

AUTO-PILOT

SHORT SHORT STORY NO.29

30,000 feet above sea-level, aeroplane pilot Catherine Rippon reaches for the intercom and prepares to address the passengers. Her second-in-command, newly promoted, is a junior officer named Stephen Lee. Three years ago, in an incident she would rather forget, they engaged in a little sexual foreplay at a Christmas party. He subsequently invited her on a date, an offer she declined.

'Do you want me to do that?' Stephen asks as she takes the microphone control from the holster by her knees.

'Do what?' she asks, looking at him in surprise.

'Address the passengers,' he tells her.

She frowns, not quite sure what he's getting at. 'I think they prefer to hear from the captain, don't you?'

Stephen offers her a small smile and nods, as if he is merely entertaining her delusions. 'Sometimes it's more appropriate if the co-pilot speaks to them,' he says.

'Is it indeed?' asks Catherine, who's accustomed to such sexism from her friends and family but refuses to accept it from a junior. 'And when would that be?'

Stephen sighs and looks away. 'Fine,' he says, as if the whole universe is a crashing bore. 'It was just a thought.'

Catherine ignores him and informs the passengers of the altitude they are cruising at, the weather at their destination and the likely time of their arrival.

'Well?' she asks as she replaces the mechanism. 'What did you think? Will there be widespread panic in the cabin?'

'I was only trying to be helpful,' he replies.

A moment later, one of the stewardesses, Alice, is admitted into the cockpit with tea and muffins; she hands the tray to Stephen first. 'You got your hair cut,' she says, smiling at him as she touches his neck lightly.

'A few days ago,' he says. 'It was too long.'

'I liked it long,' she replies.

Catherine stares straight ahead and sets her jaw irritably. It's one thing to be disrespected by the men; it's another thing entirely when even the women patronise her. 'Thank you, Alice,' she says sharply, causing the stewardess to turn towards her.

'For what?'

Catherine says nothing and the stewardess turns back to Stephen and mutters something to him. He snorts and shakes his head.

'Been there, done that,' he says, as Alice laughs and leaves.

'What was that?' snaps Catherine, turning to glare at him but he pretends not to have heard her and starts checking some fuel indicators instead. She's about to ask him again but feels too exhausted at the idea of it. Instead, she looks out the window towards the mountains on her left. It would be so easy simply to turn the plane in their direction and head straight for them. By the time anyone realised what

was happening, it would be too late. She looks at the controls and narrows her eyes, glances at her co-pilot for a moment, before offering one of the most joyful laughs of her life and making a sudden and completely understandable decision.