

Confessions of an Air Hostess

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Extract

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**Rule One: Smile and the world smiles with you,
scowl and passengers will make your life hell.**

Ten myths about cabin crew members:

1. We all love our jobs.
2. We also love smiling, even when presented with overflowing sick bags.
3. We're not remotely afraid of turbulence.
4. We eat the same food as the passengers.
5. We have a man in every port (we wish).
6. We don't get hangovers.
7. We don't mind getting up at 3 a.m.
8. We're not that bright so we need a calculator to work out the price of two coffees.
9. We all live very glamorous lives.
10. Our secret wish is to marry captains (even ugly captains).

Ladies and gentleman, my name is Annie and today I'll be looking after you on your flight. Please do not give me any hassle as I was dumped on my way to the airport this

morning, by text. Please do not be fooled by my heavy make-up, as without it I'd be a ghastly shade of green, the result of a vicious hangover. Please buy as much ladies' and gents' fragrance as you can, even though you don't particularly want it, as there's 20 per cent off today. Ladies, please don't be fooled by handsome Marco's charm; he's as gay as the Christmas fairy, and he wants to sell you a horrible Celtic brooch for the commission. Gentlemen, please don't think that sexy Sue thinks you're hot – she has been laughing about your toupee behind the curtain for the last twenty minutes but she's hoping you'll buy a hand-painted Irish tie, again for the commission. Please be careful when aiming for the toilet bowl as we have no cleaners on the flight. Cabin crew members are here primarily for your comfort and safety, and potty training is not included in the price of your cheap flight. Just to let you know, if you hand us complaint cards at the end of the flight, they will not be passed on to Head Office but will go straight into the bin along with your used napkins. Please do not ask us which country we are flying over at any stage of the flight – if we were that good at geography, we'd be, like, geography teachers or something.

Do not, absolutely do not, ask us which hotel we are staying at. If you are looking for that kind of entertainment, please ask the discreet concierge at your own hotel, which is hopefully at the other end of town to ours. Do not enquire whether we like our jobs as cabin crew and in return we will not ask you if you like your job in the bank or wherever the hell you work. Do not ask us where the best night spots in Dublin are as we will just tell you to go to Temple Bar – a place where we wouldn't dream of going

ourselves. On your way home, don't complain that it rained all week in Ireland. We are not responsible for the weather, so tough luck if you got wet.

Please do not hand us your heavy black hand luggage, asking us to stow it away safely as you have a bad back. Our backs aren't the best either, and they will be even more damaged if we try and lift all your belongings and shove them into a tight overhead compartment. Please don't complain if you've ended up in the dreaded middle seat – no, we cannot ask another passenger to swap seats with you and it'll be a lesson for you to check in earlier the next time. Don't moan that we're not showing a film – it's a forty-five-minute flight, so what do you expect? And don't ask if little Johnny can visit the captain in his cockpit. The real reason the captain became a pilot was to spend as much time as possible away from his own little brats and, anyway, little Johnny could be a terrorist. We take no chances these days, as I'm sure you found out when that stupid-looking security guy at Dublin airport confiscated your shampoo.

The toilet is for one person only and no, you can't accompany your partner into the loo to help him with his medication. Yes, we understand that there are two yellow breathing masks in the toilet but these are strictly for parents and children.

Blankets are provided to keep you warm only and are not handed out so you can misbehave underneath them when the lights are dimmed. Any strange movements noticed, will be reported to the captain. Well, he gets very bored in the cockpit after finishing the newspaper crosswords and suduko puzzles so it's important to keep him entertained with amusing passenger stories.

Please don't tell us that your little girl would love to be an air hostess and ask us whether we have any advice for her. My advice would be to study very hard and become a doctor, or something useful. You see, our lives are not that glamorous, lots of us drink too much, we all socialise on week nights because weekends off are practically unheard of. At parties, people bore us to tears telling us about their own flying experiences and how they nearly died several times mid-Atlantic as their plane nosedived. As if!

Seriously, though, if you want a job that involves a lot of smiling and wearing red lipstick, why not become a clown? You'd probably get to travel the world with the circus and people don't shout at you because the plane is late or because you haven't got their pre-ordered, low-sodium, low-fat meal on board. And I bet the pay is much better, too.

One last thing: do not ask us if, where we land in water, anyone will hear you blowing your little red whistle. I doubt that they will. Anyway, I for one will be too busy swimming towards land as fast as I can.

Now, sit back, relax, and enjoy your short flight with us!



Rule Two: Behave professionally at all times. Even at the worst of times.

