

Co-Pilot

By John Tavares

After his co-pilot was killed in a crash landing while transporting a patient from Fort Severn, a First Nations community on the shores of Hudson's Bay, Armstrong decided to accept a position as pilot in Thunder Bay. Flying air ambulance out of Sioux Lookout was not the experience he required. Flying commuter airline aircraft out of Thunder Bay would improve his chances of joining an Air Canada crew and flying a new 777 jet in their growing fleet in the upcoming years.

Faye expressed dismay about his latest change of mind and mood. She had been asking him about mysterious telephone calls she received in the middle of the night, with women's voices in the background, speaking Oji-Cree, calling late from what sounded like a bar. When she inquired, he hurled the cordless telephone, so she did not press with queries. After he surprised her with a move to a small town in a remote part of Northwestern Ontario, she wondered if having a baby with Armstrong, whose father had named him after the first astronaut on the moon, was such a good idea. At first, he seemed devoted, but she could not persuade him to get married. He hardly ever stayed at home anyway, eating at the local Chinese restaurant, the Tim Hortons, drinking at the Legion Hall and the bar and grille. She was even beginning to think it incredible she moved from Toronto to Sioux Lookout for this man in the first place.

"I'm not sure I like the sound of Sioux Lookout. They don't even have a Walmart."

"The Walmart is a hundred nautical miles away in Dryden. Most respectable people—"

"What are you talking about, respectable people?"

"Everybody who owns a car shops in Dryden."

"We have to drive over an hour to shop for two liters of milk and a loaf of bread?"

Armstrong stared at her intently, even coldly, as if he was on a final approach to the airport landing strip on a reservation in the middle of sleet, rain, and thunder. "There is a

grocery store in Sioux Lookout, but the prices are high and there isn't much of a selection."

"So you're trying to tell me we need to shop in Dryden for cheaper prices and better selection of groceries when you're never home to eat dinner anyway?"

Armstrong glared at her. These scowls were starting to leave her depressed. "You don't mean you're getting tired of Sioux Lookout?"

"It feels like that; I wasn't expecting when I moved here I'm be living on an Indian reservation." Immediately, Faye regretted what she said.

"It's a lively place. It has the cultural and political life of a city ten times its size." Having heard that message numerous times, she thought those words should have served as a warning, but instead they succeeded in luring her to a place she later considered God forsaken. When he returned home on a weekend, she reminded him she had just graduated from university. She still wanted to pursue a second degree in education and reminded him she had abandoned a career in teaching to be his stay at home mom. She had only to study an academic year, two semesters, at Lakehead University for her consecutive education degree. Then she would possess a license to teach at any public school in Ontario, but she put that plan on indefinite hold to move to Sioux Lookout and pursue his career and ambitions and now have his baby.

"Our baby," he interjected.

Usually around this time, he was drinking beer and then he drank straight shots of whiskey. She wondered aloud how he managed to stay sober enough to pilot an aircraft, an air ambulance. As soon as she mentioned his drinking and flying in conjunction, he grew angry, accused her of trying to ruin his aviation career. He demanded to know whom she was talking to and grabbed her by the wrists. The fierce look in his eyes and the crazed expression on his face, the intensity of his emotion and the rage she somehow provoked she found most frightening.

"That's the look of a killer, an A-10 pilot before he fires cannon and rockets into a convoy of Iraqi tanks, a B-52 bomber pilot before he drops his payload on Viet Cong around Khe

Sanh.”

Then he would start slamming the doors and windows, breaking the glass panes. After he hacked into her e-mail account and read a message she sent to her father, he smashed her computer monitor during the subsequent outburst. When she mentioned something that did not agree with him during a long distance telephone call she had with her mother she inadvertently triggered another outburst. If she had realized he was eavesdropping on the cordless extension phone while he sat on the stairwell outside the house, she wouldn't have even called her mother, but that conversation cost her desktop computer when his fist smashed the tower. She was forced to spend more money to replace the expensive electronics, but this time Faye decided she'd obtain something mobile, a tablet, in case she needed to leave in a hurry. Then he went to start a fire in the basement woodstove for warmth, after he was drinking beer and straight shots of whiskey. His efforts to start a fire caused smoke to fill the basement and rooms upstairs, so the carbon monoxide and smoke detector started chirping crazily and loudly. She could not help thinking he had filled the house with smoke deliberately and told him so, provoking more rage and smoke. Afterwards, she worried about smoke in the clothing and furniture, to say nothing of their lungs.

