

SUPER DAD flies coach

by Michael Dermansky

I am the man receiving the condemning stares from the other passengers on flight 728 from the Dominican Republic to New York. My wife is conked out on the window seat. She has left SUPER DAD, that would be me, to deal with Maddy and Emma, one and four years old, squished into the middle seat.

SUPER DAD isn't able to stop speeding bullets, look through luggage, fly like an airplane or recharge computer batteries with his fingers. SUPER DAD's only super power is that he can change a diaper without a changing table or wipes. That and he has exceptional powers when it comes to getting on an airplane with children, which means he has to take off his children's shoes, fold up the stroller, get all the family possessions in little grey trays, unscrew the Sippy cups for x-rays. There will be no guns, knives or explosive apple juice on the plane. Unfortunately, there are no security screenings for people who hate children. SUPER DAD is the only protection. My job is to ingest the poisonous barbs every day citizens feel free to unleash to protect my children's innocence.

Today's mission is to get the family from the Dominican Republic back home to New York without any meltdowns or trouble from the police.

"I want Dora, daddy, De-de-de-de-Dora!" Emma cries.

"The laptop is dead sweetie."

"Dora daddy, Dora. De-de-de-de-Dora!"

I get the laptop down from the overhead compartment. Using my apartment key, I unscrew the battery pack of the laptop, rub it briskly and reinstall it. Visualizing streams of magnetized energy shooting through my finger, I press down on the start button for ten seconds. The laptop does not respond. Sometimes SUPER DAD can bring life back to dead electronics and sometimes he cannot. "I'm sorry baby. You can watch Sponge Bob on the little TV." There's a small screen on the back the airplane chairs. "See, it's Sponge Bob."

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"No Sponge Bob," she cries. "No Sponge Bob. DORA."

Maddy cries, "Elmo, daddy, Elmo. ELMO."

"Oh, Elmo. OK Maddy, here comes Elmo." SUPER DAD reaches into the olive diaper bag, grabs an Elmo rattle, shakes it back and forth and placing his voice as high as possible, squeaks, "Baby Maddy, it's me, ELMO. Do you know what love is? Love is when people come together. Coming together during tough times. Do you know what tough times are?"

"I want *colo*," Maddy says.

SUPER DAD, knowing that '*colo*' means 'color' reaches deeper into the diaper bag, under the zip lock bags and the sticky Sippy cups, deep down into the dark and sticky bottom, made up of crumbs, wrappers and a mysterious molasses, where no man has gone before. SUPER DAD pulls out four old crayons, puts them on the fold down tray.

Maddy slams her fists down on the tray, rocking the chair, the crayons flying in all directions.

The old man whose chair was attached to the tray mumbles, "This is the flight from hell." The old man talks to the man on the aisle, "You're right Lex, there should be fines for disturbing the peace."

Lex, diagonally across from me, pivots his shoulders, squaring up to me like an enraged bull. Lex is 65 years old, wearing navy slacks and short sleeve button shirt with enormous red flowers in bloom. He is a little burnt from lying out in the Caribbean sun. His face is handsome but hard. He stares at me until our eyes meet. "You know Super Dad," he hisses "it's your fault the flight was delayed."

My t-shirt that reads SUPER DAD gives my identity away, "Oh," I said, "I don't think that's true."

"The stewardess told me. We were ninth on the runway and your little girl had to go to the bathroom and we were bumped back to 23rd."

"Oh," I said.

"If you can't control your kids you shouldn't fly."

"I'm sorry." I smile at him, letting him know if our eyes remain locked much longer he'll develop a crush on me.

He keeps staring, unleashing six seconds of highly condensed criticism waves into my brain. Had anyone heard the way Lex Luther was talking to SUPER DAD? The stewardess who had ratted out Emma for going to the bathroom during take-off, making the plane late because federal regulations say that we had to stop the plane if anyone got out of their seats, ignored Lex. In fact, she seemed attracted to him. The older ladies sit quietly, keeping their heads down in their books and magazines.

The passive passengers remind me of a study I read in Psych 101. When violence occurs in a group setting, individuals are less likely to speak up, figuring maybe the person next to them will take responsibility. If this flight's example was written up in the Psychology textbook, what might happen is Lex's condensed criticism stares would cause a brain hemorrhage. SUPER DAD crumples over in the aisle. His wife cries, "How did this happen? The police interview passengers, who'd say, "If only we had helped SUPER DAD. He was such a gentle, kind man. I am so ashamed."

