

FEAR OF LANDING

by Eamon Somers

“Omaha is filled with fine clothing stores for men,” he says, “all of them doing very well. Whereas Minneapolis is a different story altogether.”

I am trying to sleep in seat 26C. 26B is occupied by Mildred who has already introduced herself, and 26A by the chattering man, who waits until after the safety announcement to tell her that his name is Peter-Allen.

“Peter, how nice,” Mildred says, “my first husband was called Peter.”

“It's Peter-Allen, with a hyphen,” he says, “I have a family name as well.”

Well lucky old Peter-Allen.

He clutches at her hand as we accelerate down the runway; Mildred seems at home. Once we're airborne she takes her hand back and pats his gently. “Now that's the worst of it over.”

Peter-Allen is in men's clothing, Mildred is in women's.

“It's quite a coincidence really, us being placed beside each other, isn't it?” he asks but doesn't wait for an answer.

Actually he's also in women's clothing, part-time. He tells her he has other business interests as well and as if to demonstrate begins to..... but let's not go into that. I'm still trying to sleep. Besides I am supposed to be listening to me, not to ambient noise. I promised: a week of listening; of following my whims; of resisting resistance. I am to just go along with; try not to interpret. Although frankly I think it's Carol Ann (without a hyphen) who should refrain from interpreting. I thought I was doing very well thank you, until she and the rest of the world decided I was out of touch with my feelings and should slow down and spend a week feeling. Nothing but feeling. As if it would be a new experience.

I live with Carol Ann. No, we live together.

See, that's what she says I do. Always modifying the first thing that comes into my head; which apparently prevents me from feeling the feeling.

Not that I would ever say: "Carol Ann is living with me." She isn't. It's her tiny flat on the Bowery that we share. I pay towards the up-keep and running expenses, but it's probably not true to say we share.

"Perhaps you're not ready to share," Susie the psychic suggested, and that's when I suspected Susie the psychic and Carol Ann the girlfriend had spoken to each other. You couldn't share a shower of rain. Couldn't share a see-saw. Couldn't share a bomb blast or an orgy in ancient Rome. I'd heard it all before. I just didn't expect it after only ten minutes of talking to Susie.

Carol Ann and me have been sleeping together for six months. Admittedly I'd been a real lodger for a year before that, creeping into the apartment late at night (careful not to disturb her well ordered life) to sleep on the couch. Waiting outside the bathroom with two doors in the morning until she flushes the toilet and I allow other noises to convince me she's back in her bedroom and I can push open the visitor's door to the bathroom and have my shower.

"I shared with Trevor in London for nearly four years," I told her, "and he never had any complaints."

"Yes, but you weren't fucking him."

Which was true. Well, up to a point. No, in fact it's completely true. But I could have been. No that's not true, I couldn't, but for a little time, I might have wanted to. Well, Cecilia said I did. I was going out with Cecilia at the time and she insisted it wasn't her I wanted but Trevor. But I never felt it.

To Carol Ann I say: "I thought we were fucking each other," and she says: "fuck you mate," which I thought was an interesting choice of words, especially for an American, although she may have been trying to relate to what she saw as the Londoner in me, forgetting

I'm Irish. "Don't ever throw my words back in my face," she hisses, "or you're dead meat."

It doesn't surprise me that Mildred in 26B works in women's clothing. She reminds me of the assistant in Goravans the drapers, when I was growing up in Ireland. Black cardigan, white blouse, pleated skirt and shoes for standing. More than a hint of colour in her hair. I never knew her name, but my mother always smiled and talked to her as if they were old friends. Her face powered thickly and her lips red like two very squashed balloons. Perhaps a lot of women wore too much make up in those days, but studying their faces got me into trouble. My mother would shake my arm and say "it's rude to stare." But that was on the street, or the bus, or at mass. In Goravans it was different; my mother's mind was elsewhere. I could take the woman's face into my memory over and over without the slightest fear that I would be stopped.

Mildred doesn't work in a shop; she represents a very well known brand of women's clothing. She visits specialist shops all over three states, and places these famous clothes. I've never heard of the company but Peter-Allen knows it. "I'm also a consultant," he says. "I get to help fashion companies that run into a little trouble." He has seven states in his patch.

