

## *The Betty Letters*

*My Dear Grandchild,*

*Can you imagine, sitting in an aeroplane for a period of about 18 hours with nothing to do? Can you imagine, being finger-printed and photographed by a foreign power, with no reason, being given for the action? Well, both of these things happened to me on my recent trip to Toronto, Canada. You will recall that Bo-Bo, your fat frog of a Grandpa, has to keep in close touch with the Government of Canada for political reasons (I am not supposed to tell you about these matters) and, from time to time, we have to take trips to Ottawa, the Capital City of the Canada, for very hush-hush talks (Bo-Bo refuses to tell me about these talks no matter how much I nag him). Well, to continue with my horror story, Cathay Pacific Airways Ltd, some years ago, stopped all first-class seating in its long-haul carriers to Canada as did Air Canada. So, now, I am forced to sit in the Business Class Section of the aeroplane for the long and tedious journey and, worse still, I am not able have my usual seat: Number A1. The fact that there were no special seats, reserved for me and Bo-Bo on our last trip to Canada became of little importance, as it turned out, because events overtook such considerations when, as soon as the aeroplane left Hongkong, we were informed that the entertainment system had broken down and that attempts would be made to correct the problem. That set the stage for what was to become, My Dear Grandchild. I and Bo-Bo had brought some work to do so, for the first few hours or so of the trip, we were both engaged in useful endeavours (confidentially, Bo-Bo was writing a speech to be delivered to the Chinese community of Vancouver). However, when we thought that it would be nice to watch a movie on the television monitoring sets, we discovered that the crew had been unable to repair the problems of the entertainment system. And, as it turned out, the entertainment system was never repaired for the entire, horrible trip. No pak-pau magazines; nothing to read. Talk about a boring trip, and you will appreciate how I felt for 18 hours aboard this rather tired aeroplane whose foam-padding on the seats had become hard with years of use. Also, parts of the covers of the seats and footrests and leg-rests were torn, exposing the aged, yellowish-white, foam-padding. The girls, carrying food and drinks to the passengers – it was a full load, by the way – were hurrying and scurrying around as many people were complaining. And some of the complaints were becoming a little loud and aggressive. One passenger asked whether or not the other electrics on the aeroplane had been affected and, if so, to what extent and, 'Is everything OK with the engines?' I can tell you, in strict confidence, my legs and bottom were terribly sore by the time Bo-Bo and I arrived in Toronto at about 10 o'clock at night. Our limousine was standing by and it was so nice to be able to sit on a chair that had comfortable padding.*

*That is only part of the story, however, during that terrible trip, because we landed in Anchorage, Alaska, for what we were told was a refueling stop. I have taken this trip, many times in the past, and, during this one-hour layover, we used to stay on the aeroplane, sipping Champagne. But, on my recent trip, we were all ordered to disembark at Anchorage for refueling and we were, also, ordered to carry our passports with us. I could not imagine the reason for (a) disembarking for an hour while, allegedly, refueling of the aeroplane was taking place and (b) the necessity for the carrying of passports. Also, nobody recognised me and Bo-Bo at Anchorage, which was quite disconcerting, you understand. At Anchorage, the US Customs Service scanned my passport, and then took the fingerprints of my right and left index fingers. Then, I was photographed. The same treatment was metered out to Bo-Bo, who complained because, being a high muck-a-muck in Beijing, this is just not done. I discovered, soon, that the reason for this action was that the US Government is collecting data on all non-US and non-Canadian residents in order to put the information into their databanks. I felt as though I was suspected of being a criminal or terrorist and I asked one of the Customs men, a rather polite gentleman, what was the rationale behind the scanning of my Chinese*

*passport, the taking of my fingerprints, and photographing of my face without a by your leave and before I had been able to comb my hair, properly. He just smiled and waved me on. In my opinion, this is very wrong, but I had the option of (a) obeying the orders of the US Government people in charge at Anchorage (they, all, wore pistols, by the way) or (b) being held in some kind of custody – or worse.*

*When, about one hour later, we all reboarded the Cathay Pacific aeroplane, the electronic system still had not been repaired and so we all looked at blank, television monitoring sets for the entire trip between Alaska and Toronto in similar fashion to the long and arduous trip from Hongkong to Alaska. Then, a little flying waitress came to talk to me and handed me 4 Service Vouchers, each Voucher, having a face value of \$US25. The Vouchers may only be used aboard a Cathay Pacific aeroplane to purchase inflight sales items, only, and may not be converted into cash, so I was told. Now, I ask you, My Dear Grandchild: What is there aboard one of these old flying buses that would interest me or anybody of my class? I was told by the flying waitress that the Vouchers were given to us as a type of compensation for the boring trip due to the breakdown of the entire entertainment system and part of the lighting system. It seems to me that, at the price of about \$HK50,000 for the very long trip between Hongkong and Toronto, Canada, one is paying for (a) a large, comfortable seat (b) good food and wine and (c) an entertainment system to wear away at the boredom of sitting for between 18 hours and 22 hours, depending on the time of the year, on this flying bus. Since one third of that which I paid for was not delivered, at least, I feel that I am entitled to make a claim of about one third of the ticket cost. Cathay Pacific, I am sure, will not consider such a claim, knowing this company as I do, however, as a matter of honour, one would have thought that this British-owned, international carrier should live up to its contractual obligations. It is a real pity that Cathay Pacific does not have more competition on this route because, then, things may improve. As it is, Cathay Pacific and Air Canada share a monopoly on this lucrative route. End of horror story.*

*Talk to you next week.*

*Chief Lady*

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