

The Penguin Flight

by Roz Warren

Even though I made the phone call, it was really Steven who put me on that plane. I wanted to fly out at dawn. "Let's wait till after breakfast," he said. "Change to a later flight."

By that time everything was sold out except a few seats on Doomed Flight 211, although, of course, they didn't start calling it that until it crashed. The booking lady didn't say, "The only seats we have left are on Doomed Flight 211." So I booked a window seat.

Doomed Flight 211 was an evening flight. The drive to the airport reminded me of too many other drives. Steven and I had had a lot of good times driving around San Francisco. I knew that by the time he got back from the airport, Mary would probably have moved herself into the apartment.

I can't say that I took the whole thing like a good sport or that there were no hard feelings.

I didn't say goodbye. I just got into the security line. He stood there and watched me. I knew he was feeling lousy. I had nothing to do but watch him waiting for me to finish waiting in line. A tall, skinny, smart-but-jumpy-looking guy wearing blue jeans, a black T-shirt, and a cowboy hat. Twenty-four years old and still wearing a cowboy hat. And I was still in love with this jerk.

"Go away," I called over to him. "Beat it. Get lost."

A couple of people looked around. He just stood there, looking miserable. I could tell he wanted to cry. I wanted to go over and give him a hug and say, "Hey, it's not the end of the world." Forget that, I thought to myself. Didn't want to lose my place in line. Standing there with all the rest of the bozos emptying their change and car keys into little plastic containers and asking the attendants about their camera film getting clouded.

"Won't nothing happen to your camera film," the attendant is saying. Then this bozo walks on through and right away the alarm goes off.

"You got any metal on you? Put all your metal in this plastic container."

"Oh -- metal?" the guy asks. "Where? In this container?" He is wearing a suit and carrying a briefcase. He must have been on an airplane sometime in the past couple of years.

"Oh, no," says the attendant. "Not metal. We're collecting drugs today. Coke, ludes, reefer... Anything you got." He sees me smile and winks at me. "Just put the stuff right in here and keep walking."

The other attendants are snickering.

I got on the plane in a daze. I didn't once look back at Steven, which took some effort. I found my seat. After we took off they began showing recycled nature shows from television and I began to drink. First there was one about otters. The next one was about hippopotamuses. Soon I was on my fourth drink and they were telling me about penguins. I noticed that there was a whole pile of empty airline salted nut bags on the seat-back table in front of me. How had I managed to get my hands on so many? It seemed important to count them. There were twelve. They were very bright around the edges, illuminated, like a medieval manuscript. This was because of the drinks, which the insurance broker sitting next to me had bought me.

We had just learned that penguins have no natural predators when there was a loud "WHUMP" and the plane began to drop.

I can tell you what went through my head the instant the plane began to drop because it was just one word and that word was "whoops." Here I was on a plane that looked like it was going to crash and nothing went through my head but "whoops." A lot worse has gone through my head when I've blown a tire on the freeway.

I must have been in shock, although it's hard to say when the shock started. I'd been all shook up ever since Steven told me he was dumping me so he could get married to Mary. By the time my plane went down, I figure I was going on two solid weeks of shock. I barely knew Mary existed and suddenly the idiot wants to marry her. Knowing that the two of them were probably going to end up miserable together didn't make me feel any better. All I could think

of was all those years of me and Steven down the drain. We weren't just high school sweethearts -- we were nursery school sweethearts. One day I climbed up to the top of the jungle gym at Miss Nancy's Nursery School and there he was. I was only four at the time. It just wasn't fair.

After he told me about Mary, I cried for days. I didn't understand it. He didn't understand it either. He started smoking again. We both lost weight. Finally, he drove me to the airport and put me on the plane to Philly. We couldn't even stand to be in the same city. So then of course my damn plane crashes.

I assumed the emergency crash position, but after a few moments I unassumed it because I couldn't see anything from there but my knees. The penguin movie had gone off. The little pile of empty salted nut bags was long gone. The overhead luggage racks were popping open, suitcases were flying around, and everyone was screaming. I didn't scream. I'm just not a screamer. I never scream on the roller coaster either. The insurance broker next to me was struggling to dislodge one of those little airsickness bags from the seat-back pouch in front of him so he could throw up into it. Neatness counts.

I didn't feel sorry for myself. I felt sorry for the real people; the mothers who had babies with them, the young couples on their honeymoons, and the teenagers who were about to die without ever having sex. I was mostly sad about Steven, and angry at him for booking me on some damn messed-up flight that was crashing just because he was so lazy he couldn't drive me out to the airport early in the morning the way I'd wanted it

The plane stopped falling and went into a glide. Everyone made a sighing noise like "ooohhhh." The penguin movie came right back on. That penguin movie was eager to get itself across to us. A big group of penguins waddled across a stretch of ice and plopped into the water. Each one paused for a second on the edge of the ice and looked down at the water before jumping in. They looked very thoughtful, as if they had some other option besides jumping in and they wanted to think the whole thing through before going forward.

I was watching the movie intently. It was as if as long as I could keep that movie on, the plane wouldn't crash. A stewardess was lurching up the aisle. Then the scene shifted to a penguin couple. They were standing together kind of poking at each other with their beaks.

"Only the strong get to mate," proclaimed the narrator. The plane started falling again and I blacked out.

When I came to, I was sitting in the middle of a two-lane blacktop -- still in my airplane seat. Nobody else was around. There weren't even any cars on the road, just me in my airplane seat. My seat belt was still fastened. It was very dark and quiet and all the stars were out.

