



A notice appears in the paper that Trans World Airlines will be holding interviews at Idlewild Airport. I read it over and over. Wouldn't this be a dream come true, but what are the odds of getting an interview? Forget the odds, just show up.

Not knowing how to get to Idlewild Airport, I take the easy way out and ask my father if he would drive me or let me borrow the car. This innocent request results in my parents having a rare disagreement, not what you would call a no-holds-barred, plates-flying disagreement, but a sharp difference of opinion.

Don't take her out, Ed, my mom says. If you do, I'm warning you she's going to get that job and then what?

What do you mean *and then what?*

I mean they could send you anywhere.

Not wanting to hurt her feelings, I bite my tongue, knowing such a scenario would be an answer to this maiden's prayers.

They could send you to California if they wanted to.

What's wrong with California? I reply, as images of cable cars notching their way up Nob Hill and Hollywood starlets being discovered at soda fountains come to mind.

A single woman living on her own in California?

She sounds like a teacher who realizes that despite her best efforts the student has missed the point. Acting blasé, I downplay any possibility of California.

California? Fat chance, everyone wants to go to California. However, if you want to fly International to Paris, Rome, or Madrid, you have to fly out of New York.

Paris? Why would you want to go to Paris?

You're not serious. Who wouldn't want to go to Paris or travel the world? I'd like to go to Ireland and kiss the Blarney Stone. Climb the Eiffel Tower and see all of Paris at my feet. Visit Rome and see the Vatican and walk the Forum of the Caesars in the moonlight.

Are you saying you think it's all right for a single woman to travel the world by herself?

Mom, let me explain something—airline hostesses do not travel the world alone. They're part of a crew. As for what people will think, I think they'll be jealous. Being an airline hostess has to be one of the best jobs in the world. I've been told women passengers come on board carrying fur coats, with stone martens draped around their necks. That you meet celebrities—actors and actresses, politicians and VIPs—and you're paid for doing it. I'd do the job free, if they'd let me.

Being a stewardess is no job for a decent girl.

My mom has a way of making the word *stewardess* sound like a euphemism for prostitute. Switching tactics, I toss out an enticement, telling her that TWA gives employees and family members free travel passes. Naturally, she, the happy homemaker, is not interested in traveling.

You're planning to leave home, is that what this is all about?

No, of course not, I fib, even though it's all I can think of. At this point, my father comes in from the living room asking: When are the interviews?

Saturday.

I'm off Saturday, I'll take you out.

What happened? I'll bet he's packed for Hawaii—white anklets, black shoes, and a floral print shirt.

WE ARRIVE early at Idlewild Airport, which takes its name from the former Idlewild Golf Course. A place long on grass and short on blacktop, there are millions of birds wintering over in the marshes. We zip past the main terminal, New York International Air, where the multi-colored flags of a dozen countries are flapping in a breeze, while out on the tarmac stand the propeller-driven planes belonging to Air France, Alitalia, and Air Jordan. Although early in the day, a dozen people—including two boys on bikes—crowd the viewing stand, to watch the planes taking off and landing. You can feel the excitement in the air and see it in the architecture—a new age of aviation is dawning. At the Pan-American Terminal, a circular building with a flat-as-a-pancake roof, the planes

park with their black noses touching the building. Like birds around a feeder. Further along, a billboard at a huge demolition zone indicates that this is the future home of the TWA Flight Center, designed by Eero Saarinen.

Do you think Eero Saarinen is a man or a woman? Look at *that*, I say, pointing to a sketch of the proposed terminal—it looks like a giant prehistoric bird in flight.

The interviews take place in a redbrick industrial building in the boondocks. I ask my father to come back around four, thinking I should know by then whether or not I have the job.

In a large reception area on the ground floor, some forty or fifty young women—down from Maine and Massachusetts, up from Texas and Alabama, in from Pennsylvania and New Jersey—mill about making conversation. Spirits are flying high, each hoping to be crowned Miss Congeniality. By nine-thirty, there is a brief welcome and an overview of what we should expect; specifically that each of us will have four interviews throughout the course of the day.

