

It's a Hard Rain

AIRLINE HONCHO

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Air Arcadia CEO Confident

OTTAWA - Boy Wonder, CEO of Air Arcadia, today responded to questions concerning the government's review of the 'pension holiday' the company has been enjoying during its merger with the former Arcadian Airlines.

"Our pension fund is in excellent shape," Mr. Wonder affirmed. "I am confident the regulator's investigation will confirm, and that the government report will reflect, my confidence in our funding of future obligations."

Cameron

NEWLY SPAWNED RIVERS are coursing down Vancouver streets, overwhelming the drains and finding their way across roads and over curbs. Cameron is waiting for the light at Davie and Granville, vainly trying to stay dry under a canopy that isn't a canopy. The

light changes. He runs the last block to the Swamp Pub.

He pushes in through the door and stands there, dripping and peering around the room.

“Sir, I’m afraid we’ve had to close these tables by the window.”

She has reddish hair and freckles. Standing between the brass rails of the waitress station, she points at the water running down the inside of the window and dripping onto the tables and the floor.

“Would you like a seat at the bar?”

Speakers over the bar play celtic music. It is loud enough to almost cover the noise of the water dripping from the window wall and from Cameron himself. Wet, wet as the sea, the dripping coasts. The music is coastal, too, our Maritime music, Arcadia’s own Bluegrass, singing of fishing and family and being broken by work, the work we can’t do without.

“Or up there if you prefer . . .”

She is a Maritimer, if Cameron has the accent right. She has come three thousand miles from home to find the same salt air and soaking rain.

She gestures up the steps to the right of the bar.

“Cameron! Over here!”

“Rod!”

Cameron has to recover his balance as he looks up, disoriented by Rod’s voice. It is the same voice he heard when they met, thirty years ago. Memories flood his thoughts. He stares up the steps at Rod’s table.

There’s Rod, who he met at St. Hubert before they joined Air Arcadia. And Jean-Luc, who was a student pilot there, a kid earning money by packing groceries at Steinberg’s.

Thirty years have slipped by. A year from now Cameron will be

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sixty and that will be it. Retirement. His career over.

He walks up the three steps. Rod gets up with an easy grace and walks around the table to embrace him.

“Cam! Glad you’re here. Hey, where’s your F/O? What’s the matter – did you piss him off?”

Everyone laughs except the third pilot at the table. Cameron tries not to struggle for the name.

“Yeah, who you wit’?” asks Jean-Luc.

“Trefor. He’s up visiting his Dad. Somewhere on Horseshoe Bay. Didn’t sound too happy about it, but he hasn’t been up there this month and he’s had three layovers here.”

Rod finishes pouring a glass for Cameron.

“They’re separated, right?”

“Tref’s parents? Yep. Long time.”

“Ouais. C’est la mode. Separate, divorce.” Jean-Luc raises an eyebrow, presumably to indicate disgust. “Mes parents n’ont jamais eu de chance, hostie.”

“How do you mean?”

It is the third pilot, the First Officer. The name pops into Cameron’s head. *Courtley*.

“Mon père ‘e drop dead, tabarnac. L’avait quarante-six ans.”

“Oh, I’m sorry . . .”

“C’est normal, hostie. ‘E work too ‘ard. Dey don giv ‘im no fuckin’ respect. L’a crevé son coeur.”

“Sorry . . .”

“C’est ma mère qui nous élevait. Me and de five h’odder.”

“You were six kids?”

Jean-Luc laughs.

“Garde-donc, Courtley. C’était normal dans ce temps-là.” He looks around the table with a little smile. “Beside, now it me gonna get divorce.”

Rod and Cameron glance at each other and back to Jean-Luc.

“No!”

Jean-Luc laughs again.

“Ouais. She find out.”

They are aware of a loud noise at the entrance. Heads turn. Freckles and a dark-haired girl are at the waitress station at the bar, staring at the door.

“. . . sure know how to make a guy feel at home. Jesus! And not just like I’m back east, I’m at sea and it’s a rough fuckin’ day! Beer! You got any beer?”

Cameron can see Freckles is smiling broadly. A dark-haired waitress has joined her. Both girls are edging closer, giggling.

