

Digging to America

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Extract

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— At eight o'clock in the evening, the Baltimore airport was nearly deserted. The wide gray corridors were empty, and the newsstands were dark, and the coffee shops were closed. Most of the gates had admitted their last flights. Their signboards were blank and their rows of vinyl chairs unoccupied and ghostly.

But you could hear a distant hum, a murmur of anticipation, at the far end of Pier D. You could see an overexcited child spinning herself into dizziness in the center of the corridor, and then a grownup popping forth to scoop her up and carry her, giggling and squirming, back into the waiting area. And a latecomer, a woman in a yellow dress, was rushing toward the gate with an armful of long-stemmed roses.

Step around the bend, then, and you'd come upon what looked like a gigantic baby shower. The entire waiting area for

the flight from San Francisco was packed with people bearing pink- and blue-wrapped gifts, or hanging on to flotillas of silvery balloons printed with IT'S A GIRL! and trailing spirals of pink ribbon. A man gripped the wicker handle of a wheeled and skirted bassinet as if he planned to roll it onto the plane, and a woman stood ready with a stroller so chrome-trimmed and bristling with levers that it seemed capable of entering the Indy 500. At least half a dozen people held video cameras, and many more had regular cameras slung around their necks. A woman spoke into a tape recorder in an urgent, secretive way. The man next to her clasped an infant's velour-upholstered car seat close to his chest.

MOM, the button on the woman's shoulder read—one of those laminated buttons such as you might see in an election year. And the man's read DAD. A nice-looking couple, not as young as you might expect—the woman in wide black pants and an arty black-and-white top of a geometric design, her short hair streaked with gray; the man a big, beaming, jovial type with a stubbly blond buzz cut, his bald knees poking bashfully from voluminous khaki Bermudas.

And not only were there MOM and DAD; there were GRANDMA and GRANDPA, twice over—two complete sets. One grandma was a rumped, comfortable woman in a denim sundress and bandanna-print baseball cap; the other was thin and gilded and expertly made up, wearing an ecru linen pantsuit and dyed-to-match pumps. The grandpas were dyed to match as well—the rumped woman's husband equally rumped, his iron-gray curls overdue for a cutting, while the

gilded woman's husband wore linen trousers and some sort of gauzy tropical shirt, and part of his bright yellow hair was possibly not his own.

It's true there were other people waiting, people clearly not included in the celebration. A weary-eyed woman in curlers; an older woman with a younger one who might have been her daughter; a father with two small children already dressed in pajamas. These outsiders stood around the edges, quiet and somehow dimmed, from time to time sneaking glances in the direction of MOM and DAD.

The plane was late. People grew restless. A child pointed out accusingly that the arrivals board still read ON TIME—a plain old lie. Several teenagers wandered off to the unlit waiting area just across the corridor. A little girl in pigtails fell asleep on a vinyl chair, the button on her green plaid blouse proclaiming COUSIN.

Then something changed. There wasn't any announcement—the PA system had been silent for some time—but people gradually stopped talking and pressed toward the jetway, craning their necks, standing on tiptoe. A woman in a uniform punched in a code and swung open the jetway door. A skycap arrived with a wheelchair. The teenagers reappeared. MOM and DAD, till now in the very center of the crowd, were nudged forward with encouraging pats, a path magically widening to let them approach the door.

First off was a very tall young man in jeans, wearing the confused look of someone who'd been flying too long. He spotted the mother and daughter and went over to them and

bent to kiss the daughter, but only on the cheek because she was too busy peering past him, just briefly returning his hug while she kept her eyes on the new arrivals.

Two businessmen with briefcases, striding purposefully toward the terminal. A teenage boy with a backpack so huge that he resembled an ant with an oversized breadcrumb. Another businessman. Another teenage boy, this one claimed by the woman in curlers. A smiling, rosy-cheeked redhead instantly engulfed by the two children in pajamas.

Now a pause. A sort of gathering of focus.

A crisply dressed Asian woman stepped through the door with a baby. This baby was perhaps five or six months old—able to hold herself confidently upright. She had a cushiony face and a head of amazingly thick black hair, cut straight across her forehead and straight across the tops of her ears, and she wore a footed pink sleeper. “Ah!” everyone breathed—even the outsiders, even the mother and the grown daughter. (Although the daughter’s young man still appeared confused.) The mother-to-be stretched out both arms, letting her tape recorder bounce at the end of its strap. But the Asian woman stopped short in an authoritative manner that warded off any approach. She drew herself up and said, “Donaldson?”

“Donaldson. That’s us,” the father-to-be said. His voice was shaking. He had somehow got rid of the car seat, passed it blindly to someone or other, but he stayed slightly to the rear of his wife and kept one hand on her back as if in need of support.

“Congratulations,” the Asian woman said. “This is Jin-Ho.” She transferred the baby to the mother’s waiting arms, and then

she unhitched a pink diaper bag from her shoulder and handed it to the father. The mother buried her face in the crook of the baby's neck. The baby stayed upright, gazing calmly out at the crowd. "Ah," people kept saying, and "Isn't she a cutie!" and "Did you ever see such a doll?"

Flashbulbs, insistent video cameras, everyone pressing too close. The father's eyes were wet. Lots of people's were; there were sniffing sounds all through the waiting area and noses being blown. And when the mother raised her face, finally, her cheeks were sheeted with tears. "Here," she told the father. "You hold her."