The plane roars down the runway at a thundering speed. All our passengers seem excited and are chatting eagerly amongst themselves as we then soar into the air en route to sunny Lanzarote. They are no doubt looking forward to spending a lazy fortnight in half-empty Irish bars in Puerto Del Carmen or Playa Blanca, watching Sky Sports on big screens and drinking San Miguel while comparing Lanzarote to the resorts they visited last year (like Santa Ponsa in Majorca or Playa De Las Americas in Tenerife) with other sunburnt Irish couples that they meet at the naff welcome meetings. Still, I'd rather be them than me. I am wondering how I'm going to cope now that my life has collapsed all around me. How could Niall cruelly dump me by text? How will I tell my mum? She loved Niall. Granted, she'd never met him as he was a Southsider who would never dream of venturing all the way to Swords on the Northside where my parents live in a semi-detached house on a quiet estate. But I'd told her all about him and she approved. She liked the fact that he worked as

an accountant, didn't smoke, didn't drink and wanted children. Just not *my* children it would seem.

Cathy, my fellow air hostess, who is sitting beside me applying electric-blue eyeshadow, notices the tears spilling on to my hands streaking my fake tan.

'Are you OK?' she enquires.

'No, I'm crying because I'm happy,' I say with more than a hint of bitterness. 'I just love spending my weekends making sure happy couples arrive in comfort and safety at their sunny holiday destination.'

She looks at me blankly. 'Are you being sarcastic?'

'Of course I am. Yesterday I was out celebrating my longest relationship in years. I was telling my best friend that I couldn't believe Niall and I had lasted three long months. We were even thinking of getting a little dog together. We were going to call her Molly. And then this morning at 7.07 a.m. I received a text telling me it was all off,' I said shakily before bursting into tears.

Cathy put a skinny arm around my shoulder. 'My poor baby,' she cooed. 'What an absolute bastard! What an unbelievable coward. If he's such a loser, maybe you're better off without him.'

'I am,' I sniffed, 'aren't I? He didn't deserve me. Didn't deserve all the love I had to give him. I just wish I hadn't given him a thousand quid to help him find his feet.'

'You did that?' Cathy looked at me wide-eyed.

'I know. I'm such a stupid fool. He was sick of his job and his boss.'

'So you gave him the money and he found his feet no doubt.'

'Yes; it seems they took him all the way to the airport

where he booked a one-way flight to Australia. Now apparently he loves it so much over there he's not coming back.'

'I hope he gets buggered by a kangaroo,' Cathy spat.

'Thanks, Cath.' I smiled weakly, wiping my wet cheeks with the back of my hand. 'Is my mascara all streaked?'

'Nothing that a Kleenex can't quickly sort out.'

'Thanks. And thanks for listening to me. I will survive this, you know.'

'I know. You go, girl. And don't worry; there are more men just around the corner.'

'I just wish I knew which corner. But I'll get back out there with a smile on my face. Life goes on. Fuck the bastard!'

With that the deafening sound of applause came from down the cabin. A startled look appeared on Cathy's face.

'What? What's going on?' I shrieked, my hand flying to my mouth.

'Oh. My. God,' said Cathy slowly. 'We forgot to switch off the microphone!'



Rule Three: Let safety be your number-one priority.

I wake up the following week to the sun streaming through my window and an irate message on my answerphone from Sylvie my supervisor. My heart immediately fills with dread. Sylvie is a witch who seems hell-bent on making my life hell. Apparently, when she first joined the airline, like a hundred years ago when air hostessing was the most glamorous job in the world and guaranteed you a rich husband, she was a raving beauty and all the pilots were wild about her. But now her looks have gone to pot and she has acquired the face that she deserves – pinched, spiteful features, thin, mean-looking mouth and hawk-like eyes accentuated by naff bottle-green eyeshadow.

While all her contemporaries used their glamorous status as globe-trotting air hostesses to nab wealthy businessmen and get dazzling sparklers for their engagement fingers, Sylvie married late in life, and is now separated and sour as hell. Her main preoccupation these days seems to be torturing younger fun-loving girls. Girls

like myself who simply joined the airline for an easy life of luxury hotels, swimming pools and sunny locations, not realising that working through the night with a teapot in one hand and a tray with jiggers and sugars in the other, is bloody hard work.

According to her sharp, short message, she wants to meet me at 12 p.m. Looking anxiously at my watch, I realise I have exactly two hours to make myself look normal and get out to her poky little office at cabin crew headquarters at Dublin Airport. So I make myself look presentable but not too glamorous and head to Busaras to catch the Airport Express.

