthwhile adventure to show our children the country where we were born. We'd do it in style, we decided, and so we blew years of savings on business class tickets. Being avid list-makers, we compiled pages and pages on what to see, what not to eat, and items of clothing and medications. Our longest list was titled "What to Take on the Plane." Some of these were: children's books, books for us adults (alas, how optimistic we were), crayons, an Etch-a-Sketch, towels, a set of extra clothes each, extra barf bags, Froot Loops, peanut butter crackers, hand-held video games, Chutes and Ladders, a bottle of Dimetapp (a dose of which, more experienced friends assured us, would knock the boys out for hours), lots of aspirin, a double stroller and Blankie and Birdie.

A note about Blankie and Birdie, both of whom have been part of the family since the children were born. Birdie, a stuffed Woodstock toy who belongs to Anand and was once yellow, is 4 years old and missing various appendages. Abhay's Blankie is a patched alphabet quilt of 2 years, but appears more ancient, due to frequent encounters with the washing machine and baby teeth. If we ever asked our children to choose between Blankie

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and Birdie and their parents -- well, we're not that foolish.

A week before the trip, Murthy came down with appendicitis and had to be rushed to surgery. The surgery went well, but of course he was in no state to undertake an 18-hour journey in the next few days. Coward that I am, I almost canceled the trip, but I knew how much my mother and aunts were looking forward to seeing us. They'd already bought a kite for the children to fly and fishing rods for them to fish with at the pond behind our house, and prepared for them jarfuls of the sweet sugary sesame-seed-and-jaggery candy I used to love as a child. They'd even borrowed a goat from the village milkman for the children to play with. How could I let them down?

I'm not going to tell you about the traumatic odyssey that followed. About how, even before the plane took off, Abhay bit into a glass of orange juice he'd grabbed from me, and the stewardess and I spent the next 15 panicked minutes picking out pieces of glass from his mouth and putting them together to make sure he hadn't swallowed any. Or how Anand, who'd been diaper-trained for over a year, peed in his pants -- not once but twice! -- reducing me to surreptitiously (not that one can be surreptitious about such things) hanging wet child-wear from our elegant business-class seat-handles. Or how the Dimetapp, upon which I was relying heavily by this time, combined with the Froot Loops turned the kids hyper (a side-effect my friends -- ex-friends now -- had neglected to mention). Or how the boys refused to be belted into the double-stroller in London, and when I let them out -- defeated by shrieks that seemed to emanate from baby Pterodactyls -- they immediately ran off, each in a different direction, and disappeared. Or how, in Delhi, during another plane change, the airport lights went out, and in the ensuing confusion we lost -- yes! -- Birdie.

I want to focus, instead, on an incident that was, for me, the most revealing moment of the journey. We'd barely taken off -- I'd recovered a little from the bitten-glass mishap, and the children were excitedly pointing out the lights of San Francisco to me -- when the man sitting in the seat in front of Abhay's looked over its top at us. He wrinkled his elegant nose in distaste at Blankie and Birdie and the scattered Froot Loops and peanut butter smudges and frazzled hair -- from his vantage point we must have looked like refugees -- and sternly ignored Abhay, who was waving hi.

"Lady," he said, "I hope you can keep your kid from kicking my seat all through the flight. I paid a lot of money so I could get some sleep, and I want to make sure I get it." With that, he pressed his recliner button and disappeared.

I was too stunned to think of a suitable retort. As I stared, face flushed, at the back of his seat, it came to me that if I'd been traveling with my husband -- or alone -- that same man would have possibly exchanged pleasantries with us, or courteously

offered to help me with my bags. Suddenly, because of my children, I'd turned into a social pariah.

"Mommy, why was the man so angry?" Anand asked.

"I don't know," I said distractedly as I tried to keep Abhay quiet and in his seat. It was an endeavor, as all mothers of 2-year-olds know, doomed from the start.

I couldn't forget Anand's question, though. Even after I returned from India, I kept thinking about it. And I began to notice what I'd paid no attention to earlier -- what I'd been guilty of myself in my pre-children years. As a culture, we are not children-friendly.

I noticed that, apart from a few clearly delineated venues such as playgrounds and McDonald's, I was expected to keep my children away from public spaces. If I did venture into such spaces -- restaurants, movie theaters, airplanes, libraries -- and my children behaved like children usually do, I was expected to act apologetic and remove them as soon as possible. And although few people have expressed their annoyance as explicitly as the man in the airplane to India, I could tell what a lot of them were thinking: "Why should I have to put up with kids that aren't even mine?" And maybe, "Why can't they have little quarantined areas for folks with children, with glass walls to keep the pollution in, like they have for smokers at airports nowadays?"

It's not just strangers. Since my children's birth, I've turned down countless invitations to events because my boys were not included. Being a working mother who's already away from her children for long hours, I feel our family needs to spend our leisure time together. I don't regret my decision. But I have to confess that sometimes I felt sad. Left out. A lot of those events were fun ones -- dinners, dance parties, bay cruises, trips to ski lodges -- and I'd have liked to go. But it was as though my friends were saying, "You've got to choose between your kids and us."

Children are a part of life. Like life, they're messy, noisy, joyful, curious. Children -- even other people's -- nourish the child that's hidden inside all of us. However, in America today, we value comfort and convenience more. And glamour. But alas, children are generally not glamorous, and thus are often relegated to the equivalent of the Victorian nursery while we enjoy our civilized, sophisticated pleasures in the living room below. They put up with it. Handicapped by the helplessness of youth, what else can they do? But careful, they're watching from around the bend of the stairs, taking notes. And the drama whose first act began in executive apartments where signs read, "No Children," might end with us -- today's cultural policy makers -- looking wistfully out of the windows of old people's homes at the lonely view, wishing we'd made more willing space for children in our lives.

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