

## Dogs in Flight

Sammi slowly walked down the aisle with the snack and beverage cart.

"Bone, pig's ear, or leftovers?" she asked at each row. Three each across the rows. A few sleeping were skipped over.

"Bone," replied some. She tossed a small wrapped biscuit down on the tray next to a small plastic bowl of water. A few dogs looked sorrowfully at the tiny bowls, as if they wanted to know how they could be expected to slake their thirst with that measly tongue-full of water. The bulldogs had the saddest expressions, especially those who didn't like flying in the first place – their saliva tended to get overactive in the dry cabin air.

The wrapped bones didn't go over well, either, for the new fliers. They were obviously expecting a good chunk of cow bone to grind their teeth on. Sammi could see in their eyes the anticipation of a bone that might ease their in-flight anxiety. They returned to her a hang-dog expression as well that she tried to ignore as she continued down the aisle.

"Bone, pig's ear, or leftovers?"

A pair of miniature schnauzers sat side-by-side on their cushions. *Please don't say pig's ear*, she thought. Schnauzers, especially miniatures, had always made such a mess with the ears. Their tiny jaws and ugly noises – she just couldn't stand it.

"Pig's ear!" they replied in unison. Sammi turned to her cart to hide her disgust. She considered, as she pulled two small wrapped ears out of the drawer, how different some dogs were from others. Some were definitely more liable to shed, or drool, or whine than others. It wasn't what made them bad, although some could be more trying on patience than others, depending on what attitude they offered. But that's what made them all dogs. They couldn't, any one of them, be perfect, any more than they could all be well-tempered, calm, and gregarious all the time, either.

"Pig's ear," replied an elderly golden retriever in 12C. The golden had white around her ears and her eyes had the start of a glaze. Her companion was a slightly younger greyhound – long and lanky. The greyhound asked for leftovers.

As Sammi tidied her cart before moving to the next row, she heard the greyhound complain.

Sammi knew the tiny packet of desiccated rice, carrots, and chicken giblets was just as disappointing as the water, or the bone, or the dried out ear that might not have been a pig's at all but quite possibly a pork-flavored soy product injected into a form and baked to the tough consistency of an ear.

"It's just not like it used to be," replied the golden to her companion. "I remember when the bowls were metal. Some airlines even had ceramic. One could often get a real ear or bone. And the leftovers option – that wasn't available until you were probably a puppy." Her voice sounded wistful, "I remember a bit of hamburger on one flight. And that was just the snacks. When it was a flight with a meal, we could still find steak or fish. Sometimes even venison depending on where we were departing. Forget that today. It's all about cost cutting. It's like kennels in the air."

A few rows back, Sammi heard playful yipping. Four little puppies squeezed into the row with their mother. She was a collie and her puppies looked like their father might have been a husky or malamute. She shushed them.

"I'll have a bone, thank you. The puppies will take a few bowls of water, but they'll be nursing in a few minutes."

Sammi looked around quickly and leaned over.

"Ma'am, I'm afraid we don't allow nursing in the cabin."

The collie looked upset.

"I'm sorry, Ma'am," Sammi continued. "We encourage bringing pre-extracted milk onto the plane. If you don't have any, you can certainly use the lavatory."

Sammi could sense the dog's hackles rising and smelled the bitch's aggression as much as she could smell the milk swelling. The puppies yipped; they were clearly hungry.

"I'm supposed to take my puppies with me into a cramped space with astroturf and a well-used wooden post to nurse? You've got to be kidding me."

Sammi leaned closer.

"Look that's what I'm supposed to say. I don't really mind, and as long as none of the other dogs say anything, I don't have to either."

The collie nodded and appeared willing to assess her fellow passengers and decide on her own.

Another one of those obnoxious rules, thought Sammi. Everyone had a mother and had to eat one way or another.

The cart shook. Turbulence rocked the cabin. Around her a few passengers began to whine. She noticed ears going flat and a few heads ducking lower. One shaggy tail that had been wagging out into the aisle since take off retreated into the row with its owner.

"There's a rough patch of air that we're experiencing right now," said the pilot over the PA. "I ask that all passengers remain in their seats for now. I'm putting on the Stay sign. As soon as we get through, which should be a few minutes from now, I should be able to turn it off."

One of the flight attendants repeated the announcement. "The pilot has put on the Stay sign. We request that all passengers return to their seats and remain there until the pilot has turned it off. Thank you."

