

## Into the Frying Pan

By Tiffany Hawk

The last three flights I boarded tonight canceled. Unfortunately they weren't called off before we filled every seat, served plastic trays of chicken and beef, poured umpteen cups of tap water passed off as bottled, and screened tonight's movie, *Chicken Run*, twice in order to calm the hundreds of people United is holding hostage.

Now I'm resting my head against the window of a 727 parked at gate eighty three. They're deadheading me, or sending me as a passenger, to Denver where they're short on crew. I'll find out what happens next when we get to Denver. *If* we get to Denver. The pilots are conducting something they refuse to call a slow down. As long as United management won't negotiate with their union, they won't pick up overtime and they will demand every maintenance write-up be fixed, even those that could safely be deferred, such as the captain's automated seat adjuster. We've canceled 6,000 flights in the last month.

I close my eyes and hope for a moment of sleep.

Someone bumps me and I jerk upright. My contacts stick to my eyelids as I blink awake. I take that to mean I got a minute or two of sleep. I used to wonder if it was smarter to stay up all night rather than get only a few hours of sleep. Now I know exactly how half an hour of sleep feels – significantly less painful than fifteen minutes, and immeasurably less than one minute. But one minute, one glorious minute, can make all the difference. Nothing hurts as much as zero. God I hope my mouth wasn't open.

It's a pilot. He looks about ten years older than I am, somewhere in his early thirties. He steps into my row, stooping so he doesn't hit his head on the overhead bins.

He looks down at me and smiles. I sit up a little straighter. He introduces himself as Rick and lets his hand linger as he shakes mine.

I don't smile back as I tell him my name. If I've learned anything in my first few weeks on the job, it's that flight attendants don't flirt with pilots. Like crossing a picket line, it's just not done. There's a joke that demonstrates our party-line position on cockpit crew:

How many pilots does it take to screw in a light bulb?

One.

He holds it up in the air and the world revolves around him.

"Tiffany what?" asks pilot Rick, who inevitably knows a half-dozen Tiffanys of both the "y" and "ie" varieties.

I hesitate and then reluctantly, I say "Douglas." The name has been attached to me for two years, but I'd like to step under a power washer and blast it off.

Rick pulls a small stack of clothes from his bag before stowing it in the overhead. "I'm gonna slip into something more comfortable." He laughs at this lame attempt at humor. "I'm commuting home."

As he enters the lav, I curl back into dozing position, hoping the reduced oxygen level on takeoff will help me sleep.

My recent insomnia isn't just the fear of missing a checkin when the clock radio, wakeup call, *and* cell phone alarm fail. It's knowing that as a new flight attendant, one slip up will get you fired. And the fear of termination is not about the paycheck. If you're the kind of person who can relocate anywhere they tell you to, then spend twenty nights a month in a hotel, you're running away.

Sometime later, Rick nudges me. I rouse and see the purser standing in the aisle with a pen and pencil.

“What would you like for dinner this evening Ms. Douglas? The chicken parmesan or the salmon with lemon and capers.”

It’s my first time riding in first class and I’m excited, but still I say “I’ll have whatever is left over.”

The purser winks at me as if to say right on. I won’t be the kind of flight attendant who morphs into a self-important corporate type when I’m sitting in first class – for free. When she reaches the last row and I hear what must be the tenth request for chicken, I know I’m having salmon.

“So where are you based?” asks the pilot who is now wearing a white green golf shirt and khakis.

“San Francisco.”

“Ah, me too,” he says. “But I commute to Denver. At least for the moment. Do you like San Francisco?”

I nod and don’t tell him that I put in for a transfer to L.A. That I promised my husband I’d quit this job if I didn’t get my transfer within my first six weeks. We hit six weeks a few days ago and yesterday I slipped down the list from one-hundred and six to two hundred forty. When I saw Ben today, I lied and said my transfer was almost up. Still, he said “almost won’t cut it.” I’m not sure it matters now anyway.