For once I am early. I pause outside the tall, grey, unwelcoming building where a bunch of cabin crew members are taking the opportunity to sneak a quick cigarette before their overnight in Paris. They all stand huddled against the wind, identical in their uniforms, their black overnight wheelie cases nearby. Their hair is all swept back into ridiculously old-fashioned buns. They could all be members of a 1960s girl band.

‘Hey Annie.’ One of them smiles as I approach, looking for a lighter. ‘We’ve just been talking about you. You’re a legend, do you know that?’

I raise an eyebrow.

‘Cursing into the microphone like that,’ she laughed. ‘You’ve some balls on you, woman. Fair play to you.’

‘But that was an accident,’ I said, reddening. I was getting embarrassed now. I don’t want to make my mortifying faux pas my claim to airline fame. How much do they know? I don’t particularly care about the microphone incident but the thought that everyone in the airline knew

I'd been dumped by text, was absolutely mortifying. How would I live ever that one down?

'So any plans for Paris?' I asked quickly, trying to change the unpleasant subject.

'I'm just going to take it easy,' said Sophie, the older air hostess, a striking sallow-skinned girl in her thirties. 'When you've two toddlers at home the last thing you feel like doing is partying in somebody's hotel room. I'm going to have a long hot bath with a glass of wine and enjoy the latest Cathy Kelly without the sound of little fists thumping on the door.'

'It depends on the cockpit crew, I suppose,' says Elena, who is a former beauty queen and only goes for drinks if there's a single pilot among the crew. This girl suffers from serious pilotitis (an addiction to pilots) and wouldn't waste a night in Paris chatting in some hotel bar to a bunch of girls when she could be getting her beauty sleep. 'Are you not working today?'

'I'm on a day off.' I grimace. 'I'm just in to meet Sylvie Savage for a chat.'

'About what?' asks the third girl incredulously.

'Oh, just about life and stuff, I guess.' I have to laugh at their surprised faces. 'I'm joking, of course. You hardly think I'm in here to collect a bonus for my good behaviour? No doubt I'm in for a good old bollocking about something or other. Well, have a good trip, girls; I'm off to meet the devil herself.'

I take the lift up to the third floor examining my spots in the harsh mirrors. Man, the lighting in here is terrible. Either that, or I look like shit.

I'm still a good five minutes early but Sylvie makes me

wait outside to suffer in silence until she's ready to see me. Her face is like thunder when I'm finally granted entry. God, what have I done now?

Her beady eyes bore through me. I uneasily shift from one foot to another. There's another seat in the room but she doesn't invite me to sit down. 'What's the meaning of this?' She's holding up a neatly written complaint card but my eyesight isn't that good so I don't know what it's all about.

'Can you explain?' I try to keep my voice steady. Today is my day off so I don't want to spend the entire day in this stuffy little room going around in circles with a woman who seems to hate my guts.

She inhales swiftly and her eyes narrow until they look like slits in her over-made-up lined face.

'I've had a complaint from a respectable family man who is a regular traveller. He says you used foul language on a flight to Lanzarote a couple of weeks ago. He also says for the rest of his holiday his innocent young son kept asking him about the word "bastard".'

She almost winces as she says the word. What a prude! That's bloody ridiculous. What era is she still living in? Would she not think of retiring gracefully? Bastard isn't even a curse word. It's in the dictionary.

'That was a mistake,' I admit, realising that this was an argument I wouldn't win. 'I was talking about something private at the time. I had no idea that the microphone was on. Anyway, most of the passengers laughed. They thought it was funny.'

Sylvie bristles. 'Well, this man didn't find it remotely funny. In fact, he was so offended that he is now looking for

a refund on his plane tickets and a written apology from the airline.'

'Jesus, he needs to get a life!'

'Would you mind not taking the Lord's name in vain? Can't you be professional for once in your life? You are in the wrong here, Annie, and you know it. You have let the company down, not to mention yourself and whatever's left of your reputation. The consequences for your actions will result in your suspension for a week without pay.'

What? Is she kidding me? She cannot be serious. It soon dawns on me that she is. Oh great, I think. Maybe I could go away somewhere for a spa break or something. Or tidy my room. Or do something useful like get driving lessons.

'If you are disciplined three times, we will be forced to terminate your contract,' Sylvie spat almost gleefully.

Now, that isn't so good. Where else could I get a job where I spend most of my time looking into a mirror reapplying my lipstick? Who would pay me to swim up and down a glorious pool in Santa Monica as part of my job? Or to hang out in London hotels during rugby internationals? And who would make the repayments on my crippling mortgage? I've just bought an inner-city two-bedroomed box for the price of a mansion in any other country! Shakily I get to my feet. 'It won't happen again, Sylvie, I promise,' I mutter, hating myself for grovelling. 'Thank you.'