Later, he promised her that once the baby was born he would spend more time at home and less time flying out of town. Home was a house they bought for a tenth of the cost of a house in Toronto across the street from Stanton, a high school teacher. Armstrong promised his mother would give him ten thousand dollars for a down payment. When her mother and then her father heard she was pregnant and wanted to buy a dwelling, they offered to double that amount. When Armstrong learned Faye's parents were willing to offer twenty thousand for a down payment, his mother in Toronto must have had second thoughts, because the money she ostensibly offered for a down payment suddenly evaporated. Faye still wanted to buy the house. She loved the idea of owning her own home, even if it was in a town she did not like, she told her mother and father in separate telephone conversations, and they agreed her idea was sound.

Faye's mother offered her fifteen thousand dollars as a down payment for the house. By Monday morning, she transferred the money to her account. Then, when her father heard her mother gave her fifteen thousand dollars, he sent her over thirty thousand dollars, but he warned her not to put the house in Armstrong's name.

"It's hard to go wrong with real estate as an investment, and you're only twenty-three."

Agreeing with her father in Toronto, she made a large down payment on the house and took on a small mortgage. Armstrong claimed it was his idea to buy the house, saying he found the house through a friend and fellow pilot, who died in the air ambulance crash and who, in fact, rented and lived in the house before the accident that killed him. He insisted he arranged and brokered the sale. How could she cut him out of the deal when they were practically man and wife?

"You're not offering any money, though," Faye said. "You don't even want to get married."

"A wedding ceremony is a mere formality because for legal purposes we're man and wife already," he reassured her. He put his arm around her and patted her on the large belly. "Besides, it's our baby."

"But our baby isn't born yet."

"Are you trying to get philosophical with me? Do I have to remind you I majored in history and philosophy at university?"

Afterwards, Faye called the real estate broker and a local lawyer listed Armstrong co-owner of the house on the deed. Then she went into labor. Doctor Joni feared complications and warned she did not want to be sued, if any childbirth delivery issues arose, so Faye in prolonged and agonizing labor was flown by air ambulance, piloted by Armstrong's friends, to the regional hospital in Thunder Bay where the baby was born in neonatal intensive care unit. When Armstrong discovered the baby had cerebral palsy, he exploded on a scale she never saw before. She had to call Stanton, a neighbor, handyman, and high school shop teacher, to replace the windows he smashed in a drunken rage. He tried to blame her for the baby's

condition. The smell of whiskey and beer on his breath when he returned home at all kinds of hours of the day became stronger.

He tried to persuade her to give up her baby for adoption or surrender the infant to social services. He said he had a cousin who was mentally disabled. The boy ruined the life of the whole family, his siblings and parents, he insisted, as they tried to raise him in a normal family. It was not just as if the child got sick and suffered a prolonged illness and died one year; it was like that every year of his life in his relative's family.

His disability tore his relative's family apart and it skewed his cousins' outlook on life, he said. "The kid ruined their lives. They just could not let go. My cousin has a degree in mechanical engineering, but he's working in a group home. My other cousin earned a degree in physics, but he's affected by his retarded brother so he's also working with the mentally disabled in a group home."

"I think it's a credit to your cousins."

"The retard ruined their lives."

"That's your opinion."

Armstrong faded from family life at home and his absences became longer. Faye was no longer certain what she was doing in this town. Now she felt stuck in this remote town in northwestern Ontario. She reached out to neighbors and acquaintances she met at the grocery store and restaurant where she went for coffee and in the post office, where she picked up the mail shortly before noon each morning. She heard the other moms and single parents talk about racism and social problems, alcoholism, drug addiction, and broken families. There was an urgent need and pressing demand for social workers. She had a degree in sociology and women's studies, but it was strictly theory. She had no practical training whatsoever, she revealed to Stanton, her handyman neighbor, a high school teacher who taught automotive mechanics and welding. He taught high school students how to fix carburetors, transmissions, welding pipe, and sheet metal. Stanton recommended she take courses from the community college in social work, since she sounded like such a positive and affirming person. He said she

sounded like somebody interested in fixing the problems in the world and people, serving society. He described the distant learning center, a satellite campus of the community college, which allowed students in front of computers, microphones, and cameras to speak with their instructors in Thunder Bay.