The purser leans over to offer me a hot towel and twists to face Rick, placing her cleavage square in his face.

I feel the chocks release and the plane eases away from the jetbridge. Finally, I'm going somewhere.

After the purser carefully blows into the tubes of the demonstration life vest, she puts her hand on the Rick's shoulder and asks him to put his seat in the upright position. She once again leans across him, this time to pick up his pre-departure mimosa. She must be what they call a cockpit queen. I've heard of the type.

The plane creeps along the taxiway, repeatedly turning and rhythmically smacking the same pothole every few minutes.

"Recognize this box pattern?" asks Rick.

I don't, so I shake my head.

"We're going to be here a while."

His arm bumps against mine on the wide first-class armrest between us. I can feel its warmth and I am caught off guard by how soothing I find it. I have an urge to press my arm fully against his. Immediately, I want to pull it away, but that too, would seem oddly deliberate. I sit straight forward, frozen in position. I slide my eyes to the left to see my hand next to his, my ring finger ringless for the first time in years. I slipped it into my purse this afternoon as I walked away from Ben in the parking structure outside the therapist's office. It's just an experiment to see what my hand feels like without its weight.

"When the ground controllers don't have room for another jet in the takeoff line, they keep us moving. They have a motto," says Rick. "A moving airplane is a happy airplane."

I laugh and shift in my seat, thankful for an excuse to let my arm drop. I look up at him. His blonde hair is thinning and has turned gray around his temples, but when he smiles, his

dimples make him look like a sixteen year-old boy, innocent and kind. He is watching the purser who is standing in the galley repeatedly plunging a bag of tea into a Styrofoam cup.

“So how long have you been flying?” he asks me.

“Six and a half weeks,” I say.

He looks me up and down, nodding. “I thought so. You’re so regulation.”

I widen my eyes to convey shock. “What do you mean by that?”

He leans across the armrest and says into my ear, “Maybe someday we can get you to let your hair down.”

“But if it’s below our chin we have to have it pinned up,” I say and touch my tightly-formed French twist. Then I hear my cell phone ring from inside my purse. “Crap,” I say, Ben again. This is the eighth time he’s called tonight. I turn the phone off and stuff my purse back under the seat in front of me.

Eventually the box pattern becomes a straight line.

“Finally,” says Rick.

A voice over the P.A. says, “Flight attendants prepare for takeoff.” As if I were on the jumpseat, I shift into brace position for takeoff, legs together in front of the seat, hands tucked at my sides, head facing forward. We move into position at the end of the runway. I hear the engines spool up and begin my silent review. No matter how routine this job gets, we still rehearse for an evacuation with every takeoff and landing.

We race down the runway, gathering speed. Rick pulls the *Hemispheres* magazine out of his seatpocket as I mentally review throwing open doors and rushing people down slides. The plane hums louder and louder as we get ready to slingshot into the air. We’re about to lift off and

BANG. The noise is so loud it's as if we fired a missile from our right wing. I'm thrown forward, pressing into my seatbelt. The brakes scream and the whole plane slides from side to side.

"Holy Shit!" yells Rick. "Our gear collapsed."

The forward force is so powerful I have to press against the armrests to hold myself back in the seat.

Rick looks at me as he yells "We're full of fuel. We'll catch on fire!"

He has the entire first class cabin's attention. A man across the aisle unbuckles his seatbelt and the woman next to him screams at him to put it back on.

We continue to whip from left to right as we screech down the runway. I'm thrown back against my seat when we finally slam to a halt.

Just as I'm about to shout first command – "Release your seatbelts and get out" – a voice booms over the PA, slow and clear.

"Ladies and Gentlemen. This is your captain speaking. There's nothing to be alarmed about. We just experienced what we call a compressor stall. We'll pull off the runway for a few minutes so maintenance can inspect our engine."

In time with the passengers seated around me, I whip my head around to look at Rick.

