

Anne Woodford – Flight Path

A slim, silver plane flying westwards left a thin milky trail across the azure sky. Was this a sign that he'd been cleared for take-off? Yet, unlike the pilot with his sights set on a destination, Alec couldn't be certain where he was heading.

He squeezed himself onto a circular wooden bench at a table on the terrace. The breeze having dropped, he steamed in the afternoon sun. Was the yellow jumper a mistake? But a shirt and blazer would have meant a tie, and Janet wasn't a tie-and-jacket sort of girl. He loosened his silk neckerchief, smoothed the bristles of his moustache. All this hanging around got on his nerves. Hadn't she been to the Ladies before leaving the pub? But, on arriving at the House and Garden, off she'd rushed again.

Here she came, tipping forward as she walked, not unlike the Khaki Campbell ducks he and Carol had found so endearing. Was Janet a bird lover? Time would tell. Attempting to stand, he found that he was wedged.

'Stay where you are, Alec,' she sang out. 'I'll get the tea.'

This would save time later when he'd want to get her home, to his home. Where was his dratted wallet?

'This one's on me,' she waved a red purse, 'after such a scrummy lunch.' Smiling her light smile, she placed her tan bag beside him and padded off towards the tearoom.

How slim and pretty she looked today in her white trousers and pink blouse, so much more attractive than the usual flappy skirts – her 'Bloomsbury look.' And cheerful too! Maybe he'd worried too much about lunch; his steak and kidney pie with a pint had hit the spot but she'd refused a glass of wine and picked at her fish pâté.

The rowdy family at the next table reminded him how he and Janet always meet in crowded places: Shakespeare at the Castle, concerts in the Arts Centre or walks with the History Society. It wasn't that they hadn't got to know each other. He'd talked, too much probably, about his career in the RAF and she'd told him something of her life as a diplomat's wife in Europe, but they'd never spent time alone together.

Today would change all that. He thought of the bottle of bubbly in his fridge, the locally smoked salmon, Dorset cheese and cherries. And how he'd finally followed his chess playing friend's advice and taken Carol's coats and waterproofs, still hanging in the hall, to a charity shop. 'It's time to move on, you know,' Brian had said, taking Alec's knight. That was rich, coming from a man who'd been happily married for years with no devastating illnesses in sight.

Only Carol's gumboots remained and, of course, the years of memories. The boots were now in the back of the garage.

'Here we are.' Janet wobbled a tray onto the table. 'Home-made shortbread. And does he take sugar?'

'No,' he lied. Didn't want her running off again. Watching her pour, he thought, not for the first time, that something about her was different. Was it her hair? Or maybe she'd been dieting.

The tea commented on – Darjeeling preferable to Earl Grey – he searched for something more to say. 'What are these blue flowers behind us?'

Swinging round, their heads dodging, they gazed past the bush down to a narrow glimpse of sparkling sea. Her perfume pleased him.

'Ceanothus,' she said. 'Tim's favourite.'

Damn, he'd evoked the memory of the perfect husband. Mr Goody Two-Shoes, Carol had called him. 'Let's walk a little way down the valley,' he suggested, hoping she wouldn't want to trail round the house.

Trying to humour her, he enthused over the explosions of gaudy rhododendrons that she so admired while agreeing wholeheartedly that it was the most perfect summer's day.

'I must ask you something, Alec.'

'Yes?' He frowned.

'When did you last check your emails?'

'Goodness, I don't know. Carol kept an eye on all that.'

'A marbled white!' Janet stooped over a butterfly. 'It's just that I emailed you recently and wondered if you'd read it.'

'No, is the answer. Was it important?'

'Nothing that can't wait.' She turned towards the house. 'Shall we go in now?'

'If you like.' He had wanted to leave early, before the mass exit at closing time. 'Hang on to me, it's a bit steep here.' Her arm felt thin through her cardigan.

The leaded panes of the 1930s windows and the bare quiet of the bleak carpeted rooms depressed him, but he enjoyed Janet's pleasure.

'Isn't this fun!' She'd found an old hairdryer in a pale green bedroom. 'They must have plugged it into a lamp socket – and look at that electric fire! We had one just like it – I remember how our hair smelt, singeing as it dried.'

Having regained the ground floor, he heard her sigh. Was she too being affected by the melancholy of the house with its dead hairdryers and defunct soda water siphons? A house with its life extinguished. Was his home beginning to feel the same? Not for long, if Janet would agree to move in.

She was looking up at him now, her eyes sad. 'Have we had enough?' Relieved, he nodded.

The warmth outside revived his spirits and, as they walked in single file up the narrow track towards the exit, his pulse quickened. Soon he would ask her, but first she wanted to buy postcards. Patiently, he studied a florid chart of the British monarchy.

At last they reached the car park: this was the moment. The memory of the plane flew across his mind with him in the pilot's seat. 'What I suggest,' he smiled down at her, 'is that you come back to my house.' Don't stop there, you fool. 'It's a glorious evening and you haven't seen where I live, nor the view over the moor.' Pausing, he leant against the car's hot metal. 'We can have a drink and a bite to eat.' He smoothed down his moustache. 'How about it?'

'Well,' she glanced away, 'that sounds nice, but it's been a long day –'

She was going to refuse! Not looking at him, she bobbed inside the car. He slammed the door.

Keep calm, he muttered, plodding round to the other side; it's only a bit of turbulence. With skilful flying he could get through this. Sitting down heavily, he fumbled with the key. What was she saying?