Around three-thirty in the afternoon, I'm called into the office of a C. E. McBride Jr. for my fourth and final interview. An attractive, slightly rotund, middle-aged man rises as I enter. From the scuttlebutt in the outer room, I already know he's the Supervisor of Employment for TWA flight personnel and has come from Kansas City to oversee the interviews. I also know that when you enter his office, he wants you to walk to a corner and turn around, so he can check out your legs. Thick ankles? Thanks for coming, nice to meet you. Piano legs? Take

them with you when you leave, please. Heavy thighs? Sorry to have put you to the trouble.

After the preliminaries—Ipana smile, Katy Gibbs handshake—I'm no sooner seated when he asks: Aren't you talking to the other young ladies?

Bells clang, sirens whistle, lights flash: If he suspects I'm not talking to the other applicants, wouldn't that be a black mark against my name? Scribble-scribble: Candidate shows poor social skills.

Yes, I am talking with them, but why do you ask? I say, my hand fluttering from lap to throat, a gesture that could vaguely be interpreted as *how could you think such a thing of me?*

Because you're the first one to come through that door in the last hour who hasn't walked to the corner and turned around—without my asking them to do so. The chin is tucked, the eyes amused.

Suspecting this to be an icebreaker, I play along, telegraphing him a megawatt smile, saying, I was hoping you'd forget. My knees are a bit shaky, so if it's all right with you, I'll stay where I am. He's having none of that.

Do me a favor, walk to the corner.

At which I trot my limousine legs—Aunt Dot says all the Bracht girls have the ankles of thoroughbreds—to the corner to do a full turn.

Could you raise your skirt a bit?

Checking to see how much leg I'm showing, not wanting to look the hussy, I wait for a reaction, but after no more than a cursory glance, he continues thumbing through a folder,

presumably one with my name on it, motioning for me to take a seat.

Miss Miller says you're taking classes at Fordham—

My heart goes limp, dies a little when he says Miss Miller. *Does he mean Miss Mueller? is this a ploy, a deliberate mispronunciation to see what I'll say? wouldn't the Supervisor of Employment for In-Flight Personnel know the names of the other interviewers? if I don't say something, will he think me a dimwit incapable of remembering passengers' names? if I correct him, will he think me lacking in the social graces essential for a TWA hostesses? Not sure how to play this game, I invoke Rule Number One: Don't be a Jerk. Mum's the word.*

—at night. How do you like Fordham?

I *love* Fordham—the classes are great, all the instructors brilliant and the student organizations . . .

You mean sororities and fraternities?

Oh, no. Not at Fordham. Our extracurricular groups are the Inter-Racial Organization and the Student Council for Evening Students.

Ah, yes, and I see here you've had three years of a foreign language.

Well, actually, I've had six—three years of Latin, three years of Spanish—but I don't know if Latin counts, since no one speaks it anymore. What do *you* think?

He tilts back in a swivel chair saying: I think it counts, but I'm wondering how you're going to continue taking classes while flying for TWA. Flying's not a nine-to-five job.

Not wanting to bore him with the dishwater dull details of my current nine to five, I smile saying:

That's exactly what I'd love about flying. I once read that the world is like a giant encyclopedia, but in order to read it, you have to travel. I like that, don't you? He does.

What's unsettling is how within minutes of meeting me he's zeroed in on my biggest worry: If I leave Fordham before getting my degree, will I go back and finish? I can't imagine a time when I'd quit flying to go back to living at home, working at the phone company and taking classes at night. Accumulating credits at night is as endless and exhausting as shoveling snow in a blizzard. What's more, should I leave Fordham, I'll never hear the end of it from my father. On the other hand, should I stay the course, I'll be the first in my family to graduate college. All things considered, if Mr McBride offers me the job, I'm going to take it.

The Telephone Company's paying you more than we're prepared to offer at this time.

Mr McBride, for me flying with TWA isn't about the money. I've wanted to be an airline hostess for as long as I can remember, as far back as elementary school. In fact, in my Graduation Day autograph album, there was a page with all these questions: who is your favorite actor? favorite actress? favorite film? what will be your future occupation? On that line, I wrote stewardess. Did you have those albums? Ours were navy blue leather with pastel pages in about as many colors as Howard Johnson's has ice-cream flavors.

