

CONVERSATION IN THE SKY

A short story

By

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CONVERSATION IN THE SKY

The sky was blue, apart from a streak of high-floating cirrus and, to the south, a bank of cumulus solid as a mountain range. No wind to blow it northwards. No chance of sudden precipitation here. It might be raining in England, but I was in Scotland and the sun shone.

I was standing at the door of a cottage that my partner and I had rented just north of the border. A one-storey mill worker's cottage next to the owner's modernised Mill House and, beyond that, a babbling brook called the Water of Milk. Outside, a small garden – 'Please note: *no* access to the river'; inside, functional furniture, white paint on washed stone walls, floral curtains, and enough mod cons in the kitchen to keep a townie's head above water.

We had arrived the night before and my partner, Marion, an airhostess for KLM, was still asleep. She had that ability – to catch up on sleep; backlogs of overwork and sleep deprivation compensated for in the first few days of our annual holiday. She expected little from me, apart from occasional cups of tea and afternoon sex (preferably oral) to work up an appetite for the evening meal.

The ritual suited my habits. I wake early, holiday or not, and have long since given up trying to get back to sleep. Eight hours might be the norm, but I survive on six – along with an hour sipping tea, meditating and reviewing the day to come. I am not a jump out of bed, pull back the curtains and do fifteen press ups before breakfast sort of man. I am addicted to tannin and conscious thought, and it is those two addictions that stop me sleeping. I prefer to be propped up on pillows sipping tea and thinking than flat on my back dreaming in an arbitrary and uncontrolled manner. Perhaps, if I could remember the dreams, I would not find sleeping such a frustrating occupation, but I can't and that bugs me. Why all the creative activity, if it can't be filed away and recorded for posterity? It's like the last words of a dying man that no one hears. I prefer a state of wakefulness. I prefer being alive.

I shifted my gaze from the sky to the ordnance survey map in my right hand. I had planned a circular walk to last a couple of hours and folded it to the relevant section.

"Back in time for sex?" my partner mumbled, as I kissed her goodbye.

"Yes," I said. "And tea."

Joyce found her place – a left hand aisle seat to the back of the right hand outside row. Not next to a window, that made her feel vertiginous, but close enough to peek out when they were coming into land.

She looked around. Gosh, they were big these planes – two central aisles and an upstairs section for first class. How on earth did something this enormous get into the air? She had only flown to the Channel Islands before, in a small propeller plane. She understood propellers, cutting through the air as they did through water, but jet engines were incomprehensible. Her young grandson had tried to explain jet propulsion on the phone from New Jersey when her daughter-in-law had rung to check arrival times, but it had all been double Dutch.

Never mind, she wasn't the pilot and she had faith in modern technology. It kept her warm, mended her body – she had recently had a heart bypass operation – and was now allowing her to visit an only son and three grandchildren at a reasonable price.

She was about to open a locker above her head when an air hostess appeared, took away the holdall, placed it in the locker and departed with a statutory 'You're welcome' despite the fact Joyce had offered no 'Thank you' to trigger the phrase.

She stared after the kept fit buttocks as they swayed away to the central aisle.

"Americans!" she muttered. "Do I look that old and helpless? Or is everybody 'welcome' to her help?"

She felt a tap on her shoulder, turned and found a man in glasses, grey sweatshirt and black jeans staring at her. He had jammed his hand luggage into the locker without the aid of Ms Aerobics.

"Excuse me," he said, "I'm in the middle seat."

His sounded nervous and smelt of sweat.

Joyce stepped aside to let him through.

"You're welcome!" she said.

The man nodded, sat down, fastened his seat belt, and leant back with both hands clasped on the arm rests.

Joyce settled in beside him wishing he had moved to the window. If he was the unsociable sort, she didn't want to battle in silence for the shared armrest all the way to JFK.

She looked at his face – tense, but not unfriendly. She would help him relax. She got out her bag of peppermint imperials and eased them under his nose.

I set out from the cottage and turned down a lane off the main road.

It dipped into a conifer plantation, where trees were planted so closely no sun could penetrate, and the air, despite the heat of the day, was cool and dank. Darkness hung between the spindly trunks and needleless branches and, for a moment, I understood why Marion was frightened of woods.

“It’s what *might* be hidden,” she had said the previous night, as we drove through Kielder Forest. “In the air you can see what’s coming. In a forest, wolves stalk unseen.”

“Not in northern England,” I had replied, “a walker or a wildlife fanatic, but not a wolf.”