'What I mean, is that – that I really need to get home and take off this wig. It's so uncomfortable –'

A wig? Good God! Must have been having chemo. After cancer - like or not like Carol. And coming a year or so after her husband dying. Why didn't he know? Hadn't asked the right questions,

he supposed. Turning towards her, his right hand hovered over her shoulder. 'I'm so sorry, Janet. I'd no idea.' Of course, that's what was different - not her own chestnut hair, but a good match. Say something, anything. 'And here's me thinking you look so well.'

'Luckily, I am.' The lines around her mouth tightened. 'The worst of the treatment's over and I'm fine. Tired, but fine. And,' she laughed, 'itchy!'

She was letting him down! Not her fault of course, but he'd been banking on the possibility that, bereaved and lonely, they could spend time growing comfortably fond of each other. What to do? Make it clear he couldn't cope with another invalid? But no, that would be too cruel.

'If you agree to come,' he forced himself to speak slowly and gently, 'you can put your feet up and I'll wait on you. That's a promise.' God, now tears streaked her cheeks. 'Forgive me, Janet. I'm such a clumsy oaf -'

'No,' she gulped, 'you're not. It's when people are kind -'

'Take that damned wig off and you'll feel better.'

'Don't look then.'

With his eyes closed, he heard her open her bag, blow her nose. The click of the car mirror as she pulled it down.

'All right now.'

Her eyes were of a deeper blue than the scarf she'd knotted around her head; the intense blue of today's sky. She was beautiful.

'You're beautiful,' he said, before shifting his gaze back to the gate. The way ahead was clear now. 'So,' he breathed deeply, 'how about it? Shall we go?'

'Yes, Alec.'

Yes, Alec, he repeated to himself. Quiet and decisive. He liked that.

Once he'd settled her onto the swing seat in the garden, he retreated upstairs to the bathroom, splashed water over his face and tugged off his sweater. Why couldn't he relax? Hadn't he and Carol, bless her, talked about this possibility, that he might make a new life for himself? Feeling more comfortable in an olive green sports shirt, he took a quick look into the spare room to assure himself that everything was tickety-boo, the roses holding up well.

Downstairs, he took the bottle from the fridge and placed it on the tray with the glasses, cheese straws, olives and two paper serviettes before stepping out with care through the French windows.

Surely she wasn't on her phone? Yet he could have sworn he saw her tucking it into her bag. Who on earth had she felt it necessary to call? Never mind, it wasn't going to spoil their evening.

'Here we are.' With the Champagne poured, he relaxed into the chair opposite her.

'Thank you, Alec, for bringing me here. It's really lovely.' She raised her glass.

Leaning across, they clinked glasses. 'You're more than welcome, Janet.' How nearly had he said "darling"?

'Um, delicious! And I've never seen such roses.'

'Albertine's over already. Too prickly to cut anyway but I picked some of my other favourite, Madame Isaac Pereire. Am I boring you with garden talk?'

'Not in the least. And this view! So perfect -'

A buzzard circled high over the moor. 'Yes,' he mused, 'we were lucky to find this place. Needed a lot of work doing, I can tell you.' After topping up her glass, he refilled his. While the conversation meandered around gardens, Janet's patio - her fuchsias and lavender - and on into

Dartmouth's garden centre, both the sun beyond the purple moor and the level in the bottle went down. He offered her his arm to go inside.

Still keeping the tone light – they had time ahead in which to explore each other's lives – Alec devoted himself to pleasing her. A glass of Muscadet with the salmon. Claret with the Blue Vinney. A drop of Grand Marnier to round off the meal.

Was he talking too much? When speaking of his flying experiences, he tried not to “drone on,” making her laugh. All, he felt, was going smoothly, until a knock at the door.

‘That'll be Tommy.’ Janet checked her watch. ‘All this talk about flying but it's the time that's flown.’

‘But hang on, who the hell is Tommy?’

‘The young lad working for Sid's taxi service.’ She picked up her bag. ‘He often runs me about. I'll just ask him to wait a few minutes.’

Stunned, Alec heard her do just that. He was on his feet by the time she returned. ‘But, you know, you could have stayed here! The spare room is all ready –’

‘Another time, maybe.’ She came over to him. ‘I must thank you for such a marvellous day –’

‘So that's who you were phoning, in the garden –’

She nodded. ‘Give me a hug, Alec. We'll still be friends, you know.’

Feeling the contours of her body, her silky scarf against his chin and inhaling her scent, a deep longing welled up inside him.

‘Goodnight, Alec. We'll be in touch. And do read that email.’

From the front garden, he watched the lights of the taxi dwindle into the dark.

A whisky, that's what he needed. With the tumbler at his elbow, he dug the laptop out from under the pile of newspapers on his desk and plugged it in. Come on, come on, why was the damned thing so slow? Must get it overhauled or something. Christ, will the list of messages never stop? But now, here she is, Janet – click -

Dear Alec,

I'm so looking forward to our day out. You may not know that I haven't been well recently. Hopefully I won't be a burden.

Soon it will be my birthday and I've never been to the Scillies. I thought, if you'd like to, we could take the helicopter from Penzance (can you bear not to be in the pilot's seat?!) and potter about for a couple of days.

Do think it over and let me know. There's no rush –

Jan

PS I'm aware of what you went through with Carol. But I'm very independent and, for you, I will be well.

The whisky forgotten, Alec sat back in his chair, grinning with incredulity. What a girl! So forthright, so intuitive. Smoothing down the bristles of his moustache, he repeated ‘Jan’ to himself. He liked that.

And now to press reply -

My dearest Jan,

No - that won't do – calm down old chap! Where's the whisky – just a sip. And some deep breaths to calm that pounding heart. But get a move on, she may even check her emails tonight. Keep the tone light, make her smile before offering the flights as her birthday present -

Dear Jan,

Chocks away!