Faye enrolled in social work courses at college. Soon she started to adopt the northern town its rural ways and culture. She embraced the lifestyle of the residents and visitors from First Nations communities in the north, who travelled by plane to Sioux Lookout for shopping and health-care at the hospital. She wore blue jean pants, a denim jacket, plaid shirts, rock t-shirts, wife-beaters, hiking boots, sneakers, sandals, baseball caps. The locals seemed to like particularly the faded Rolling Stone and AC/DC t-shirts she wore. She braided her hair and clipped her nails short and left them unbuffed and unpainted. With Sky in his cradleboard, which the aboriginals she met called a tikinagan, she took hikes in the bush around the airport and picked blueberries.

Armstrong grew more distant and aloof. He came from the bar and grille, nightclub, or the airport and complained she did not wash his laundry. She had not done his laundry because she was busy with the baby, she insisted. He slammed his fists against the washing machine, pounded, and smashed the side. When she tried to wash the laundry later that evening, she discovered the machine was broken. Then he mocked her.

“You’re worried about a fucking washing machine. You disrespect me—”

“I disrespect you?”

“Yes, you disrespect me. You’ve given birth to a blithering idiot, our relationship is in shambles, and you’re worried about an effing washing machine!”

He slammed the door of the washing machine, so it broke off the hinges and would not close properly. Later, Stanton tried to fix the washer, but said the parts could not be replaced and the hinges were broken beyond repair. She was forced to buy a brand new washing machine. Then she felt forced to seek help from a doctor, who insisted she call her Joni.

“Anxiety, depression,” Dr. Joni uttered impatiently. Gazing downwards, Dr. Joni made

shorthand notations in the medical record. “Marital relationship features aspects of coldness, remoteness—”

“Hostility. Maybe outright hostility would be a better word.”

“Hostility? What do you mean?”

“He gets so angry sometimes he spits in my face when he’s shouting or he slaps me.”

“Ok.” Dr. Joni put her finger across her lips as she held her chin, and wrote a prescription.

When Faye deciphered the handwriting and realized it indicated fluoxetine, she said, “This is Prozac. You’re giving me Prozac because my husband slaps me around?”

“You said you have a degree in sociology and women’s studies?”

“Yes, I have an honors bachelor degree with a double major from York University.”

“And you can’t figure this out on your own?”

Faye gazed at Dr. Joni with a querulous expression. “What do you mean?”

Doctor Joni referred her to a social worker. In the drugstore, while she waited for the pharmacist to fill the prescription for antidepressants, she crumpled the doctor’s note, the referral to the social worker, and checked her pulse and blood pressure at the machine with an inflatable cuff.

Then, one night, when he came home after midnight, Armstrong badgered her about work. “All you do all day is stay at home, sitting on your big fat ass in front of a book or a computer.”

Knowing they were living off the dividends of bank shares her grandfather had left her in a trust for her college education, she was outraged and continued silently washing the dishes. But his remarks about her backside hurt her more than he knew or understood, because Dr. Joni said she was underweight and suspected she suffered an eating disorder. She was beginning to realize, as she start to learn more shocking things about Armstrong every week, his taste ran to anorexic women.

“I’m looking after our child. You told me you didn’t want me to work. When I applied for

a job, you got pissed off at me. You kept telling me you wanted me to be a stay at home mom. I'm beginning to think you're just jealous."

The movement of his hand was swift and blurred, as he slapped her on the face. He had been drinking, but he was careful not to leave a bruise. She ignored the gesture, punishment, whatever it was she no longer understood.

"Tim Horton's called me about my application from six months ago. They told me I have a job baking doughnuts or brewing coffee if I want one."

"No! You'll get hit on by all the truckers and cops if you work there."

A few weeks later, as she walked down Front Street to the post office to pick up the mail, Faye thought she saw a thin aboriginal woman downtown, wearing a jacket with Lakehead University nursing on the back and the name Robin in sloping gold letters stitched over the breast pocket, over her favorite vintage Rolling Stones concert t-shirt. Later, she questioned Armstrong about her favorite Rolling Stones Still Life concert T-shirts. He flew into a rage, pushed, and kicked her out of the house.

When she went to carry the baby with her, the pain in her arm caused him to weep. She walked to the emergency department. After Dr. Joni ordered her arm X-Rayed and placed in a splint and bandaged, she asked if she was having difficulty sleeping. Faye said she was not getting any sleep. Perturbed, her brow wrinkled, Doctor Joni wrote her another prescription for alprazolam. Faye shrugged helplessly and waved the scripts around.