And how many might that be? he says, the bushy eyebrows only half-hiding the merriment in the eyes.

Twenty-eight, I say, my face brightening in all the right places, tiny dimples punctuating my cheeks. Giving me an *aw-shucks* grin, he wonders aloud whatever happened to his album.

Wouldn't it be incredible, I say, if where it said future occupation, you had written, Supervisor of In-Flight Personnel for TWA?

He gives a chuckle, saying *engineer* would have been more like it. Then—too soon, too soon—time's up. He's arranging his papers, capping his fountain pen. *Don't just sit there—say something, do something, ask a question. The longer the interview, the more time you have to make a good impression.*

Well, he says, drawing out his words: I . . . think . . . that . . . we've . . . covered . . . everything. I want to thank you for coming in. It was a pleasure meeting you, Miss Bracht—firm handshake, good eye contact—but I should tell you we won't be making any decisions for at least a week or two. My colleagues and I need time to put our heads together. Have you any questions for me?

In a spilt second, I yank my ego out of my pocket and ask how many hostesses he intends to hire.

That's a good question, but hard to answer, he says pushing back from the desk. We don't have a specific number in mind. We're simply looking for young women who would make great TWA hostesses. On average, we interview forty applicants to fill one position.



One in forty? I repeat, as deflated as a punctured balloon.

We want to get it right, he continues. The way we see it, our hostesses are on the front lines with our passengers. We think of them as our secret weapon—the face of TWA.

That phrase *the face of TWA* negotiates the switchbacks of my brain, triggering thoughts of a classmate at PS #14, who had been a runner-up in a Miss Rheingold contest and went on to be *the face of Revlon* on the Arthur Godfrey Show. Perhaps noticing I'm growing paler at his every word, adding a wink, he says:

As you might expect, my job's easier than it was years ago. In the early days of aviation, a young woman had to be a registered nurse to become a hostess.

A nurse? why was that?

The planes weren't pressurized. Airsickness was a big problem. And people weren't accustomed to flying, weren't used to the sensation of being airborne. I'm told they'd interview one hundred before hiring one ambassador for TWA.

A TWA ambassador? This is getting better and better, but if his congenial manner is meant to be reassuring, I'm not reassured. My heart's flip-flopping like a mullet out of water. Having canvassed the competition, I suspect he'll go with the Georgia Peach from Cedar Creek, the one who goes around saying ya'll this and ya'll that. Or the leggy blonde from Texas—*five foot nine? five foot ten?*—who tells everyone she's from Big D. Big D? Big deal. Most people don't know what the heck she's talking about.

Wiping my sweaty palms on a tight-fitting pencil skirt

riding above my knees, my mind races to find something to add that might improve my chances, something other than my vital statistics: five feet five-and-one-half inches, one hundred and twenty-four pounds, thirty-five/twenty-four/thirty-five, with seven-and-a-half-inch ankles, and twelve-inch calves. What's he scribbling? Did he just cross my name off the list? My feet don't feel like they're my own. Making a herculean effort, I push myself up and out of the chair to bow geisha-like out of the office, hoping he doesn't detect the free-floating anxiety in a forced smile. Pausing in the doorway, I hold up two crossed fingers and, giving a discernible wink, say:

I'll keep my fingers crossed until I hear from you, Mr McBride.

You do that, young lady, he says with a broad smile.

Say good night, Gracie. Exit left.

MY FATHER has the car positioned for a quick getaway, a fuzzy grey spume pouring from the exhaust. The man is like a Swiss watch, never late. But he's also like a soufflé in that he doesn't like to be kept waiting.

Waiting long, Dad?

Nah, ten or fifteen minutes. You get the job? he says, quick-checking the side mirror before making an illegal U-turn out of the parking lot onto Ocean Boulevard. With his left hand barely grazing the wheel, he roots around with his right for a pack of cigarettes, taps the pack on the dashboard in such a way that a single cigarette pops up—not two or three,

just one—which he grabs between his lips. He then takes a matchbook from behind the visor, opens the cover with a flick of a finger, and bends the matchstick into a ninety-degree angle, rubbing the chemically coated tip against the striker, and lighting up. It's a deft maneuver executed with the skill of a surgeon. I don't understand why he smokes Chesterfields, when everyone knows that more doctors smoke Camels than any other brand.

