

Takeoff

By Jami C. Johnson

She was one of those kinds of people whose cheeks never hurt no matter how much they smiled, and she was always smiling. Lillie finished the last run down the aisle. As she finally made it into the galley, a thin-lipped woman approached her, and said, "Excuse me, Miss? A woman is breastfeeding her baby in my aisle and she is—well, I don't know how to say this—*exposed*."

Lillie sighed inwardly yet her visage revealed nothing. Having been a flight attendant for more than a decade, she recognized it was not a new complaint. There were several ways to handle this. She would attempt to sidestep.

"Isn't that how it always is? Those babies are always hungry at the *craziest* times," Lillie said with the warmest smile she could muster and returned to separating aluminum cans from rubbish for recycling.

"Yes, well, it is a bit uncomfortable," the woman continued. "We can see *everything*."

Lillie changed up her approach. The woman looked old enough to have had children of her own at some point, although her left hand was conspicuously devoid of a wedding band. Lillie stopped for a moment and looked at the woman. Her plastic-gloved hands paused in midair, one hand holding a can of Coke and the other a wadded-up napkin, and she tilted her head to one side, smiled brightly. Despite having no Southern accent of her own, she drawled, "You know what it is? A lot of times, feeding the baby on the descennnt helllps with the altitude change, an' alll. Their little earrs hurt. You know how it iis." Lillie blinked a slow, sweet blink as if talking with a dear aunt over sweet teas on a Savannah afternoon about a particularly uncomfortable subject matter, one that could only be approached with equal measures of diplomacy, sugar, and passive-aggressiveness.

The woman's eyes widened, in the shock at not having gotten her point across. Lillie looked away and resumed her duties as if the matter was now settled. It wasn't.

"Well! It's... it's *indecent*!" the woman hissed, as she tugged at her cardigan, unconsciously crossing the two sides of her pink sweater across the modest bumps on her own chest.

Lillie quickly finished the sorting, and straightened to her full 5' 10" height, before swinging her long, auburn hair over her left shoulder. It was a purposefully intimidating gesture. Her accent disappeared, as she said, "*I understand, ma'am, however...*" Midsentence, the seatbelt sign

illuminated, and she was saved by the bell. She didn't have to do it, to say it, but Lillie decided to proceed anyway.

"Actually, ma'am, the FAA won't allow us to interfere with the feeding of a child by its mother. Regardless of the situation, as long as both are safe, our hands are tied. *And*, because the captain has just put the seatbelt light on, I'm going to have to ask you to return to your seat so we can land. Okay?" Lillie's grey-green eyes flashed like Athena, and she allowed herself one final dig, "Just try not to look, alrighty?"

The now-silenced, bewildered woman made her way back to her seat, but not before she encountered another flight attendant, Riley, as he made his way aft. He dismissed the woman's concerns with a swiftness.

Riley rolled his eyes at Lillie as he entered the galley, and said, "I don't know why *anyone* who flies to Sac is surprised by that. There's always titties out on the way over here," he lolled in his flamboyant accent. Lillie burst into giggles.

"Lillie, seriously. Look at me. I mean, *look* at me. Does that woman think that I like seeing boobies any more than she does?" Riley said, gesticulating extravagantly with the grace belonging only to a perfectly-formed gay man. Riley held a stern gaze through slitted lids and feigned gags until Lillie had tears spilling out of the corner of her eyes. "Honestly, she should be thankful. At least this set bothered to use deodorant and a razor. Which *you know* are illegal in Sacramento," Riley finished with a flourish.

Lillie loved flying with Riley. Not only was he a good friend and a former roommate, but he was a fearless attendant. As most would expect, nearly all pilots and flight attendants establish an unavoidably delightful yet insalubrious connection to one another. She was glad each of them had found a new partner and place to live, but she missed those sunny layovers and lazy weekends with Riley more than she could bear to remember.

As the last of the passengers was deplaning, Lillie checked her text messages. There were three: one from Charlie, and two from her good friend, Tessa.

Charlie: *Call me when u land in DEN babe.*

Tessa: *Ok DiRicci's Pizza @ 7pm. See ya soon!*

Tessa: *BTW, excited to meet Charlie... finally!*

Lillie replied to the texts quickly and then helped the cleaners sweep through the cabin for wayward items. DEN to SAC was one of her regular turns, and she would be home by five o'clock, at the latest.

If she was honest with herself, she was nervous for her friends to meet her new boyfriend. Certainly, Charlie was a stratosphere above her ex-husband, and there was not much fault that could be found in the hunky, blue-eyed pilot from the Mid-West. Yet she knew they would find some fault, in that way in which only single, sarcastic, caring girlfriends can.

Charlie was chewing on her ear when the two sisters walked into the pizzeria, and Lillie was not a little bit embarrassed. Although it had only been a few months, Tessa and Amy were shocked to find that Lillie was rail-thin, a shell of her former voluptuous self. When they remarked on it, she beamed.