“Must be the Swamp or I’m dreaming – where else would there be two such beautiful girls at the bar? Am I in love or is it just the music?”

Like Bird of Prey and Cubby and Cicero before him, Bad Dog has become a legend.

The girls gesture at an empty seat at the bar beside them. The legend lurches, and like a drowning man grabs one of the brass rails.

“Beer,” he says. “Bring me beer.”

A strong gust rattles the windows on the side street, calling attention to the wet tables and the water on the floor. Bad Dog gazes in mock horror.

“You’re mermaids! Mermaids of the Swamp!”

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Of average height and sturdy build, he is not handsome but he radiates force and confidence. More than once the military haircut and the blustering facade have made Cameron think of an officer trying to pass as a Marine Drill Sergeant.

“Shit! Just when I find love in the Swamp.”

Bad Dog’s piercing yellow eyes have found Cameron’s table. He turns back to the girls.

“Sorry, ladies. I see my buddies are here.”

Bad Dog bounds up the steps.

“Geez, I’m glad you guys are here to save me. I think I was falling in lust. O, mon hostie de tabarnac – Jean-Luc – c’est-tu possible?”

He waves dismissively at the pitcher of beer on the table.

“What’re you guys, a frikkin’ tea party? Rod? Cameron? Bloody Anglophones, stands to reason . . . but Courtley – hostie – t’aurais dû mieux soigner ton commando, tabarnac . . .”

The girls are still watching Bad Dog with fascination. He turns to them and holds his right hand aloft with two fingers up, waving them in a circle.

“Bring on the beer!”

He pulls up a chair and sits down.

“Where’re you in from? asks Rod.

The answer is a few seconds in coming. Bad Dog has been pouring his first beer from the pitcher already on the table. He chugs it and burps loudly.

“London. Flying with a fuckin’ Blue guy. Tried to kill me.”

He pours himself another beer and drinks half of it at a gulp.

“I ditched him.”

Bad Dog is distracted by Freckles coming up the stairs. She is

blushing. He watches with appreciation as she re-arranges the table to make room for two more pitchers of beer. Rod waits until Freckles starts back downstairs to the bar.

“You ditched him?”

Bad Dog inclines his head and puts on a treble voice.

“You going out for supper, Bad?”

It is as if he has a puppet on each hand. He turns back to the Bad Dog puppet and his own voice.

“Oh, I dunno, pretty tired, going to take a nap first. Maybe I’ll see you.”

He grimaces.

“Nap – are you kidding? After twelve hours in a fuckin’ airplane? First priority: dump. A good dump. A mega-dump. I just can’t shit right until I re-pressurize, and then . . .”

He chugs the rest of his second pint.

“Beer.”

He puts it down.

“It’s good we got a party going here. Take my mind off all the crap.”

“So what did this Blue guy do?” asks Rod.

Baddy jerks forward.

“Fuck, man, it’s more what he didn’t do. To be fair, it could happen to anyone, you’re so fuckin’ tired and punchy after all night over the Atlantic. London gives us a hold and they want 190 knots . . . ennaway, I’m waiting for him to call for flap but he thinks he’s light or some shit. Thank God he gets the 190 straight and level, ‘cause we’re about 12 degrees nose up . . .”

Bad Dog holds up his right hand with thumb and forefinger almost

touching.

“... and we're that far from the shaker, I swear to God – a fuckin' cunt hair away, and so I say – Mr. Diplomacy here, all nice and sweet: Would you like some flap, Jim? Might make the attitude a bit more comfortable.”

Bad Dog makes a face.

“What I didn't fucking say was ya better hang something out before you start your turn or this sucker's gonna stall.”

He sits back. Rod shakes his head.

“What did you do?” asks Courtley, eager for gossip.

“Didn't do a fucking thing. See, it's not that I mind the fuckup. I mean, we all fuck up, right? So I give him room. I give him a chance, and – nothing.”

Courtley looks blank.

Bad Dog sits forward and puts both elbows on the table.

“My point is that he still hasn't made it right with me. He's had the whole layover, and all day today, and he's never brought it up. That's what pisses me off. So I ditched him.”

“Aie, t'es ben sage, toi. I'd 'ave jus' h'ask him where he learn' to fly.”

