

ep-5-the-gambler

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00:02 Enid Otun: Hello, and welcome to the fifth episode of If Women Were Meant to Fly, the Sky Would Be Pink, the Gambler. I'm Enid Otun. This episode, I'll be facing down the temptation to fly under the famous Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco, something few people have done successfully, but it's always a temptation. I turn down offers of money for dodgy flights, fly to Las Vegas for the weekend, and as my mental health journey continues, I venture to Los Angeles with friends to explore my independence.

[music]

01:34 EO: As I reached the midpoint in my training, I was beginning to understand the gravity of what I'd taken on. Up to this point, although I passionately believed in my choice of career, I still had many doubts that I could or would succeed at this. A lot of this I realised was coming from my lack of ability to come to terms with the trauma I had suffered as a child. If someone keeps telling you throughout your childhood, particularly from a very, very young age, that you are worthless, stupid and a failure, you tend to begin to believe it. And not only that, you live your life that way. In a strange way, it was easier to believe that I was deficient than that my father was abusive and incapable of loving me. I had progressed through school not knowing what I wanted to get out of it and not thinking that I was clever enough to achieve. The funny thing was that although there were key points in my life where I clearly proved to myself that I could do this, I would often turn it on its head and accept it as a fluke.

02:34 EO: If something went badly, it was disappointing, but in line with my self-image anyway. If something went well, it must be luck. Self-sabotage played a big role, not only in my professional life, but also my friendships. I had the classic, "Why would anyone want to be friends with me?" My outdoor, out there counseling was helping, though, and I was gradually being helped to work through my issues. The student community at ATI was growing, and I was being tasked with many more areas of responsibility in addition to my training: Student liaison, running errands and sorting new students out as well. This was a good development as it assisted me in forging new relationships with people around me. Other people seemed to see me as a buoyant woman who liked to help people reach their goals, and I was trying to do just that through keeping homesick students focused and happy as well as achieving.

03:29 EO: And funnily enough, this was reminiscent of my role in boarding school. I remember whilst I was in Form 4, we had two sisters arrive at school from Kenya. They seemed to have been thrown into the deep end with no support from a family that was so far away. They were placed in Alfred House, which was my house whilst I was boarding. They were very different. Edith was the more aggressive of the two and gave the impression that she was in charge. Caroline was more demure and gentle, but they worked well together and supported each other in addition to the sibling rivalry that was normal. I was tasked with making sure that they settled in as well as could be expected as they were beginning their English school experience in the middle of a term. They were gorgeous, curvy girls, which is wonderfully celebrated in African cultures, but not so much here in those days. And this added to their huge fun personalities.

04:20 EO: They were conscious of this and always on alert for any negative comments, of which there were a few, and as I got to know them, we became a formidable team of three, educating anyone who failed to understand that we were a close-knit trio and looked out for each other. They became much loved in their own right, and I will always be grateful for the opportunity to be their friend. And so, like I had with Edith and Caroline, I supported the foreign students, who in many ways were under a lot more pressure than I was. They were fully sponsored by governments or businesses and had to achieve their goals come hell or high water whilst I would only have myself to answer to if I failed. America held so much promise in the early days of my training. Sometimes I couldn't believe I was really there doing this. I had a responsibility of great magnitude in my mind. It wasn't like learning as I had known it. It was so much more than that.

05:13 EO: When you're in control of an airplane, you can feel both exhilarated and petrified when it dawns on you that you have the power of life or death in your hands and not only your own. My instrument rating was one of a number of hiccups in the road to being a professional, and although I was determined, I struggled to stay ahead of the curve. Looking back, this was on me. I realised that I might resemble a Jekyll and Hyde character in my approach to life in general and flying in particular. Some days I was on it, other days I caved to the self-doubt. I knew what I was doing. I was just powerless to stop it. Many times, I thought it would never happen. But once I had taken my instrument rating exam and passed it, I was to all intents and purposes, a fully qualified commercial pilot, an achievement I couldn't quite believe. In fact, I had to take a weekend in Las Vegas just to let it sink in. Well, you have to, don't you? I'd never been, and it was an excuse to celebrate in style, and I'd always wanted to experience a feeling of being a gambler.

[music]

06:27 EO: I decided to hire my favorite Cessna 172 RG and together with two friends, planned to fly to Las Vegas for the weekend. This was also the first time I would have flown over the Sierra Nevada mountains on my own. Interestingly, having passengers increased the nervousness, but increased the confidence. The flight was fairly uneventful until we began our climb to a safe altitude to cross the mountain range. This ensured that should we have an engine failure, I had time to find a suitable landing spot. The winds had picked up as forecast and the resulting turbulence was moderate to extreme. Sick bags became a necessity, and I was glad that I had brought them with me. Single pilot operations were fun most of the time, but with all of my attention focused on keeping the aircraft the right way up, I had precious little time to do other than reassure my passengers that this would pass shortly. Our arrival into Las Vegas was near enough on time, and as we taxied to our designated parking spot, my passengers seemed happy to be on terra firma in spite of looking distinctly off colour.