"Isn't this Barbra Streisand's favorite medication?"

"It might be."

"Well, if Xanax is good enough for Barbara Streisand I guess it's good enough for me."

She gazed in fear out the window of the clinic office, thinking she just spotted Armstrong's four-wheel drive pickup truck. "More pills. I think work might be the best therapy. I could use the money and a job will keep my mind off my troubles."

"The hostel is looking for staff in housekeeping and the hospital kitchen needs dietary aides." Doctor Joni continued writing in her folder and notepaper.

Faye realized that her Canadian bank stock dividends probably paid as much as any minimum wage earnings. She also had not considered who would care for Sky. "Six years of university in sociology and women's studies and it comes to this." She started to weep.

"Ok, do you want to see a mental health counsellor?"

Faye shrugged again. "I don't see what choice I have."

Doctor Joni gave her a referral to the psychologist at the mental health clinic and counselling service. She was supposed to call to make an appointment for when the psychologist made his monthly visit to town. After she researched the side effects, consulting a thick pocketbook on prescription drugs she bought at the drugstore, she decided to take the alprazolam. Fearing the side effects on her heart, she dropped the green and white Prozac capsules into the toilet and flushed. The alprazolam looked and sounded safer to her. The baby became easily irritated and agitated, so she decided to break off a piece of pill and give the Sky some Xanax in what she figured was in proportion to his body weight.

When the summer came during her second year in Sioux Lookout, Faye found solace in the municipal dock park, at the local beach on the fresh water lake, part of a blue and green maze of lakes surrounding the town. The beach at the municipal park became busy with children, babysitters, and parents on summer vacation, so she picked up the blanket, towel, and cradleboard and a squirming and wriggling Sky.

She left the town dock beach and found another beach outside town. Pulling the wagon, carrying the tikinagan, she hiked the few miles on the recreation trail alongside the highway to the second beach, just outside the town's normal boundaries, where few children went to swim. She unfolded a few beach towels, put the baby down with toys and swim gear, and studied her Confederation College social work textbooks, monographs, journal article printouts, and books on group therapy, family counselling, subjects of practical use in a messed up world.

Other times, she tried to play with the baby in the water, but he had difficulty controlling his spastic limbs while he swam. She did not feel safe swimming with him alone and no help nearby. In her last conversation with her mother, she said she had to admit Sky loved

the water, and she did not recall seeing him so ecstatic. Swimming, however awkwardly, seemed like good therapy for her infant son.

Armstrong was gone for a periods that stretched out for weeks. Meanwhile, Faye lost weight and gained muscle. Her hair grew long, tangled, stringy, and became sun bleached and her tan grew dark. She stopped cutting and trimming her nails and shaving the hair from beneath her underarms and on her legs. The baby grew cherubic and emanated happiness. She managed to study for her social work courses with her textbooks and computer tablet and finished several term papers in her notebooks and on her laptop at the beach. By midterm of the summer semester, with the tall red and white pines in the background, the lake in the foreground, Faye did most of her colleges studies on the sandy beach along the lake, with Sky at her side, and she was an A+ student at midterm.

Then she went to the post office one day and found a letter from Armstrong. She actually waited until she had hiked to the beach with Sky in a wagon with his cradleboard and had settled on the beach blanket with blueberry and pomegranate juice. At first, she believed the letter might actually bear good news. She almost thought he might have done something rash and exciting like pay down the mortgage. The letter was rather stiff and formal. He wrote her he had found an apartment in Thunder Bay with his new girlfriend, an aboriginal, who had introduced him to the delights of pemmican, bannock, and moose meat. He had the time of his life when he attended the potlatch and powwow on the reserve. He wrote that in a year he'd be training in flight simulators to fly 777's for Air Canada out of Pearson Airport. But he wouldn't be returning to Sioux Lookout, even though his girlfriend expected to complete her practicum at Sioux Lookout hospital, the Meno Ya Win Health Centre, as part of her registered nurse's training. Robin was just completing her degree in nursing at Lakehead University.

Then he went into detailed length about his girlfriend, a member of the North Spirit Lake First Nations band, the first member of her family and clan to obtain a college education.

"So am I, Armstrong, so am I. I'm the first person to obtain a university degree in my family, so am I," she whispered as she read the handwritten letter.