Charlie began to ramble about how they were eating healthy now, and working out together once or twice a day. "It's our hobby, isn't it, baby?" he said, slowly rubbing her lower leg.

The girls caught up on what had been filling Lillie's days. Six months into this relationship and it appeared that Lillie was now enjoying all of *his* hobbies: Model trains, mowing, working out, making maple syrup, and flying around the country as Charlie hopped single-engine planes from destination to destination for plane owners when there was an opportunity.

Tessa and Amy reviled how sticky Charlie was. He was always touching Lillie, rubbing her thighs, holding her hand, blanketing her by an invisible static force. Their mutual chemistry was palpable, yet his smother seemed to envelop Lillie completely. The girls considered the woman before them: She looked and sounded like Lillie, but it was a ghostlike veil. A Lillie layer.

As Charlie glommed onto a new subject about the merits of his favorite pizza place, which was excellent only in its mediocrity, Lillie reached for another slice. Watching her, Charlie interrupted his train of thought for only a moment, to interject, "Hey babe, you sure you want that?" Lillie smiled shyly and set it down. Amy and Tessa dropped their slices midbite in disdain and solidarity. The largely uneaten pizza remained untouched for the rest of the night and was consumed in odor only. The rest of the evening passed in silent judgment, peppered with forced smiles. Lillie smiled brightly while being pinned under Charlie's thumb.

"He's nice," they had said, later to her on the phone. This, of course, was true. "He's handsome and attentive," they said. "Lillie, are you happy?"

Lillie said that she was and tried to believe it. She thought how happiness was not possible when someone like her was folded so carefully into the life of someone like him. Deep down she knew he was good for her in many ways, yet completely wrong in others. But, she knew she wouldn't break it off, for one very specific reason: Somehow, it would end on its own.

Lillie had nightmares nearly every night. There was a pulling in her dreams, and her foreboding premonitions were rarely wrong. While she could not wake from her nightmares in time to understand how it would occur, she was always startled awake by the sense of impending doom. This tragedy—whatever it was—could not be stopped, and it left her feeling pitted. Quietly staring at Charlie as he slept next to her in the dark, she soaked in every tear-streaked image of his quiet rest, knowing that one day soon, he would not be there.

At first, she didn't tell anyone. But, as the dreams grew more frequent, she finally confided in him. It was an awkward conversation to initiate. How do you tell the man you love that you keep dreaming he is going to die? She decided to share only pieces. At first, he tried to calm her fears. But, upon examining the intensity in her hazel eyes, he became unsettled and withdrew.

The wedding on the deck of the cruise ship was under a glorious, hazy New Orleans sun. The breeze whipped up at a mild saltiness. At one point, Lillie turned away from the festivities and took a quiet moment to herself, looking out over the edge of the boat at the water. She looked down at her white dress and the flowers in her hand. It wasn't how she imagined it would be, and if anyone had told her two years before, she would not have believed them. Or at least, she wouldn't have wanted to.

Lillie's eyes flooded as she remembered the fuzzy details about what had happened two years before, which seemed like yesterday. The trip out to Akron to limp the single-engine plane back to California. Waking up in the hospital, where no one was brave enough to tell her what she already knew. Even now, her broken neck still ached. The influx of friends and family that came to see her, to attend the funeral, some of whom were on deck today. She recalled the last memory before it happened, and the first one after. She thought about how the investigation that revealed how bald tires prevented Charlie from gaining enough speed for proper lift, and how a faulty sparkplug prevented the engine from keeping the plane in the air.

The feelings of guilt associated with having dreamed about his demise, their demise, and how she may have wished him away, washed over her in full force.

Yet despite everything that had happened in the past two years—the loss, the recovery, the grief, the incessant pain—Lillie honestly considered how she was happier at that moment under the NOLA sun than she had ever been. She looked up and watched as a small flock of seabirds circled, floating up and down. It made her smile, and her eyes welled with tears: happy tears, guilty tears. Her voice cracked as she said into the wind, almost in the form of a question, "Charlie."

A wind snapped up, and a gull that had been sitting unnoticed on his perch just a few feet away from her suddenly jumped into the wind. He glided in the air just two feet above the banister, soaring right and left. He hovered in place as the wind barreled over the top of his wings and created a controlled lift. The gull cocked head and looked directly at her before dipping into soar, then flying down towards the water and out of view. After a moment, the tears spilled over their lidded barriers, and she whispered, "Thank you, Charlie. Thank you."

She closed her eyes.

Lillie felt the warm, strong arms of her new husband, Jeff, slipping from the back of her waist to the front of her waist. His breath grazed the back of her neck and kissed her tenderly behind her right ear. He didn't need to see her face to know what she was experiencing. Somehow, he just knew. That he had the capacity and the strength to hold the loss for the three of them, and that he found no need to interject or interrupt her heartache, made Lillie eternally grateful.

They stood quietly like that for several minutes, and he gently rocked her. In the space of the silence, they learned to appreciate how parts and pieces could build new wholes. A mournful yet sweet kiss sealed their composition. Without a word, they laced their fingers together and rejoined the party.