God, why am I thanking her? Isn't it bad enough that she'd made me feel like a piece of crap stuck to the sole of her stiletto heel? I slink out of the office feeling more depressed than I have in a long time. My heart is heavy. Oh well, at least I will be able to dine out on the microphone

story for years to come. That is, if anybody ever invites me anywhere ever again. I'm still reeling over the fact that Niall dumped me without so much as a simple explanation. Why? I mean, we're all adults here. I can take rejection the same as the next girl, but I would prefer it to my face. The thing that really gets me about Niall dumping me, is that it was done in such a cowardly fashion. What did he expect? That I would make a scene? That I would fall to my knees and beg him to take me back, that I would change? As if I was *that* desperate? Anyway, it was Niall, not me, who had done all the chasing to begin with. I'd met him in a club on a night out with the girls. He had approached me on the dance floor and had impressed me with his wit and cheeky smile. I'd been reluctant to hand over my number to a stranger at first, but Niall hadn't taken no for an answer. Then he'd texted me and phoned me about twenty times a day before proclaiming his undying love for me. Our problems only began when I told him I loved him back. Immediately he started to cool off and the texts dwindled to a couple a week, usually informing me that he couldn't meet me because of rugby training. The more he ran away the more I ran after him. Until I got that final text to tell me it was over. He'd invited me to a dreary place called Dumpsville, population: me.

Since Niall and I have split up (I tell people that we split up, of course, not that I was ditched), the invitations haven't exactly been pouring in. People don't seem to feel comfortable with a new singleton sitting amongst them. It makes them feel uncomfortable, for some reason. As if they've found out I've some kind of unpleasant disease. Even all Niall's friends' girlfriends, whom I'd quite

reasonably thought were my friends, too, have deserted me. No doubt they are just waiting to befriend his new flame, the fickle bitches.

‘We’ll definitely have to meet up for a girlie night soon,’ a couple of them, Rose and Sarah, promised me when they bumped into me in the street, without ever specifying a date. I think they’re avoiding me in case I ask awkward questions and they have to tell me the truth. What was the truth anyway? Was Niall with somebody else now? Were they both lounging around Bondi beach drinking cool beers without a care in the world while I struggled to get my dignity back in depressing old Dublin, alone? Was she accompanying him to barbecues, holding his hand and laughing at all his silly jokes? Is her mother as excited as my own had been about dating such a good catch? Maybe his new girlfriend is Australian, an Elle McPherson lookalike with impossibly long, tanned limbs. Is he using my money to buy her flowers? The thought just sickens me.

My head spinning, I cross the road quickly in my new pastel-pink strappy Jimmy Choo sandals. I’m wearing a baby-pink cardigan, too, with faded denims, as I read in some psychology book once that pink makes people warm to you. Obviously it didn’t work on Savage. Maybe she is colour-blind. I totter across the road, lost in the depths of my own sad little world and fail to notice the big, shiny, black Mercedes coming at full speed around the corner. Too late. It screeches to a halt. The noise of it throws me and I stumble, crashing to the ground and hitting my face on the kerb with a thud. Darkness follows.

I come round with a thumping headache, feeling that somebody has slashed the side of my face with a knife. I'm aware of being rushed to the medical centre, but thankfully I'm OK. What isn't OK is that, when I look down, I see the heel has come off one of my brand new sandals. God, I'll be working overtime for a year to pay for another pair.

I'm placed on a bed which is very comfortable. So comfortable it makes me want to go to sleep.

'How are you feeling?' asks the middle-aged nurse holding a wet cloth to my aching cheek.

'Fine, fine,' I say, feeling dizzy. There's a man awkwardly standing next to me in a beautifully cut navy suit. He has dark hair going slightly grey around the temples. He has the bluest eyes I've ever seen and they seem full of concern.

'Who's Jimmy?' he asks slowly. He has an English accent. A very grand one, like he could be related to the royal family. Or read the BBC news.

'Jimmy?' I blink a few times. Really, he was very attractive. Where had he come from and why was he asking me weird questions? Is he the new airport doctor?

'You asked for Jimmy . . . I didn't quite catch the surname. I was wondering whether I could phone him for you, perhaps. My name is Oliver Kane. I knocked you down.'

'Did you? Were you the guy in the Mercedes?'

The kindly nurse interrupts. 'Do you want to give us Jimmy's number? Is he your boyfriend?'