“I prefer the sky” Marion had persisted, staring up at the heavens. “No wolves in wellington boots up there.”

“Just wolves with walk-men and laptops” I said, getting in the last word.

I had never come to terms with her role as mistress and mother to half the world’s businessmen and women. It fuelled my fantasies, but made me vulnerable when left on earth. Five-mile-high clubs might be the fictional stuff of men’s magazines, but how did Marion survive without my daily lick and cuddle when she was jetting back and forth across the globe?

The darkness of the wood provided no answer and, as the road wound upwards to the light, my mind returned to the here and now.

The trees gave way to stone walls and green fields with munching Scottish Blackfaces and not a predator in sight. I stopped and stared at the landscape. To the south stood a flat-topped hill, surrounded by round-topped neighbours. A burial mound, I thought. The ice-age glaciers would never have left such a sharp shape behind, not at all their style. No, probably a last resting place from which Celts could stare out at Hadrian’s Wall and savour the revenge of time.

Behind the burial mound, vapour trails criss-crossed the sky: wide dissipated trails of planes long gone; thin lines, still intact, of planes just passed. And then, directly above, a white line – a crisp, cool vapour trail in the making, the silver snail at its head, glinting in the sun, spewing out its stream of spent fuel and energy, marking the heavens as a dog marks its territory; a tiny dot, five miles high, appearing to crawl at a snail’s pace, but in reality hurtling through emptiness at five hundred miles per hour.

I felt weak at the thought and lowered my gaze to the solid hills. I hated flying.

They were taxiing to the runway now with airhostesses demonstrating the emergency drill. Joyce watched Ms Aerobics fasten a lifejacket, mime blowing the whistle, and hold up the safety leaflet that 'passengers will find in the pocket in front of them'. No one took much notice, apart from Joyce's neighbour. He sat bolt upright, straining to see over the seat in front of him, determined not to miss a move.

Though he had accepted the proffered mint and exchanged a few words, Joyce was not optimistic about having a conversation partner for the journey. She had learnt that he was a lecturer in graphic design, that he was going to New York for a conference and that he had no children. But as the plane tested its engines at the head of the runway and a shrill scream of frustration shook the fragile structure from head to tail, he returned to his closed-eyes, head-back, arms-clenched-over-armrest pose.

Joyce popped a mint imperial into her mouth and leant back too.

She had not flown enough to be afraid of flying, but the nervousness of her neighbour was contagious.

She closed her eyes.

She had developed relaxation routines after her heart operation, but decided to try a new one – especially designed for the aero-phobic – that she had read about in a Sunday supplement: clench and unclench your buttocks at the same time as thinking of a hated authority figure from your childhood dressed up in ridiculous clothes. Any irrational fear that might come into your head – such as engines falling off, pilots going berserk, or bombs exploding at 35,000ft – should then be put into the mouth of this eccentrically dressed tormentor of yore.

So now, as the plane lumbered forward, gathering speed, the scream of its engines rising to fever pitch, Joyce summoned up her primary school headmaster – a Presbyterian minister with no sense of humour – dressed him in a ballerina's froufrou and began clenching and unclenching as he wagged his finger and spewed out the most absurd disaster scenarios.

By the time the plane passed the point of no return and lifted off, she was finding it hard not to laugh. She also noticed that the hand on the rest beside her clenched and unclenched in time with her behind.

She opened one eye and glanced at her neighbour's face. Was that a hint of a smile? His eyes flickered open and met hers.

"Did you read the article, too?" she whispered.

The road now turned into an un-metalled track and descended to a bend in the Water of Milk and what, on my map, was marked as a ford.

The cirrus cloud had disappeared and the sun beat down on the Yankees baseball cap that I wore for summer walking. My hair had thinned over the last few years, my eyes become more sensitive to light, so I positioned the cap in the conventional manner, peak forward, and – according to Marion – looked like an American president on vacation.

At the point where the ford should have been, a footbridge stood with its central section missing. Beneath it, the water flowed over pebbles; shallow enough to paddle across, but cold, coming as it did from the high hills on the eastern horizon. I removed my shoes and socks, rolled up my jeans and waded in.

A dog barked. Was I trespassing? No. No law of trespass in Scotland. Did the dog know that? Probably not. I stopped and looked across the river. A border collie hurtled towards me followed by a man in Wellington boots, worn cords and tweed hat with a double-barrel shotgun in his right hand. The dog stopped on the far bank and continued to bark. I considered retreat, but then remembered you should never let a dog know you are afraid. I relaxed, smiled at the bared teeth, shaded my eyes and pretended to admire the landscape. My feet were numb, but the dog didn't know that either.