07:29 EO: The weekend in Vegas was an eye-opener and a learning experience. The bright lights at the Vegas strip were eye-watering and loud. The Las Vegas of today seems very different to back in the 1980s. We stayed at the Circus Circus Hotel, which was pink and has a circus right at the top of the building. Restaurants were open 24 hours a day as was the gambling, and I still remember having won \$250 on the slot machines and then treating everyone to prime rib at about 2 o'clock in the morning. We left Las Vegas very early on the Monday morning in the hope of not repeating our inbound Sierra Nevada crossing. The forecast was good and the whole return flight smooth, so I landed with some very happy passengers.

08:11 EO: Quite often in our downtime, the students would think about renting an aircraft and flying to Lake Tahoe Airport, which was approximately three miles southwest of Lake Tahoe itself, known for its beaches and ski resorts. The lads liked to attempt to ski trip occasionally just so they could say they'd done it. So during one of our planning trips, it was suggested that we could perhaps make history by flying under the Golden Gate Bridge. The suggestion was met with nervous laughter and then silence, with the occasional muttering of, "Well, we could also make history by becoming a submarine if we misjudged it." The suspension above the Bay is only 270 feet, and we would have had to have been that precise to pull it off. Chances are, we would have got caught, sent home or we'd have drowned. In the end, we all declined the offer in favour of living to fly another day. As we all progressed with our flight training, we would double up to test each other's knowledge of procedure and prepare for flight tests.

09:11 EO: Most of our aerobatic training was undertaken along the coast, just south of Half Moon Bay Airport. We'd climb up to height and practice spins, which were part of our training. They were not a favourite maneuver, but they had to be practiced to show that you could recover from them. Spins were an aggravated stall, so where you lost lift on the wings and then it was followed by a corkscrew down the path nose first. All private pilots had been exposed to them by an instructor in the early days of their flying program to make sure they recognised if one were to occur unexpectedly from something they had attempted to do. "I absolutely love this maneuver", said no one ever. In the end, I came to like them as I continued on my flight instructors course, and so I did many of the set practice sessions with the students. Since we did this six days a week, we were very recognisable on the flight line, and we'd often have people approach us asking about the aircraft and training.

10:05 EO: And more often than not, this was entirely innocent. However, we did have one or two occasions where we would be approached with offers of money to take bags or packages to airports in varying places. Whilst we were in no doubt as to the reasons behind the requests, I'm happy to say that no one to our knowledge was ever tempted to accept such an offer no matter how lucrative, and all incidents were reported to the authorities. As I continued my counselling alongside my flying, I was encouraged to travel further afield if I could whilst I had the chance. My counsellor's aim was to encourage me to grow my confidence gradually, and it seemed like a great idea. But I was just a little bit apprehensive to stray from what I now knew really well even though I did just that while I was flying. One of my newest friends was a student in LA and often encouraged me to come down to Santa Monica to see her and meet her university friends.

10:57 EO: She was a keen private pilot, and I used to fly with her to share costs and give her confidence when she was visiting her parents in the Bay Area. After a lot of coaxing, I finally decided to spread my wings and hopped on a PSA flight down to LA. It all seemed surreal. Even though I'd been to a lot of airports in California in places like Lake Tahoe and Reno and Vegas, I had yet to explore Hollywood. And this was first on the list if I decided to go. With my mental health on the up, I took the plunge and I let myself be guided by someone else in a city that was iconic. I was nervous at the outset, but it was one of the best things I could have done for mind and body. I explored Hollywood, went to Disneyland, had tea at the Russian Tea Rooms. I guess I felt playful and free, and it was wonderful. I found a hitherto unknown part of myself that I didn't know was there or that had been buried for so many years, and I was able to enjoy myself without fearing

a corresponding low after the adrenaline had left me.

11:55 EO: Looking back at that time, I would often not understand why it was so hard for me to do normal things that came so readily to those around me. I didn't understand my traumatised mind or why my behaviour was somewhat at odds with others. I had many, many more years to go before I'd be able to examine myself in detail and reach my comfort zone. What I didn't know at the time was that I was slowly starting to heal, and all these experiences would be instrumental in helping me get there. Thank you for listening. Your comments and reviews are very much appreciated, and thank you once again to Lucy Ashby for the dedicated editing of this episode. Now, in a departure from other episodes, I've included the entirety of the podcast music as we sign off on this episode as many people seem to enjoy the selection that we play. It's also featured on the website, so please enjoy. In the next episode, I will introduce you to my flight instructors course, welcoming my mum to San Francisco, and I embark on my new journey as a flight instructor and my first officially assigned student. Thank you and goodbye.

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