Did I get the job? That's what I'd like to know, but they don't tell you, not for a week or two. Get this, they take one in forty applicants. How about those odds?

He's noncommittal, offering little more than *you'll see*. Once in a while it would be nice to hear a reassuring word, something more than *you'll see*. But sweet talking is not his style. Maybe it's that he doesn't want me to get my hopes up, but my hopes have been sky-high ever since I saw the notice.

You know, Daddy, some of the girls were so pretty, and a number of them had this way of talkin' all sweet and Southern—as if each word went into a honey pot before it came out of their mouths.

You might say that this would be a perfect opportunity for my father to say he's sure I'm as pretty as any of these Southern gals, but there are no such affirmations coming from behind the wheel.

You know, Dad, that way of talkin' sweet and sugary sounds phony. Of course, what I think doesn't matter a bit, it's what Mr McBride thinks that counts, right? No comment.

And, get this, a number of girls were college *graduates*.

Let me ask you, if you could hire someone who's been to college or someone who hasn't, who would you choose?

Knowing he finds any mention of college, no matter how inconsequential or off-the-cuff, provocative, I drop it. A ride's a ride. Getting something out of him is like nailing jelly to a tree. Off in the eastern sky, I watch a pair of silver wings fading out of sight.

A LETTER arrives from TWA offering me a job. I can't believe they want me and not the leggy blonde from Big-D or the sweet young thing from Cedar Creek. To show they mean what they say, they've included a round trip ticket to Kansas City. The next hostess training class will start Monday, July 6, if that's convenient. If that's convenient? Let me check my calendar.

The letter goes on to say that if I have any questions, be sure to give them a call. Included is a full-color booklet with pictures of TWA hostesses in form-fitting green uniforms, more sage than shamrock:

*Once you have completed training, you will be meeting and greeting stage and screen stars, key figures in the news, prominent people in government, and noteworthy men and women from many nations and all walks of life.*

I can hardly breathe—it's as if I've run a mile after a bus. Where's Kansas City?

On a day that would be perfect from start to finish, another letter arrives. This from the manager of the Skyline

Inn on Route 4, Box 530, in Parkville, Missouri, who writes to give us an overview of what we can expect during our month of training in Kansas City. He wants us to feel at home, suggests we think of his address as our own. (Much obliged!) At the Skyline Inn, rooms will be assigned, four girls to a room, on a first-come basis at the rate of \$15 per week, with extra days charged at \$2.15 per day. When we receive our first paycheck—they're paying us during training?—we need to clear our accounts. Local transportation is included, and they have a bus and a station wagon available to take us to the airport, to church on Sundays, or to go shopping after class. Should we decide to call a cab, we must pay for it ourselves. Fair enough.

The letter points out that we need to make our beds each morning—doesn't everyone? That fresh towels and washcloths are furnished daily, sheets and pillowcases weekly when the maid comes in to clean the apartment. A maid? Hannah Gruen, at last. It goes on to say that boys are not allowed in the rooms, but not knowing a soul west of Jersey City, I couldn't care less. Management explains they're not policemen, but they have a contractual responsibility with TWA to see we live in accordance with the company's rules and regulations:

*We are not a bit narrow-minded. We have worked with TWA hostesses for many years, and we think we can understand almost any problem you may have — give us a try.*

This might be the first time that anyone has offered to help me with anything. My mom's shocked at the prospect of my going with TWA, but my dad's okay with the idea. If only I

could refrigerate this moment, keep it fresh for a month or two. When I tell Nana the news, she thinks it's positively grand.

Guess what, Nana? You can put your dress patterns away. Oleg Cassini will be making my TWA uniform.

THE FLIGHT to Kansas City on a four engine propeller-driven Constellation—a Lockheed 0-49—is a white-knuckle affair. Understandably so, as this is my first flight. At home, everyone was so excited about my going to Kansas City, they all piled into the car to drive out to La Guardia Airport to see me off. No one we know has ever been on a plane. Waiting to board, the sight of the plane on the tarmac, with the ground crew rolling out the steps—Trans World Airlines in bold red letters running the length of the fuselage—is exhilarating.