I remained in this position until the farmer reached the bank and told the dog to 'shut it'. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw him shift the shotgun from one hand to the other. Was that why there was no law of trespass in Scotland? Farmers just shot intruders and lugged their bodies to the burial mound? No need for courts and laws? I relaxed some more. Farmers, like dogs, could probably smell fear.

"Looking for the chapel?"

The man spoke with a soft lowlands accent. I turned my head, as if surprised by his presence.

"Good morning." I used my best English, middle-class voice. "I hope I'm not trespassing."

The man waved a hand to dismiss the idea and stared at my cap.

"You're not American?" I shook my head. He seemed relieved. "We get a lot round here – wandering about." He paused. "Poor souls."

Joyce was bored with buttock clenching. It made her rheumatic hip ache, and she wasn't nervous anymore. Thousands of planes took off and landed every day all over the world and once they were up they were up. She glanced at her neighbour. He was still working hard, brow perspiring. Perhaps, Joyce thought in a maternal way, it would help if he could talk about his fear.

She proffered the mint imperial bag.

"Mints help you relax, did you know that?"

He opened his eyes and shook his head. The eyes reclosed. She removed the bag and tried another tack.

"Talking takes your mind off things." An eye opened, sized up her offer and rejected it. "Or, we could play a game." She played games with her grandchildren, whilst driving them around in her Morris Traveller – the 'Granny-mobile'.

"Bit dark outside for I-spy, but we could try Botticelli. Do you know that one?"

You had to be pushy with this sort of person. Break through the 'leave-me-alone-I'm-suffering-in-silence' and get them involved.

"You think of a famous person starting with the letter 'P' and I ..."

"I know the rules." The man opened his eyes and stared at Joyce. "The thing is, if I stop concentrating on keeping the plane in the air, something will happen."

Joyce laughed.

"So you're going to stay tensed up like that for the next six hours?"

He nodded and then laughed too – slightly hysterically, Joyce thought.

"I've only been on one-hour hops to the continent and that's not so bad."

Joyce patted his arm.

"I'm sure the captain will manage without you. Oh, speak of the devil... "

A click on the plane's PA heralded the captain's voice. Joyce settled back to listen.

"We are now cruising at 35,000 feet and will shortly cross the Scottish coast south of Glasgow and head out into the Atlantic. Expected time of ..."

Her neighbour tapped her on the shoulder.

"I'll risk it. Mine begins with H."

Joyce gave a thumbs-up sign and settled back in her seat.

"Are you a famous Roman?"

"I'm not – Hadrian."

The plane began to shake – then shudder.

Joyce reached for the man's hand and squeezed it.

"It'll be all right. Promise."

I had walked up the hill from the river to a church nestled beneath the burial mound.

I stood in front of a Chapel of Remembrance built of the same red sandstone as the church. A note on the door informed visitors that a key could be obtained from the cottage next door, or from the town hall in Lockerbie three miles to the west. I didn't want to go inside. I wasn't a relative and I wasn't a disaster tourist. I would never have gone near the place, but for my chance meeting with the farmer.

I walked round the graveyard. Now I was here, I wanted to pay my respects to the people I had been trying to forget ever since we arrived. Now I was close to their final departure lounge, I wanted the bodies, the belongings – the living beings that fell from the sky that December night – to be more than just a horror story blotted out by subsequent disasters. I wanted to see them as part of the landscape, belonging as much as cows, farmer and dog to the hills and grassland beyond the chapel. I wasn't religious, I didn't say a prayer; I merely hoped that they felt at home in these hills – as I did.

When I returned, Marion was still asleep.

I sat down on the bed. We had mentioned Pan Am in the car and I had apologised for not checking the map more carefully before booking the holiday.

"Why?" she had said. "It's not Chernobyl."

"No fallout, you mean?"

She had laughed, warmly, with the confidence of the professional flier who rides the sky each day and understands its ways and whims, its dangers and risks.

"When it fell, it fell in seconds. Horrible, horrific – then over."

"And the people below – can they forget?"

"If we let them – if we come here as visitors, to be ourselves."

Marion's hand crept from the duvet and pulled me down – down onto a soft stomach with folds like summer hills, down to the warmth and wetness of life.