'No, my boyfriend was Niall and I certainly don't want you to phone him. He's in Australia for a start.' I sit up in

the hospital-type bed. Ouch. My head really hurts. 'I'll be fine. I'd better get home. Where are my shoes?'

I look down sadly at my destroyed sandals. 'Oh my poor Jimmy Choos!'

The nurse and the well-dressed man look at each other and exchange secret smiles.

'Your sandals,' they say in unison.

'Yes they're my Jimmy Choos. Oh, I see what you mean. Shoes, not a man.'

'Can I give you a lift somewhere? You're not going to be able to walk home in those,' says the man with the cute eyes, or Oliver, as I suppose I should call him.

'No, I'll get a taxi,' I assure him. 'I'm OK, honestly. Is there a bathroom in here? I'll just go and get myself cleaned up.'

The sight of my face in the bathroom mirror gives me a shock. One side of my face is very badly scratched. I look like I got into a fight with a big wild vicious cat – and lost.

I come out into the medical room again. 'My face . . .' I start to whimper. This day is just not turning out to be good for me.

'I'll write you a note,' says the nurse hurriedly. 'You'll clearly be cosmetically unfit for a week, so you won't have to work.'

'Oh, but that's no use,' I insist. 'I've been suspended for a week, anyway, so could you give me the same medical cert for a fortnight?'

I know I'm probably chancing my arm, but what the hell? I may as well get something out of this. I've had the day from hell and I could always go away on a nice holiday or something for all my trouble.

‘Sure,’ the nurse says immediately. ‘That’ll be no problem.’

‘In the meantime, do you mind if I lie down for half an hour or so? I feel a bit drained. Thank you so much for being so kind.’ I take the gentleman’s hand and squeeze it. I feel the cold touch of a wedding ring. Oh, pity. But sure, it’s inevitable, isn’t it? Single men in Ireland are a rarity. Especially good-looking ones.

When I wake up again the nice man is gone. I feel much better now, although my cheek still stings a bit.

After I’ve freshened up, the nurse hands me my sick note (yippee!) and an envelope.

‘What’s this?’ I enquire. Hopefully, I won’t have to fill out a load of forms or anything to be released. My day off has nearly come to an end and I’ve absolutely nothing to show for it. I didn’t even get to go to the dry cleaners, the post office or Dunnes Stores to buy underwear. See what an exciting life I lead? Those are the things I normally do on a day off. And sometimes for extra excitement I get the 41 bus to Swords to visit my folks and help my dad out in the garden.

‘Mr Kane left you some money for your taxi home. He had to rush off to a meeting.

‘Oh,’ I say, ripping open the envelope. He must be a busy man! As the envelope tears open, a load of €20 notes start floating towards the floor. I stare at them in stunned silence. There must be some mistake.

‘Where does he think I live? London? A taxi into the city centre would only cost €20 at the most. This is ridiculous. I’ll have to give it back. Did he leave a card or something?’

‘Apparently not.’ The nurse shrugs. ‘I’d take the money, though. He could have killed you.’

‘But he didn’t,’ I protest. ‘And he was very kind.’

‘And good-looking.’ The nurse winks.

‘And married!’ I counter.

She conveniently ignores that last comment. ‘Give the money to charity if you feel so guilty about it.’

I stuff the notes into my back pocket and fish my mobile out of my bag to ring a taxi. I can hardly walk up to the taxi rank with no shoes, can I? What a funny man, I think to myself. But very generous. Pity he never even said good-bye!

‘Well, I’d better be going,’ I say, giving the nurse a hug. I know she didn’t really have to give me such an extended sick note, so I’m terribly grateful. ‘Thanks for everything.’

‘Do you want to know where he was staying?’

I hover at the door ready to leave. ‘As I said, he’s married.’

‘OK,’ the nurse says. ‘Fair enough.’

‘Bye.’

I wander outside but it has started to rain. And no sign of my taxi. Maybe I should go back and ask the nurse for an umbrella.

‘I thought you’d come back,’ says the nurse, giving me a knowing smile.

‘I was wondering if you have an umbrella. It’s freezing and it’s lashing and my feet are bare.’

‘Do you want to know the name of that hotel?’

I shrug nonchalantly. ‘Oh go on, then, it doesn’t make any difference, but obviously you’re dying to tell me.’

‘The Conrad Hotel, Earlsfort Terrace.’

‘OK, thanks for that. Not that I would dream of popping in to say hello.’

‘Of course not,’ says the nurse demurely. ‘Well, anyway, have a nice weekend.’