"Sorry," he whispers, "I guess it wasn't our gear." Thank God he wasn't in uniform or one hundred and sixty three passengers would have been rushing the doors and scrambling out window exits.

"What was it?" I ask still pressing into my seat.

"Just an engine failure."

I look at him and raise my eyebrows.

“There are two kinds of pilots,” he says. “Those who have had an engine failure on takeoff. And those who will.”

I give a sarcastic half laugh.

“I’m hoping that was my one and only,” he says.

I hope so too. I wouldn’t have wanted Mr. Cool Under Pressure in the cockpit for that one.

As if reading my mind, he says “Sorry about that. I’m kind of on edge right now.” He shrugs his shoulders and says “personal stuff.”

I offer an “ah,” intended to let him off the hook without an explanation.

“My wife wants a divorce,” he says shaking his head. “Fuck.”

I think Whoa and Oh my God and Why are you telling me this. None of which seem appropriate, so I sit there staring at him, which is probably worse. I thought jumpseat therapy was just for flight attendants. I’ve found that a few minutes after meeting in briefing, my co-workers routinely confess the dirtiest details of their lives. I guess when you spend three out of four nights on the road, your latest flying partner is as close a connection as you’ve got.

He snaps his fingers and points his index finger out like a gun meant to say gotcha. “Too much information. I know. I’ll shut up.”

“Is it because of the job?” I ask. Before I accepted the job, someone told me that it would either make my relationship stronger or end it faster than I could imagine. I promised Ben it would make us rock solid, but now I wonder if I was hoping for the alternative.

Rick shrugs his shoulders.

He seems nice to me, but people would say that about Ben too. I can’t imagine the pilot sitting next to me would ever take a book out of his wife’s hands and throw it away because it was monopolizing her attention. I doubt he would make his wife read out loud to him so they

could do everything together. There is no way he would kick his wife out of the car and leave her on the side of the road late at night just for reminding him to turn on his headlights. Or push her down onto the floor of the kitchen so hard she bruised her head on the cabinets. There is no way that his wife flew into town to meet with a marriage counselor today and heard him say, straight to her face, that physical aggression is an appropriate way to express anger. If the counselor asked for his ideas on a solution going forward, he certainly wouldn't say "If she just acts like a good wife, then none of this would have to happen."

Rick says "Let's change the subject. How about you? Do you commute?"

"No." I only got my flight benefits two days ago. A few weeks ago, I promised I'd start flying home for every day off as soon as they kicked in.

"Must be nice being young and single with no responsibilities."

"Yeah," I laugh.

"How old are you?"

"Twenty three."

"Ah, the good old days."

He reminisces about pilot training in the Navy, spending his days studying and his nights partying in Pensacola bars with groupie chicks who were looking for Maverick from *Top Gun*.

I nod along as if he's describing my life. In reality I'm so straight that I didn't even drink until I'd finished college. The first time I ever caught a buzz was right before graduation when I climbed into UCLA's Inverted Fountain, as called for by Bruin tradition, and popped Champagne with the other celebrating seniors. We were so pleased with ourselves. Years of all night studying and pre-test diarrhea had made us so much better than all the "losers" at lower-

rank schools. No one mentioned the fact that every last one of us was really there because we'd been rejected from Berkeley or Stanford. Or how no one had any idea what to do next. I know I didn't. I guess that's why I moved home and married my high school sweetheart two weeks later.

“You must be living it up, flexing the flight benefits, flirting with passengers, flitting around the world all carefree. Drinking cosmos in Manhattan and absinthe in Paris with men in berets.”

I haven't actually been called up for an international yet, but my training flight to London was enough to show me that if something in my life had to go, it wouldn't be the job. We hadn't even landed yet and I knew. About five hours after we left Chicago, the captain called me and LaWanda, the other trainee, up to the cockpit.