Three rows remained. In the last row, there were two empty seats and a pug. He panted nervously. The window was already smudged with his nose slobber.

"I know we can't open the windows, but how does everyone else do it? We're so high up, but I feel like I can't breathe in here," he said when he saw Sammi regarding him.

Sammi could hear in the dog's voice, and see from his teeth, that he was still young. It might have even been his first time traveling.

"We're in a different pressure zone here," she told him. "Have you ever been hiking in really high mountains?"

The pug nodded, his panting lessened slightly.

"So you know how it can get really cold and sometimes your ears pop? Imagine it's a lot colder outside this high up and the air pressure is almost dangerously low. If we had windows to open we'd all be very cold and would actually have a harder time breathing."

The pug looked back out the window, leaving another smudge. "I might get sick if I could see all the way down, I suppose. I don't like heights."

Sammi nodded. "Would you like a snack?"

The pug turned and seemed to finally notice the cart. "What do you have? I am sorta hungry."

She passed him a bowl of water as she told him.

"What would you have?" he asked.

Sammi realized no one had ever asked her that before. "I don't know. Maybe the bone. It's not much, but it's the most familiar. It's not an animal bone, it's the baked kind."

"My gram used to give us those when we were good. Sitting, being tidy, asking to go out politely. I'll have one."

Sammi placed the small bone next to the bowl of water.

"Thanks, thanks for the explanation. Sorry about the window. I'm not sure if you'll have to clean it later. How long until we land?"

"I think we're about two hours out."

"Okay. I think I can make it that long."

"If you need anything, just let one of us attendants know. If you press the button there, the light above your head will go on so you won't need to bark."

The pug pushed the button and watched the light go on. He clicked it a few times and the light blinked on and off. Sammi was worried he would flicker the light for the rest of the flight.

"I won't use it unless I need it," he said.

Turbulence shook the cabin again. The pug bowed his head, his ears pressed close to his skull, his eyes large and concerned.

"It's okay," said Sammi. "Nothing to really worry about. It's like going over a bumpy road and should be done soon."

The pug nodded without looking at her.

Sammi put the cart back and looked at Rita and Shorty, who she frequently worked with. They were sitting and talking about what they were going to do at the beaches. Sammi was working a return flight before she finished for the week and wasn't staying with them this time. She almost sat down but caught the sound of a thin whine around the corner.

"I'll be in Row 35 until the Stay sign goes off if you need me," she said to Shorty.

He looked up, "Yeah, okay, hun."

In 35A sat the pug with his face in his paws. Sammi sat down.

"I remember the first time I flew," she told him calmly as the cabin rattled lightly. "I felt really alone. I also was too afraid to push the call button because my mother had always said to me, 'Sammi, no begging.' I didn't really understand the difference."

The pug cocked his head when he raised it to look at her; Sammi was pretty sure he understood.

"Where were you going?" he asked.

"I was going to visit a sister in Iowa."

"I just bought the cheapest ticket. I don't even know where to go when I land."

"Are we landing in your final destination?"

The pug nodded.

"Do you need a hotel?"

An uncomfortable moment hung in the air. "I don't have money for a hotel. I spent it all on the flight. I'm a stray." A thin whine resumed in the back of the dog's throat.

"Shh, it's okay," said Sammi, thinking how they were all strays one time or another in their short lives. "Don't worry. You're going to a nice town. If the weather's good, you can sleep on the beach for a night. Otherwise, I'd recommend a safe place on Seventh and Hawthorn. The dog who lives there should be able to help you out for a night or two while you figure things out."

“Seventh and...?”

“Hawthorn. But don’t worry. The bus from the airport lets everyone off near the park. The scent of the ocean is strong, but you should be able to pick up the scent of squirrels and fried doughnuts. Follow the doughnut smell until you reach the café. The scent of old leaves will be stronger and something like the soap that comes in the blue boxes. You’ll know it immediately. Follow that, and you’ll find Happy and his place. He’s an English sheep dog; he’s wonderful. He’ll help you out. You can tell him you know me, but it really won’t matter. He’s just that kind of dog.”

“Thanks,” said the pug, looking more at ease. “Thanks so much.”

The stay sign had dinged off while Sammi was finishing the directions. She got up.

“Don’t worry,” she said. “We’re all dogs, after all.”

The pug nodded and then sighed like he’d been holding his breath. His pink tongue lapped his nose as he looked at the bone still sitting in front of him. He ate it carefully so as not to leave any crumbs.