Seated at a window not unlike a porthole with tiebacks, I read everything in the seat pocket, including the fine print on a white barf bag. When a ground employee gives the all clear, the captain backs us slowly away from the gate and the Connie, as graceful as a ballerina, pirouettes on the tarmac.

Good morning, Ladies and Gentlemen. We would like to welcome you on board TWA's Flight #1 from New York's La Guardia Airport to Kansas City, Missouri. Our flying time today will be . . . Our hostesses in the cabin are . . . Please be sure to let us know if there's anything we can do to make your flight more pleasurable.

Pinch me, I must be dreaming. To think that in four weeks, the voice coming over the intercom could be mine. I sit with fingers crossed, not trusting in my good fortune, hoping that nothing—a meteorological event, a mechanical glitch, my father tearing across the tarmac—will interfere with take-off. After four desk-bound years at the telephone company, the road under my feet is moving. And today is Saturday, July 4th, Independence Day.

Taxiing past the air traffic control tower, we make a wide turn at the far end of the runway and, with propellers whirring and engines groaning, we tear down the runway—like a pebble from a slingshot—until the nose of the plane comes up, up, up and the ground begins to pull away. Clenching the skinny armrests for dear life, I sit immobilized, afraid to blink for fear of falling out of the plane.

We fly low over a hot July day. Over the Grand Central and Van Wyck parkways where traffic is flowing east to the beaches. Over a baseball diamond where a neighborhood game is in progress. Over the narrow streets of Whitestone, all the boxy houses lined up like dominoes. Within minutes, the captain dips a wing bringing us south, passing the Triborough Bridge, the United Nations—a green-tinted slab of glass and steel on the East River—and the Chrysler Building with its crown shimmering in the morning light. Beside myself with happiness, I let go of the armrests long enough to give myself a hug.

Wall Street flies by under the wings. As do the storage tanks, so many hatboxes on a shelf, over at Standard Oil in

Bayonne, New Jersey. The plane glides in and out of the clouds, playing an aerial game of hide-and-seek. Seeing the city as it might appear to a red-tailed hawk is nothing if not enchanting. Then it all comes rushing back—a child of nine or ten, shielding her eyes from the sun, trying to make out a plane droning overhead, longing to go along. It's a dream come true.

My parents have made it clear they expect me to return home when training's over. My dad says he's going to check out some second-hand cars, to make it easier for me to go back and forth to the airport. I haven't told them, but I have other plans.







**K**ansas City. The hostess-training program leaves nothing to chance. On Monday, July 6, we begin learning the history of the company; most significantly, that Howard Hughes owns a full 77 percent of TWA. Throughout the week, we study the worldwide routes, memorize fifty airport codes, and familiarize ourselves with the various configurations of the planes in the fleet. Starting with a two-engine Martin 404—a noisy bugger, the pilots say, but forgiving—carrying no more than forty passengers, all of whom board and deplane through a loading ramp in the tail.

Excuse me, how does that work?

We practice emergency procedures—Shoes off, ladies, jump feet first into that chute—on inflatable chutes and run through wet ditching procedures in dry landlocked Kansas City. That day, I wore a sign reading *clergyman*, while others had signs reading *military man* or *baby*. I love Kansas City, love TWA. I've sent Skyline Inn postcards to just about every-

one I know—especially to friends back at the phone company. It will probably take a month for the postcard to catch up with Nick at sea.

Everything's great about Kansas City—no nine-to-five drudgery by day, no arguments at home by night. Everything suits me—even sharing a smallish motel room with three other trainees. I'm laughing louder, smiling more—without a care in the world. Other than passing the course, that is. Today, for the first time since I've arrived, Veronica came to mind. I found myself wondering what she'd think about my having such a glamorous job. A year from now, she would have been eligible for a free pass to Ireland—a chance to see Spanish Point, the seaside village in County Clare on the west coast of Ireland where her parents came from. For the first time, I was thinking about what I could do for her, not what she could do for me.