“I want to show you something,” he said as he sprayed two pumps of Binaca in his mouth and turned off the lights. Then he told us to kneel and look outside. Thirty-seven thousand feet over Greenland, we pressed our faces against the 777 cockpit windows and watched the Northern Lights shoot miles above and below us, rising and falling, bursting and disappearing as abruptly as the equalizer bars on a stereo. It was several minutes before a radio call from Reykjavic Air Traffic Control broke the silence and we were sent back into the cabin to refill gin and tonics.

No matter how early in the morning or late at night, when I put on my uniform, I can feel that moment's exhilaration. I can see the rest of the world every time I glance at a departure board. I can taste my freedom every time I glide, rollaboard in tow, through the neon tunnel at O'Hare while hidden speakers play Rhapsody in Blue, United's theme song.

Rick turns and looks straight at me and says “Don't ever get married.”

“I won’t,” I say.

He says his wife, a nurse, is fucking a doctor at her hospital. I don’t know what to say, so I press my face to the glass and look back toward the tail of the plane. I can see a truck parked out there but no mechanic. We were on the runway for God’s sake, we better not cancel.

He apologizes again for unloading all of this on me. I know it’s really a request to continue, so I ask him if he suspected anything. For the last year, I’ve been imagining the signs that Ben was cheating, wishing he would cheat, so I would be off the hook. Besides, a girl on the side could have bought me some breathing room. He could ask *her* why the laundry wasn’t done by 10 a.m., ask *her* to take back the fourteen dollars worth of fabric she’d bought because he hadn’t been there to help pick it out, ask *her* why the hospital corners weren’t flush with the edge of the mattress, ask *her* to wear turtlenecks and baggy sweaters so men don’t check her out.

Rick did suspect, but he hoped it would pass, until he opened the door to his crashpad this morning and a process server threw a manila folder at him and ran down the stairs.

“You know what they say we carry in these, right,” he says, kicking the black boxy flight bag stowed under the seat.

“Your divorce papers,” I say and laugh, proud of myself for knowing the joke. I catch the rudeness of this response. “I’m sorry.”

“An anonymous process server? What did she think? That I was going to hurt her or force her to stay with me or pull out a gun and shoot her and then myself?”

“Maybe.”

“What do you mean by maybe?”

“Nothing,” I say and wave my hand as if to brush the comment away. But it is interesting to know she didn’t have to confront him with a divorce herself.

He starts flipping through the *Hemispheres* magazine on his lap. He doesn't stop on any page long enough to read more than the title.

I wonder if he had a big wedding, if hundreds of family members came out to support his vows, promising to help them stay together for better or worse. His wife probably doesn't care what other people think. I wish I didn't.

"Are you afraid to be on your own?" I ask.

"Me, fuck no. I'm not afraid of anything."

I've been afraid of everything. I was afraid to buy the wrong brand of Raisin Bran. I was afraid to get stuck in line at the checkout and get home five minutes late. I was afraid of leaving a water ring on the coffee table, of not getting the vacuum lines straight, I was afraid of accidentally looking in the direction of another man, a man I didn't even see.

Anything but death. I found out I wasn't afraid to die.

Last year, we were driving to see a friend of Ben's when a lowered Acura Prelude with after-market exhaust pipes pulled in front of us, admittedly too close.

"He cut me off," said Ben as he threw engine down a gear, whipped to the right and with the RPMs red-lining, passed the Prelude, pulled in front of it, and slammed on his brakes. Miraculously the Prelude skidded into the next lane without hitting us. Moments later a traffic light turned yellow and the car moved in front of us, but instead of hitting the gas, he pressed the brakes and stopped at the light. The driver door opened. An enormous hulk of a body builder in a skin-tight wife-beater tank top walked toward us. I don't know why, but he came up to my side of the car, stood at the window looking down at me. I looked right back at him, surprised at my calm. He then began kicking my door so hard the car rocked back and forth. Four kicks later, he slowly walked back to his car and drove away.

Ben had his hands on the steering wheel, his knuckles white. “I nearly shit my pants,” he said. “He could have killed us.”