Bad Dog locks eyes with Jean-Luc. They both start to laugh.

“Fuck, it's good to be with you Red bastards,” says Baddy. He looks at Cameron. “Say, Cameron. D'ja have a good time last month?”

Cameron chokes on his beer. Jean-Luc claps him on the back.

“That good, eh?” Bad Dog puts his own beer on the table.

Cameron's mind is racing as his face flushes red.

“Ah, you mean, with last month's, um, student?”

“Yeah. Don't worry. We're not going to tell tales out of school.”

He looks around the table. "You guys aren't here for a minute." He lowers his voice. "Cameron, you know I do some union counselling . . ."

"Yes . . ."

"So, did you spend any time with this guy talking about keeping a low profile?"

"Yes. Hours. Over beer. I called it keeping a thin file."

"Good. Good for you."

Bad Dog waits until the table's attention relaxes, then turns to Cameron and whispers.

"He was really steamed about your making him wear three stripes. Good fuckin' job."

He looks around the table.

"So how's everyone doin'?"

"Ai, là," Jean-Luc snarls. "Da 'ole hairline goin' to shit in a bucket, hostie."

Bad Dog snorts.

"Good to see we're all so keen. How would you anglos say that?"

Cameron takes the bait.

"Ah, maybe, hell in a hand-basket?"

Jean-Luc and Bad Dog laugh. The laugh spreads to the anglos. Bad Dog looks pleased.

"So now we got a quorum, what stupid fuckup are we going to complain about?"

Rod is the first to stop laughing. A cloud comes over his face.

"You guys know Chutzpah, right? I'm worried about her . . ."

"I wouldn't worry about Chutzpah," says Bad Dog. "She's not

going to take shit from anybody.”

“I know. But last week in Toronto she pulled me aside in the hall. Asked me if Dispatch ever hassled me about putting on more fuel.”

“Tabarnac, dey ‘assle us h’all about fuel.”

“That’s what I said. But get this: a bigwig from the head shed pulled her into the office and told her they were watching her. That if she knows what’s good for her she’d better not make any waves with Dispatch.”

“I don’ believe dat. Not Boss Boss.”

“No. It wasn’t Boss. Shit, I’d quit tomorrow if I thought it was Boss Boss. It was some free-floating asshole. You know, not on any airplane? Director of something?”

“Not la Barnacle? Hostie, I tell you, if it was la Barnacle I’ll punch ‘is fuckin’ face . . .”

“No such luck, Jean-Luc. Some other asshole. I just can’t believe they’d threaten her. You figure they start with her ‘cause she’s a woman?”

“I tell you dat’s not de woman I would mess wit’, hostie.”

“So I wonder who else they’ve been hassling,” says Bad Dog. “Do they mess with Training Captains, Cameron? You know, set an example and all that shit?”

“They haven’t said anything to me. But I retire in a year. Then they’re rid of me.”

“Rod?”

“No. Dispatch will always try to argue. It’s a pain in the ass. But I get what I want.” Rod smiles around the table. “What about you, Baddy?”

Jean-Luc is the first to laugh. Then the whole table is guffawing. Bad Dog takes the opportunity to drain the pint in front of him.

He fills it up again from the pitcher.

“I’d like to know who they’re hassling,” he says. “Because I’ve heard a few stories. From other airlines, too. Minimum gas. Not a fucking drop extra.”

“Why do they want us to carry minimum gas?” Courtney asks.

“Money, moolah,” Bad Dog replies. “Gelt.”

“How does that save us money?”

“Four percent per hour,” offers Cameron. “That’s what it costs to carry any weight, including gas.”

“Four percent?” Courtley has the blank look again.

“Hostie, Courtley, ‘garde donc, c’est sur le plan de vol, tabarnac.”

“Pas de blague?” manages Courtley.

“It’s called Estimated Zero Fuel Weight Correction.” Cameron continues his seminar. “EZFW CORR.”

“Courtley,” Bad Dog snaps, “For fuck’s sake. Just look it up. And report back.”

Cameron and Rod are caught between decorum and laughter. They exchange glances.

Rod’s hair is mostly grey now. He doesn’t look any older, Cameron thinks. But there is a change, something hard to pin down. Maybe it’s retirement: when they joined it was purely theoretical. Now it is taking on flesh and rushing toward them.