I unfastened my seat belt and stood up. I felt sore, but not in any particular place. I hauled the seat off the road because it was a hazard for oncoming cars. My cousin Allen had been hospitalized once after hitting a twin bed on the New Jersey Turnpike. It fell off the roof of the van in front of him and Allen crashed into it. Flipped his car right over. The guy in the van just kept on driving.

I didn't think this was heaven. It looked too much like Ohio.

It was hard to know what to think.

"I have just experienced a miracle." I tried that out. Too melodramatic. I thought of kneeling down and kissing the blacktop, but I didn't feel like it.

What had happened to everyone else? Where was the plane? It had been such a big bastard. Where the hell was it? I started walking. I didn't know which way was the right one, so I walked in the direction my seat had been facing. After a while ambulances and police cars started going by headed in the other direction. I didn't turn around and go back toward where the airplane was. There were things there I didn't want to see.

It was a beautiful night. Warm and clear. The sky seemed very high up. I hadn't seen so many stars in years, since before me and Steven dropped out of school and moved out west. A beat-up Volkswagon was coming down the road. At the last possible moment I stuck out my thumb. With my luck it was probably a serial killer

cruising for fresh victims. But when I got in, the guy driving looked fine, although he was much too tall to be driving a bug. He was all hunched over in there. He was dressed the way my friends tend to dress, in jeans and a T-shirt.

"Where am I?" I asked, after I got in.

"You're on the Gerald R. Ford Freeway," he said. "Just outside of Holland."

"What state is this?" I asked.

"Michigan," he said. He turned to look at me. "Are you okay? Is that where you want to be?"

I thought about this for a moment. The answer was no. Where I wanted to be was back on the playground at Miss Nancy's.

"Did you see a plane just crash?" I asked him.

"No," he said. "Are you sure you're okay?"

"I was in a plane that just crashed," I said. "But I walked away." Walked away. I liked the sound of that.

An ambulance went screaming by.

"I have to make a phone call," I said.

We stopped at a Texaco station. He filled her up and cleaned the windshield while I called my older sister Louise in Philly, collect. I told her that I was in Michigan, and that I thought my plane had crashed but that I couldn't locate it. She thought I was stoned. I could hear my niece Molly, who is not yet one, making baby noises in the background.

"Put Molly on," I said.

"Only for a few minutes. I'm paying for this."

"I'll pay you back. Put the kid on the phone."

She put Molly up to the receiver. I listened to my niece making noises like "aaahhh... ahhh... ek-ek-ek." I sang her the Texaco jingle that mom always used to sing: "You can trust your car to the man who wears the star, the big bright Texaco star!"

When Louise got back on the phone I told her not to cash in the flight insurance policy when it came in the mail because that would be fraud and not to tell Steven that I was okay. I didn't want him to know I was okay. I wanted to louse up his first weekend with Mary in

our apartment -- maybe screw up the whole relationship. I'm the first to admit that I can hold a grudge forever.

"You aren't really at a Texaco station in Michigan, are you?" Louise asked

I told her no, I'd died on the road and gone to Texaco Heaven, and I was surrounded by angels, and instead of hymns they were all singing, "You can trust your car to the man who wears the star..."

After that, Howard, the guy in the Volkswagen, took me home and we went to bed. They're very casual about these things in Michigan. Or maybe just he was. He lived in a little place that he'd bought for nothing in a little town in the middle of nowhere. He was a math teacher, but he thought he might go into the Peace Corps. He wasn't a big talker. The strong silent type. He had a body like Superman, although he didn't have a face like Superman. He turned out to be good in bed.

I read in The Detroit Free Press the next morning that my body hadn't been recovered. That was because my body was right there, eating its cornflakes. A few days later I read in The National Enquirer that Louise was telling everyone that I was still alive. The headline was PLANE CRASH VICTIM PHONES BELOVED SISTER FROM BEYOND THE GRAVE -- A MIRACLE OR A CRUEL HOAX?

I could just imagine Steven in California, sweating that one out.

The Enquirer made a big deal about my and Lou's early years as teenage dope fiends, making it out as if the two of us were hallucinating up a storm all the time back then, which wasn't strictly true. They distorted the hell out of all that stuff. They didn't make nearly as much fuss about how straight and sober we were now. They also played up the fact that our parents had died in a plane crash too, although theirs had been a private plane and mine was a public plane, so to speak.

After a while the story died out of the newspapers and life went on without me.

I stayed with Howard. I had never loved anyone whom I hadn't known forever. He had a whole childhood and adolescence that I hadn't been around for. I'm not sure why he was in love with me.

Perhaps because I was there. We did a lot of reading out loud and walking around in the woods and climbing trees.

Every once in a while it occurred to me that I could probably make a lot of money selling my story to somebody.

In many ways I liked this life better than my other life, except for the ache in my gut from missing good old Steven.

Then one night after Howard had fallen asleep, I was lying there in bed switching channels and damned if I didn't stumble onto the penguin program, the same one that had made my plane crash. Soon as I saw those dopey little birds I got chills all over. I couldn't believe I was seeing them again. I had the whole thing memorized. I could hear every word the announcer said just before he said it.

"Penguins have no natural predators." I'm watching those little bozos go waddling across the ice and then pause on the brink and peer down at the water, and it's like watching my life pass before my eyes

It reminded me of waiting in the security line and not saying goodbye to Steven. It reminded me of walking along the highway at night and sticking my thumb out just when I heard Howard's VW coming down the road. It reminded me of singing to Molly.

"We're all living on borrowed time," said the announcer.

No, he didn't really say that. I was just imagining it.

And there went the penguin couple, poking at each other gently with their beaks again

"Only the strong get to mate," proclaimed the announcer. I phoned Steven. Collect. He accepted the charges.

"Hey -- guess what?" I said to him.

He hung up on me.