I thought: That’s interesting. He really could have. It was as if I was on Valium. I couldn’t get my heart rate up. I couldn’t get that near-death rush. I realized that I wasn’t afraid to die because I was already dead.

Rick waves at me, and when I look up he says “Thought I lost you there.”

I turn toward him. His eyes are a gentle blue. They look safe. I’m tempted to tell him everything.

“So. On to a happier subject,” he says. “Are you seeing anyone?”

I shake my head. I don’t have the energy to see anyone. If you ask Ben, I never did. No matter how I tried, I didn’t have the strength, the focus, the amount of love it took to be the wife he needed. At first, I was legitimately devoted to him, and then I was even more deeply devoted to avoiding a blowout, but I couldn’t get it right. I picked up a book, I got stuck in traffic, I answered the phone.

Just weeks ago I answered the phone. It was my mom. Ben held up his hand up to demonstrate the number five – as in I’d better be off the phone in five minutes. But I pushed it. Ten minutes later, I still had the receiver pinched between my head and shoulder. I could hear him in the kitchen slamming cabinets. I’m not sure if he was looking for something or just trying to get my attention.

When I hung up, he said “You’ve been on the phone for more than twenty minutes.”

“I’m sorry.”

He grabbed a Calphalon frying pan and held it over his head.

“Who the fuck—” he said as he slammed the pan into the top of the stove, “do you think you are?”

I saw an inch-deep dent on the edge of the stove and the frying pan was no longer round, he had completely flattened one side. I started to back away, but he ran past me and stood in the doorway with his arms out, blocking the exit from the kitchen.

I tried to squeeze by but he grabbed me by the shoulders.

I squirmed against the hands that were pressing into my shoulders and shaking me. He pushed with all his strength. I flew back and crashed into the floor and cabinets. The physical pain hit immediately – the back of my head throbbed, my left elbow burned, my wrists ached. I lay on the floor looking up at him. He stared down at me, both of us expressionless with shock.

I felt a burning in my throat and knew I was about to cry. But before my tears could form, his did. He dropped to his knees, shaking, sobbing, apologizing.

But I didn't move. I lay crumpled against the cabinet and watched the last ounce of respect I had been reserving drain from the man in front of me. It was so after-school special that I could almost see the camera on him as he ran through his lines.

“I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry,” he repeated.

My fear evaporated, and the prisoner I had become floated off with it. I was filled with an enormous sense of relief.

I said, “It's okay.” And what I meant was that I would be okay. By escalating from throwing things to throwing me, he had given me a gift. I could hardly suppress a smile.

I had to go to work that night, but I promised I'd come home to see a counselor, which he had offered to do. Before I drove back to my crashpad in San Francisco, I furtively packed the

few photos and mementos that mattered to me. At the last minute, when he wasn't there to see, I took the frying pan too.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, your captain here again. Maintenance has given us the all clear, and we're going to attempt another take-off.”

“Attempt?” I say to Rick.

He smiles and winks.

I feel the parking brake release, and once again we are moving.

We turn toward the runway. Outside the window, I see a blinking trail of commercial jets from twenty-seat props to the double-decker 747s. We take our place in line and inch our way forward.

I look around at the silent cabin. We could probably hear each other breathe if it wasn't for the hum of the air conditioning. I've heard that when a flight suddenly becomes “eventful,” you won't see the chaos of a scene from *Airplane!* You'll see quiet passengers squeezing their armrests and facing forward as if turned to stone. Well, unless you're seated next to Pilot Rick.

“Flight Attendants, prepare for takeoff.”

I hold my breath and grip my armrests, surprised at the nervous energy jolting through my body. I want to sing with joy that I'm afraid, I'm afraid to die.

The airplane trembles as it builds up power, a windup toy about to be released, and we're screaming down the runway again.

No bang, no brakes, we lift off into smooth, quiet air.

I'm alive.