“Oh, and another thing,” says Rod. “Chutzpah says they have a list. I think that’s what really pissed me off. Can you imagine having a goddamn list?”

“Who has?” asks Cameron. “What for?”

“Dispatch. They have a list of troublemakers.”

“Pilots who want more gas.”

“Yeah.”

A bitterness has crept into Rod's voice. The table is silent. The drip of rain and conversation from other tables creeps into the foreground.

“How the hell did we get here?”

Cameron is taken aback. This is not the Rod he knows. It is not so much the words as the tone of his voice that has stopped conversation.

“First the strike, then the merger. Now we're losing money hand over fist. The last time anything made sense was when Horace Homer was here.”

Cameron breaks the silence.

“Yeah, the strike. Because the Ministry of Movement was making war on the pilots and management knew nothing about it. What a stupid sequence of events. And Miles started it with his brainless procedures.”

Cameron's offering sinks like a stone. It is a rare thing. Beer-lathered pilots with their mouths closed. Bad Dog pushes his chair back. It scrapes the floor and shrieks.

“You guys know Bird of Prey?”

“Who's that?” asks Courtley.

“You're too young to know. Retired before you were born.”

Rod and Cameron nod. They remember Bird of Prey.

“He's the guy that got me into this business,” Bad Dog continues. “Bird took zero shit and didn't give a shit. He flew his way. Somebody did something stupid – which was all the time – he would say, *Should fire the useless fucker. Fire him.* The next generation – his senior First O's – when it was their time they would grumble about erosion of Captain's authority. But Bird had the stuff.”

“What about Cam and me?” asks Rod. “His junior F/O's.”

Cameron is still trying to parse the question, which seems uncharacteristic to him. Bad Dog snaps back.

“How the fuck should I know? You tell me.”

Bad Dog grabs the pitcher, fills the glasses, and waves to Freckles for more. Suddenly his expression changes.

“Fuck, he found me!”

He stands up and beckons at a figure hesitating near the door.

“Jim! Over here!”

Baddy sits down, smiling widely but muttering out of the side of his mouth.

“Well, so much for bitching about Blue guys all night...”

Cameron is curious. He has never flown with a Blue guy, although the airlines have been merged for three years. Maybe he won't have to. He doesn't want to. To feel the clash of the cultures, to try to finesse around it. Something else making it harder to maintain a professional approach on the flight deck.

Jim arrives and is introduced. They find him a chair. Small talk starts up. There are awkward silences.

Suddenly Bad Dog sits up.

“Hey guys, just imagine for a second – I know, it's a stretch – but just gimme a minute and imagine Bad Dog as your president. Bad Dog succeeds Boy Wonder as President of Air Arcadia. *What would I do?* you're asking.”

Courtley leans over to pick up a peanut.

“You're not going to eat that, are you?”

Courtley drops the peanut.

“Ennaway, what I wouldn't do is have all these chicken shit little airlines running around pretending NOT to be Air Arcadia. I

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mean, for Christ's sake – Twist, Snap, and Jive – that's not airlines, it's fucking deodorants.”

Boy Wonder has dreamed up Twist, Snap, and Jive to be the no-frills leisure carrier, the low-cost point-to-pointer, and the collection of regional carriers.

Bad Dog is working himself up into a rant. There is colour in his cheeks.

“I mean, for fuck's sake, look at Starbucks expanding into Arcadia. They're all over the world and they make the most expensive coffee known to man. But it's not the best coffee. Tim's is the best fucking coffee!”

As it gathers steam his rhetoric recalls that of Cicero, prankster and brawling drunk, now long retired.

“Tim's is fucking breakfast central. Tim was a hockey player and Arcadians love hockey, so we're loyal. Tim's is a fucking national monument, like Mount Rushmore to the Yanks. I don't care where you are or what time of the day it is when you're going to work, you can always stop at Tim's and get real coffee and muffins. Not this designer shit.”

“So what does dat 'ave to do wit' . . .” interrupts Jean Luc.

“Aie, donnes-moi une minute, hostie . . .”

Bad Dog pauses to allow the drip of rain outside to be heard again.

“We're loyal. We LOVE Tim. So does Tim try to be Starbucks?”

