

## **An Unexpected Divine Appointment On A Busy Day!**

Right before the jet way door closed, I scrambled aboard the plane going from LA to Chicago, lugging my laptop and overstuffed briefcase. It was the first leg of an important business trip a few weeks before Christmas, and I was running late. I had a ton of work to catch up on. Half wishing, half praying I muttered, *"Please God, do me a favor; let there be an empty seat next to mine, I don't need any distractions."* I was on the aisle in a two seat row. Across sat a businesswoman with her nose buried in a newspaper. No problem. But in the seat beside mine, next to the window, was a young boy wearing a big red tag around his neck: ***"Minor -- Traveling Unattended."***

The kid sat perfectly still, hands in his lap, eyes straight ahead. He'd probably been told never to talk to strangers. "Good," I thought.

Then the flight attendant came by. *"Michael, I have to sit down because we're about to take off,"* she said to the little boy. *"This nice man will answer any of your questions, okay?"*

Did I have a choice? I offered my hand, and Michael shook it twice, straight up and down.

*"Hi, I'm Jerry,"* I said. *"You must be about seven years old."*

*"I'll bet you don't have any kids,"* he responded.

*"Why do you think that? Sure I do."* I took out my wallet to show him pictures.

*"Because I'm six."*

*"I was way off, huh?"*

The captains' voice came over the speakers, *"Flight attendants, prepare for takeoff."*

Michael pulled his seat belt tighter and gripped the armrests as the jet engines roared.

I leaned over, *"Right about now, I usually say a prayer. I asked God to keep the plane safe and to send angels to protect us."*

*"Amen,"* he said, then added, *"But I'm not afraid of dying. I'm not afraid because my mama's already in Heaven."*

*"I'm sorry."* I said.

*"Why are you sorry?"* he asked, peering out the window as the plane lifted off.

*"I'm sorry you don't have your mama here."*

My briefcase jostled at my feet, reminding me of all the work I needed to do.

*"Look at those boats down there!"* Michael said as the plane banked over the Pacific. *"Where are they going?"*

*"Just going sailing, having a good time. And there's probably a fishing boat full of guys like you and me."*

*"Doing what?"* He asked.

*"Just fishing, maybe for bass or tuna. Does your dad ever take you fishing?"*

*"I don't have a dad,"* Michael sadly responded.

Only six years old and he didn't have a dad, and his Mom had died, and here he was flying halfway across the country all by himself. The least I could do was make sure he had a good flight. With my foot I pushed my briefcase under my seat.

*"Do they have a bathroom here?"* he asked, squirming a little.

*"Sure,"* I said, *"Let me take you there."*

I showed him how to work the *"Occupied"* sign, and what buttons to push on the sink, then he closed the door. When he emerged, he wore a wet shirt and a huge smile.

*"That sink shoots water everywhere!"*

The attendants smiled.

Michael got the VIP treatment from the crew during snack time. I took out my laptop and tried to work on a talk I had to give, but my mind kept going to Michael. I couldn't stop looking at the crumpled grocery bag on the floor by his seat. He'd told me that everything he owned was in that bag. Poor kid.

While Michael was getting a tour of the cockpit the flight attendant told me his grandmother would pick him up in Chicago. In the seat pocket a large manila envelope held all the paperwork regarding his custody. He came back explaining, *"I got wings! I got cards! I got more peanuts. I saw the pilot and he said I could come back anytime!"*

For a while he stared at the manila envelope.

*"What are you thinking?"* I asked Michael.

He didn't answer. He buried his face in his hands and started sobbing. It had been years since I'd heard a little one cry like that. My kids were grown -- still I don't think they'd ever cried so hard. I rubbed his back and wondered where the flight attendant was.

*"What's the matter buddy?"* I asked.

All I got were the muffled words, *"I don't know my grandma. Mama didn't want her to come visit and see her sick. What if Grandma doesn't want me? Where will I go?"*

*"Michael, do you remember the Christmas story? Mary and Joseph and the baby Jesus? Remember how they came to Bethlehem just before Jesus was born? It was late and cold, and they didn't have anywhere to stay, no family, no hotels, not even hospitals where babies could be*

*born. Well, God was watching out for them. He found them a place to stay; a stable with animals."*

*"Wait, wait," Michael tugged on my sleeve.. "I know Jesus. I remember now." Then he closed his eyes, lifted his head and began to sing. His voice rang out with a strength that rocked his tiny frame. "Jeeesus looooves me--thiiiiis I knowwwwww. For the Biiiiible tells meeeeeee sooooo....."*

Passengers turned or stood up to see the little boy who made the large sound. Michael didn't notice his audience. With his eyes shut tight and voice lifted high, he was in a good place.

*"You've got a great voice," I told him when he was done.. "I've never heard anyone sing like that."*

*"Mama said God gave me good pipes just like my grandma's," he said.*

*"My grandma loves to sing, she sings in her church choir."*

*"Well, I'll bet you can sing there, too. The two of you will be running that choir."*

The seat belt sign came on as we approached O'Hare. The flight attendant came by and said, *"We just have a few minutes now."* But she told Michael that it was important that he put his seat belt on. People started stirring in their seats, like the kids before the final school bell. By the time the seat belt sign went off, passengers were rushing down the aisle. Michael and I stayed seated.

*"Are you gonna go with me?" he asked.*

*"I wouldn't miss it for the world, buddy!" I assured him.*

Clutching his bag and the manila envelope in one hand, he grabbed my hand with the other. The two of us followed the flight attendant down the jetway. All the noises of the airport seemed to fill the corridor.

Michael stopped, slipping his hand from mine, he dropped to his knees. His mouth quivered. His eyes brimmed with tears.

*"What's wrong Michael? I'll carry you if you want."*

He opened his mouth and moved his lips, but it was as if his words were stuck in his throat. When I knelt next to him, he grabbed my neck. I felt his warm, wet face as he whispered in my ear, *"I want my mama!"*

I tried to stand, but Michael squeezed my neck even harder. Then I heard a rattle of footsteps on the corridor's metal floor.

*"Is that you, baby?"*

I couldn't see the woman behind me, but I heard the warmth in her voice.

*"Oh baby," she cried. "Come here. Grandma loves you so much. I need a hug, baby. Let go of that nice man." She knelt beside Michael and me. Michael's grandma stroked his arm. I smelled a hint of orange*

blossoms.

*"You've got folks waiting for you out there, Michael.. Do you know that you've got aunts, and uncles and cousins?"*

She patted his skinny shoulders and started humming. Then she lifted her head and sang. I wondered if the flight attendant told her what to sing, or maybe she just knew what was right. Her strong, clear voice filled the passageway, *"Jesus loves me -- this I know..."*

Michael's gasps quieted. Still holding him, I rose, nodded *"hello"* to his grandma and watched her pick up the grocery bag. Right before we got to the doorway to the terminal, Michael loosened his grip around my neck and reached for his grandma.

As soon as she walked across the threshold with him, cheers erupted. From the size of the crowd, I figured family, friends, pastors, elders, deacons, choir members and most of the neighbors had come to meet Michael. A tall man tugged on Michael's ear and pulled off the red sign around his neck. It no longer applied.

As I made my way to the gate for my connecting flight, I barely noticed the weight of my overstuffed briefcase and laptop. I started to wonder who would be in the seat next to mine this time. .... And I smiled.

***~By Jerry Seiden~***