She realized his girlfriend was putting her education to good use; she was pursuing a bachelor of science in nursing, so she would be a gainfully employed professional, expecting to earn seventy thousand dollars a year in her first year of work. She realized these details about his girlfriend were the parts that hurt the most. His girlfriend was a professional. She had given up a potential career in education and had not gone to teacher's college she was scheduled to attend to have his baby, which he rejected.

Then it dawned on her: she did not recognize the neat handwriting, although that was his signature, and she knew why. She recalled Armstrong could not write this clearly and articulately, simply because he did not have the patience to apply his personal emotions and thoughts to paper, unless he was entering the cold, dry mechanical details of an aircraft check and flight plan in his technical log. She confidently concluded he simply did not write the letter, although he may have expressed some of the thoughts and sentiments, simply because he was not the type to write a personal letter. His new girlfriend had written the letter for him; it was the sensible thing to do. If he told her in person, there would have been a confrontation. The revelation would have triggered a huge temperamental outburst from him and he would have gotten physical. That only deepened her sense of loss and sorrow. She started a little campfire on the beach, which was empty, abandoned, with everybody attending the music festival in town. She tore and shredded the letter to bits and pieces and burned the confetti. Then she tore the pages of her notes and the pages of her textbooks from their bindings and heavy covers and lit the crumpled pages. She emptied her handbag, sorted through the contents, and burned most of it on the campfire.

She even tossed the leather handbag on the campfire and the smell of the hide burning reminded her of concentration camps and death. She looked at her baby, happy and cherubic, even in his clumsiness and spasticity. This baby with the Eurasian eyes, stiff muscles, and tremors was hers, hers, alone. He seemed so happy, which broke her heart because all she could feel was pain and sorrow.

Then she stuck a whole peach tablet of alprazolam in Sky's mouth, whereas, in the past,

she had only given him a quarter at most. She gave him a sip of pomegranate juice and then another peach tablet. She ground up a third tablet in his blueberry pudding, which she slowly fed him with a plastic teaspoon. Then she took another .05 mg alprazolam tablet. She dropped the plastic translucent pill bottle, spilling jagged peach tablets on the beach. She picked the tablets from the shoreline, blew away the sand and dirt from the peach pills, and took two, four, six, eight, ten, and then a total of twelve half-milligram tablets. Usually by the time the sunset she had already swum with Sky and was preparing for the hike, pulling along the wagon, with Sky in his tikinagan or riding, back home. This evening she tossed her sandals into the dying campfire, loaded Sky into his tikinagan, and stepped into the water on the shore. With him laughing gleefully on her back in the cradleboard, she waded further from the beach and deeper into the lake, as the mist rose from the smooth undulating ripples of waves. The summer sun started to dip below the horizon of rock outcrops and ridges and the skyline of pine and spruce trees, as Faye splashed and Sky giggled.

Later, Stanton hiked down the sandy shoreline to bath, swim, and cool off from the stifling summer heat and humidity he had experienced working in his garage, where he repaired a lawn mower engine. He wanted to play fetch with his pet dog. Stanton tossed the stick of cedar driftwood and when it splashed he spotted the tikinagan. The only sign left was the cradleboard floating on the calm surface of Pelican Lake, lit by the fireball of the setting sun.

The End

John Tavares bio: My previous publications include short stories published in a number of literary journals: one short fiction published in Blood & Aphorisms; one in chapbook by Plowman Press; one in Green's Magazine; one in Filling Station; two in Whetstone; two in Broken Pencil; one in Tessera; one in Windsor Review; three in Paperplates; one in The Write Place at the Write Time; three in The Maple Tree Literary Supplement; two in The Writing Disorder; one in Gertrude; one in Turk's Head Review; one in Outside In Literary & Travel Magazine; one in Bareback Magazine; one in Rampike; two in Crab Fat Literary Magazine; one in The Round Up Writer's Zine; one in The Acentos Review; one in Gravel; one in the Brasilia Review; one in Sediments Literary Arts-Journals; one in The Gambler. Also, I had about a dozen short stories as well as some pieces of creative nonfiction published in The Siren, then Centennial

Writing Raw

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College's student newspaper. Following journalism studies, I had articles and features published in East York Observer, East York Times, Beaches Town Crier, The East Toronto Advocate, Our Toronto as well as community and trade newspapers such as York University's Excalibur and Hospital News, where I interned as an editorial assistant. I broadcast a set of my short stories as a community radio broadcaster for CBL5/CBQW in Sioux Lookout one summer. I have recently written a novel and am an avid photographer.