"Aw, no, I'm scared I might . . . You do it, honey. I'll watch."

The Asian woman started riffling through a sheaf of papers. People still disembarking had to step around her, step around the little family and the well-wishers and the tangle of baby equipment. Luckily, the flight hadn't been a full one. The passengers arrived in spurts: man with a cane, pause; retired couple, pause . . .

And then another Asian woman, younger than the first and plainer, with a tucked, apologetic way of looking about. She was lugging a bucket-shaped infant carrier by the handle, and you could tell that the baby inside must not weigh all that much. This baby, too, was a girl, if you could judge by the pink T-shirt, but she was smaller than the first one, sallow and pinched, with fragile wisps of black hair trailing down her forehead. Like the young woman transporting her, she showed a sort of anxious interest in the crowd. Her watchful black eyes moved too quickly from face to face.

The young woman said something that sounded like “Yaz-dun?”

“Yaz-dan,” a woman called from the rear. It sounded like a correction. The crowd parted again, not certain which way to move but eager to be of help, and three people no one had noticed before approached in single file: a youngish couple, foreign-looking, olive-skinned and attractive, followed by a slim older woman with a chignon of sleek black hair knotted low on the nape of her neck. It must have been she who had called out their name, because now she called it again in the same clear, carrying voice. “Here we are. Yazdan.” There was just the trace of an accent evident in the ruffled *r*’s.

The young woman turned to face them, holding the carrier awkwardly in front of her. “Congratulations, this is Sooki,” she said, but so softly and so breathlessly that people had to ask each other, “What?” “Who did she say?” “Sooki, I believe it was.” “Sooki! Isn’t that sweet!”

There was a problem unfastening the straps that held the baby in her carrier. The new parents had to do it because the Asian woman’s hands were full, and the parents were flustered and unskilled—the mother laughing slightly and tossing back her explosive waterfall of hennaed curls, the father biting his lip and looking vexed with himself. He wore tiny, very clean rimless glasses that glittered as he angled first this way and then that, struggling with a plastic clasp. The grandmother, if that was who she was, made sympathetic *tsk*-*tsking* sounds.

But at last the baby was free. Such a little bit of a thing! The father plucked her out in a gingerly, arm’s-length manner and

handed her to the mother, who gathered her in and rocked her and pressed her cheek against the top of the baby's feathery black head. The baby quirked her eyebrows but offered no resistance. Onlookers were blowing their noses again, and the father had to take off his glasses and wipe the lenses, but the mother and the grandmother stayed dry-eyed, smiling and softly murmuring. They paid no attention to the crowd. When someone asked, "Is yours from Korea too?" neither woman answered, and it was the father, finally, who said, "Hmm? Oh. Yes, she is."

"Hear that, Bitsy and Brad? Here's another Korean baby!"

The first mother glanced around—she was allowing the two grandmas a closer inspection—and said, "Really?" Her husband echoed her: "Really!" He stepped over to the other parents and held out his hand. "Brad Donaldson. That's my wife, Bitsy, over there."

"How do you do?" the second father said. "Sami Yazdan." He shook Brad's hand, but his lack of interest was almost comical; he couldn't keep his eyes off his baby. "Uh, my wife, Ziba," he added after a moment. "My mother, Maryam." He had a normal Baltimore accent, although he pronounced the two women's names as no American would have—*Zee-bah* and *Mar-yam*. His wife didn't even look up. She was cradling the baby and saying what sounded like "Soo-soo-soo." Brad Donaldson flapped a hand genially in her direction and returned to his own family.

By the time the transfers had been made official—both Asian women proving to be sticklers for detail—the Donaldson crowd had started to thin. Evidently some sort of gathering was

planned for later, though, because people kept calling, “See you back at the house!” as they moved toward the terminal. And then the parents themselves were free to go, Bitsy leading the way while the woman with the stroller wheeled it just behind her like a lady-in-waiting. (Clearly nothing would persuade Bitsy to give up her hold on that baby.) Brad lumbered after her, followed by a few stragglers and, at the very tail end, the Yazdans. One of the Donaldson grandpas, the rumpled one, dropped back to ask the Yazdans, “So. Did *you* have a long wait for *your* baby? Lots of paperwork and cross-examinations?”

“Yes,” Sami said, “a very long wait. A very long-drawn-out process.” And he glanced toward his wife. “At times we thought it never would happen,” he said.

The grandpa clucked and said, “Don’t I know it! Lord, what Bitsy and Brad had to put themselves through!”

They passed to one side of Security, which was staffed by a lone employee sitting on a stool, and started down the escalator—all but the man with the bassinet. He had to take the elevator. The woman with the stroller, however, seemed undaunted. She tipped the front end of the stroller back smartly and stepped on without hesitation.

“Listen,” Brad called up to the Yazdans from the lower level. “You-all feel like coming to our house? Joining the celebration?”

But Sami was absorbed in guiding his wife onto the escalator, and when he didn’t answer, Brad flapped a hand again in that oh-well, affable way of his. “Maybe another time,” he said to no one in particular. And he turned to catch up with the others.

The exit doors slid open and the Donaldsons streamed out. They headed toward the parking garage in twos and threes and fours, and shortly after that the Yazdans emerged to stand on the curb a moment, motionless, as if they needed time to adjust to the hot, humid, dimly lit, gasoline-smelling night.

Friday, August 15, 1997. The night the girls arrived.