

earning my wings

I didn't think I could get over my fear. Until I had to.

by Susan Choi

OUR PLANE ACCELERATED, JOUNCING AND

shaking. My palms were pouring sweat. My heart galloped. Behind me, someone started to snore. I gripped my husband's hand so hard he finally looked up from the newspaper. "The plane's fine, honey," he said kindly, if a bit wearily.

I wasn't always such a white-knuckled flier. When I was a kid, I found plane travel thrilling. Well into my 20s, it seemed like a pleasantly innocuous way to spend time. Mostly, I didn't notice flying; I got on the plane, read my book, and got off when we landed.

When did things change, and why? Was it the magazine story about the plane that turned completely upside down before plummeting 22,000 feet? Was it the friend whose plane lost altitude so abruptly that she injured her head on the cabin ceiling? It might have just been growing older, and more aware of life's dangers. Whatever the cause, by the time I reached my 30s, I found air travel terrifying. During flights I nearly broke off the armrests, not to mention my poor husband's fingers. Before flights I suffered insomnia. After flights I brooded over how much worse the next flight would be.

When my son, Dexter, was born, it all got even worse. How, I wondered, would I save my baby from the burning wreckage? How could I take him anywhere at all?

It wasn't until the first time I faced flying alone with Dexter that I realized how much of a child I myself had become. I was scheduled to speak 600 miles away in Michigan during the week. My husband couldn't take time off work, and I was still nursing Dexter. I remember my mounting horror as my husband drove us to the airport, as if when we got there I was going to toss my 10-month-old onto the runway.



And yet once my husband had kissed us goodbye, and the baby and I were alone, there was no time for horror. I got us checked in and through security. On the plane I dandled Dexter and organized his books, toys, and snacks. As we took off, I nursed him so his ears wouldn't hurt, read to him about baby animals, swam his Loch Ness Monster from armrest to seat pocket, and at some point realized I wasn't just not terrified—I was happy. Happy to be needed, and to find myself able to meet every need. Happy to have Dexter dependent on me, because this made me a person he could depend on.

Perched on my lap, Dexter gazed enraptured at the clouds, at the expanse of Lake Huron. On our return flight two days later, he discovered the laminated card of safety instructions, with its dreadful worst-case-scenario pictures, and had a great time waving it around.

I could feel the older, solo-traveling, rather stern-looking woman next to us watching from her seat on the aisle, and I wondered if she was going to admonish us. The laminated safety card, after all, is not a hat. It is meant to save lives.

"He certainly loves to travel!" the woman burst out, her voice dilating with unexpected warmth.

"He does," I replied proudly. Through the years of fretful neurosis, a part of me had survived that was fearless, that could still take joy in flight—and that joy had passed on to my son.

So I let Dexter treat the card as a toy, and we flew on toward home. **R**

Susan Choi's latest novel is *A Person of Interest*.