TWA is big on branding, with no regulation left unwritten. A hostess must be between 5'2 and 5'8, weigh between 105 and 135 pounds, and have 20/20 eyesight. Weight checks are mandatory, and we have to stay within 5 pounds of our hiring weight, or be taken off the line—with separation from the company a real possibility. When it comes to the minor stuff, girdles are mandatory (no jiggling in the aisles) as is *Fire & Ice*, a bright red lipstick with cool blue undertones thought to make your teeth a whiter shade of white. That said, over at Pan American, *Persian Melon* rules the skies.

The week before graduation, we're treated to hairstyles having little to do with any personal preferences—the main

consideration being that the hair should not touch the collar and should look becoming with the hat. Do we flinch, do we complain? Not at all. We're flying high—tell us more.

On another day, we troop into a blistering-white room, one mirrored from the countertops to the ceiling, where we perch on white stools to learn the art of applying makeup. Particularly that of applying a lighter shade under the eyes to mask any tiredness or shadows resulting from jet lag. Jet lag? Most importantly, we're not to smoke in uniform or date the passengers. As for marriage, it's grounds for dismissal.

Who wants to get married? All I want to be is a TWA ambassador and travel the world. As far back as I can remember, I've loved being away from home, loved being on the road. Racing clouds in the high Adirondacks. Counting blades of grass in the Finger Lakes. Sunning to a lobster-red at the Jersey Shore.

Remember ladies, says our instructor Miss Massey, we're not selling sex, only the sizzle.

When graduation day rolls around, we're as ecstatic as a roomful of teenyboppers. Where are you *going*? Where are *you* going? By tomorrow, some of us will be winging it to the impossibly glamorous city of San Francisco, living on Nob Hill and riding cable cars to the Buena Vista Café for the best Irish coffee in town. Others will be heading to sunshiny LA, the City of Angels, where there's a chicken in every pot, two cars in every garage, and a swimming pool in every backyard. And those of us with our sights set on New York, will be apartment hunting in Woodside or Jackson Heights, neighborhoods

home to hundreds of handsome flight engineers and pilots. Nothing beats a man in uniform.

Or a woman when outfitted by Oleg Cassini in a waist-cinching uniform meant to give each of us an hourglass figure. Before we can slip into the uniform, we need to buy it. The two-piece jade-green gabardine uniform for spring and summer is a steal at \$51.75. As is the mocha-brown version for fall and winter at \$52.75. Other items include a topcoat with a liner, monogrammed white blouse slips, a raincoat, a clear plastic cap, a scarf, a leather purse, and a baggage tag. All of which comes to \$230.00, which we can pay in one lump sum by check or have deducted from our paychecks. I opt for the latter.

Don't we look fabulous? There must be an unwritten rule that hostesses look fresh and inviting at all times and that male crewmembers look dashing and heroic. Why not? Travel is our business.

At the graduation day ceremony, our instructors pin silver wings to our hats. Celebratory bouquets arrive for some, congratulatory messages for others. A friend receives a Western Union telegram: *Best wishes on receiving your wings and on the fulfillment of your fondest hopes. God bless you. Love, Dad and Mother and the boys.* Not a singing telegram, mind you, but a telegram even so. Late in the day, I call home to say I've been assigned to La Guardia and swallowing hard—Buck up, girl!—I break the news that I'm not coming home—not right away, not exactly—that I'm going to be sharing an apartment close-by the airport with three other hostesses.

Over the wires, I detect my mom's dismay, hear my father saying something or other in the background.

Your father wants you to come home before making any decision about renting an apartment. He's found you a good hardly used second-hand car.

My father once said: As long as you're living under my roof, you'll do as I say. I haven't forgotten that. Well, now I'm not. I explain to my mom that I'll be flying reserve for months and can't very well do that from Yonkers. That as soon as we find an apartment, I'll be home to collect my things. The disbelief coming across the wires is palpable.

Not wanting to hurt my parents' feelings, I don't mention how elated I am at the prospect of striking out on my own. TWA has been the best thing that's ever happened to me. Here I am, one-in-forty—the sweetheart of Sigma Chi.

Trying a diversionary tactic, I ask: Did Eddie and Kenny get the postcards I sent? Did a letter come from Nick?