He looks around the table.

“NO!” he roars.

People at other tables are looking at him.

“Of course not. Tim's are the best at what they do.”

Jim nods. He looks more relaxed.

“So as our president, I think I can rest my case,” Baddy concludes. “Just do what you’re good at. Just keep on being the best fucking airline in Arcadia.”

The sound outside has become more of a roar than a dripping. Jim speaks up.

“Bad, do you think that’s Boy Wonder’s business plan?”

Bad Dog’s manic mien vanishes.

“You mean, it sure as fuck isn’t that best airline in Arcadia shit.”

Jim sighs. He looks like an accountant, but no one feels like laughing.

“Well, yeah . . .”

There is a gap in the exchange, as if Baddy can’t get his breath.

“It’s OK, Jim. We’re not going to take offence. So he doesn’t give a flying fart about our being the best airline? I hear you.” Baddy takes his breath. “But what does he want? What does the fucker want?”

“Could be it has nothing to do with our interests. Or even with the company’s interest.”

Cameron finds himself staring at Jim. He glances across the table. Bad Dog looks like he has just swallowed an insect on a dare. He swallows again like a dog trying to keep something down.

“Fuck! I was just thinking of my brother.”

“Tabarnac, you never tole me dere’s anodder Dog, hostie!” Jean-Luc chortles.

“Oh, fuck off, Pepsi. Gimme a chance.”

“What does your brother do?” asks Rod.

“He’s an uneducated, jumped-up Pepsi. Just like me. But he’s a craftsman.”

“Il fait quoi?”

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“Bain, il peut tout faire. Flooring. Plumbing. Moldings. Installation. He does it all and he does it well. Because he loves it. He couldn't do a fuckin' shoddy job if he tried. So two years ago, he's hired by this design company. Mostly kitchens and bathrooms. They have the latest Computer Aided Design software and connections with dealers and all that shit. But when my brother comes along they've got all these fucked-up installations. So my brother starts to work with these guys they've got, and they're not bad guys, but they're labourers, not tradesmen. You know, give me fifteen bucks an hour and tell me what to do.”

“Et quinze minutes pour un café puis un smoke.”

“Oui. Exact. So he winds up trying to train these guys. Some times it works, some times it doesn't.” Bad Dog nods his head toward Cameron. “The Training Captain can tell you about that. Still, he saves their sorry asses. And for a couple of years it's perfect. He can do good work and not worry about money.”

“The company does well?” Rod asks.

“Yeah. They're up to three, four installer teams. My brother has bought a big house in the West Island.”

“So what happens?” asks Cameron. He is trying to put this together with what Jim said.

“They lay him off,” replies Bad Dog. “Fire his ass. He's the first to go. 'Cause he makes the most money. Then the guys he's trained.”

“I don't get it,” says Rod. “Doesn't the company depend on those installations not being screwed up?”

“You know, we're all a bunch of dumb shits,” says Bad Dog. “I didn't get it. My brother didn't get it. It was my brother's wife figured it out.”

“So don't 'old h'us in suspense, hostie.”

“They're going to sell. They build up the business. It looks great.

Then they trim back expenses. Get a year when the balance sheet looks great. Then they unload the company.”

Jim the accountant nods.

“Yes,” he says. “Extract the value after it’s already gone.”

The rain on the window is suddenly deafening. In their table’s unaccustomed silence it is as if people at other tables, too, have stopped talking. Freckles and the dark-haired girl are struggling with the water downstairs. The world feels fragile.

“It has nothing to do with our being a good airline,” Cameron ventures. He feels like he has been punched in the stomach.

“I don’t know – don’t get me wrong – but, maybe,” says Jim.

“Fuckin’ A,” says Bad Dog.

The rain sounds like a speaker: a big woofer connected to a powerful amplifier. The input has just gone open and there is a powerful hum. Now the hum starts modulating in waves: wet waves, attacking the windows.

“We’re doing what we do,” says Rod. “We don’t control the world.”

“Brother,” says Bad Dog, “We didn’t in Bird’s day. Firing or not firing whichever asshole it was.”

A sudden gust blows a wave of rain down Davie. It looks like surf. The Swamp Pub is a frail ship.