My smile continues on, countering Lex's stare.

"So you're SUPER DAD. Jesus Christ." He pivots back, grabs one of the tiny liquor bottles and drinks it.

"What did that man say?" My wife says, coming to from her sinus infection nap.

"Oh, nothing," I say. "Don't bother with him."

Emma starts fussing. "Daddy, I don't like it here any more. Daddy. I want to be home."

I whisper to her, "Emma, do you want to go potty with daddy?" I didn't want the hissing man to scare Emma.

From the back of the plane I hear a commotion.

A woman is yelling in the aisle. She is holding a little girl. People are looking up from their magazines, laptops, paperbacks and on-flight-television to see this woman with a pink skirt, and a gauzy pink wrap covering her bouncy breasts, let Rex Luther have it.

"What did you say to my husband? When you insult him you insult my family!"

Oh no, it isn't. It is. It's my wife. Maddy, bobbing in mommy's left arm, smiles at all the passengers.

"I told him your children were disturbing me and everyone on the plane."

"You know, my children are sick," she says.

"They seem OK to me," Rex counters.

"You have no right," she screams. "No right. YOU can go to hell. Go the HELL!"

Rex stands up. My wife is in his space. He slowly brings his hand to his chest and reaches for my wife's shoulder and then gently moves her to the right, so he can scoot by. "I don't have to take this. I'm getting the stewardess," he says and walks to the front of the plane.

I wait in the aisle few seconds; hoping people will go back to their books, and not realize that SUPER DAD is the husband being defended. "Hi honey," I say. "We got some pretzel mix in the back."

The stewardess comes over, "Is there a problem here?"

"Oh, no," SUPER DAD says, "We just got some pretzel mix."

My wife shakes her head and say, "No. I'm done. It's him. It's him. Go talk to him." The stewardess had my wife and Rex Luther fill out official complaint forms.

SUPER DAD has no special powers when it comes to controlling his wife's behavior. I had it all under control, he thinks, as he rips open the pretzel mix bags with his teeth, handing them to his children.

As we approached for our final descent, I glanced over at Rex Luther, to see if he was ready to end our conflict and be friends. He doesn't look back at me. He started talking to the women in his section about how to communicate with Spanish speaking people when you don't speak Spanish. "Just add an 'O' to whatever you're saying. Car becomes *Car-oh*. Chicken, *Chick-ahn-oh*. Money, *Din-air-oh*. Believe me, people under stand me; they think I'm bilingual."

The plane lands and both of the girls fall asleep. We stay in our seats as the entire plane empties. One chubby man walks by, and mumbles "Kids." Maddy and Emma's little bodies are flopped over the seats like rag dolls.

I look at the empty plane, blue seat belt straps falling off the seats, fold up trays in their upright position, the curving above head luggage racks all left open and empty and I feel ashamed. SUPER DAD did not avoid a meltdown. What kind of super hero am I? Lex Luther is right. I shouldn't travel. I can't control my kids or my wife. But, who cares? I want them to be kids, and let my wife be the crazy Jerry Springer character lurking inside her. I fantasize a toddler airline: Scream Vomit & Cry Wet Our Pants in the Air Airlines (or simply Waaaah!) The stewardess dresses like Dora, gives Emma a happy meal and says, "Abróchate el cinturón niños, which in English means fasten your seat belts kids. Also kids, 'Abrazo a sus padres, which in English means hug your parents."

"I don't want to scare you," the stewardess says, "but there are ten police officers waiting for you outside the plane."

I reach into the diaper bag and grab an Elmo raspberry/pear cereal bar, rip it open, take a bite, sip some apple juice from the Dora Sippy cup, wrap my back brace tightly around my back. SUPER DAD is back. A wave of energy surges through me; I lift my sleeping girls, one in each arm, ready to face customs, the police, and the baggage carousel.

The pilot, who was waiting for me by the cockpit, says, "Thanks for flying Jet Blue."

"You're welcome" I say. "Who should I talk to about setting up flights that are just for families with kids?"

"I don't know," he says. Then he yells over at the stewardess, "Ginger, do you know who this gentleman should talk to about starting up a 'Kiddie Airlines?'"

SUPER DAD's next flight will to San Diego, where he'll face another dangerous villain, my mother-in-law.