"The trouble with" (and here he mentions the company name, but let's call them Gloria Glams), "the trouble with Gloria Glams is they're out of touch.

"Naw," Mildred says, "the pricing is all wrong. I couldn't place their stuff at all this year. But they've come right down for next season."

"Gloria Glams would do all right if only they'd adjust their prices to reflect the market they're operating in," Peter-Allen announces.

I open my eyes with shock at this blatant: "hijack" (is the word I hear Carol Ann and Susie agreeing on); this blatant hijack by the self-proclaimed consultant, selling back to Mildred as his own, the solution she claimed was already in place.

I wait for her to slap him down, to assert herself. He's still clutching the orange drink he boarded with. He sips from the plastic cup and puts it back on the tray. Two airline-sized bottles from his pocket are used to top up the vodka content; returned after the lids are screwed back. Mildred says nothing.

"I see a relationship, it's ongoing, but on off, on off. You can't seem to get free of it." Susie the psychic is looking at me. "Do you recognise this?"

"No," I say. "It seems to me to be going fine."

"I see it. I can feel it. You're deeply troubled. Don't you recognise what I'm describing?"

"No," I say. "I don't."

"Perhaps it's a previous relationship. One that didn't end cleanly?"

I shake my head.

"Oh it's there OK." She says. "You're just not in touch with it."

I look at her. What am I doing talking to this charlatan; who smiles and squeezes her legs together every time I confirm the least of her assertions?

"You're a cancer?"

"Yes." She already knows my birthday, but rewards herself.

"You were born outside this country?"

"Yes, Ireland." My accent helps, but she gives another smile, another squeeze. On good days she must burn holes in her hosiery.

"God doesn't want you to stay in a relationship that's going nowhere," she says. "He didn't plan this. It has just happened to you."

I look at her face for clues as to what I should say.

"What do you do for recreation?" She asks. "I see water. Something in England?"

"I used to own a share in a boat," I say. "I live in New York now."

"But you never used it," she says instantly.

"The other party had habits I wasn't comfortable with."

Which is when she says: “perhaps you're not ready to share?” And I first suspect that Carol Ann and Susie have made contact.

It's not such an outrageous suggestion. Carol Ann has her own psychic; his name is Phil. The two sessions with Susie were third prize in a raffle. I'd bought the ticket for her at the apartment door one night.

But she wouldn't accept the prize; to see Susie would be a betrayal of Phil.

“A second opinion can do no harm,” I suggest. “If Phil can see your future then it's there in the public domain.” I'm a sceptic I suppose, looking for proof.

But Carol Ann insists she's been a man in her previous life and it's (therefore) important that her “interpreter” (her word) is also a man.

“To even consider this Susie would scream out: mistrust, mistrust.” In fact even winning the goddamn things might be interpreted as a manifestation of a subconscious desire to reject Phil.”

“I bought the tickets,” I say. “It doesn't even say what the prize is. Look: MYSTERY PRIZE.”

“You've destroyed my life,” she says.

I smile, but inwardly.

“It could be a trial set by Phil,” I say, “to test your (I want to say: “grip on reality”) loyalty.” Which is when she tells me they're obviously meant for me.

“You're going to look after me? Aren't you?” Peter-Allen announced when he first sat down. He was the last to board; led down the aisle by the North Western steward the way the “unaccompanied” minors were before him. It wouldn't have surprised me if she'd given him a colouring book and a McKids flying meal. The woman I now know as Mildred, and I, were already seated with our tray tables up, our belts fastened, and are beginning to assess each other for signs of travelling companion qualities.

Peter-Allen's: "you're going to look after me" was addressed to Mildred, but he could have said them to me, or to the steward, or to the vodka orange clutched in his hand.

"I hate flying," he says. "But you look like the sort of woman who knows how to look after a man. I saw you when I was waiting at the gate. I was too shy to approach you but I said a little prayer that we might be placed side by side so that you could help me with my ordeal." I imagine him smiling and mopping his brow with a big white handkerchief. My eyes are closed for sleep.

On my second visit to Susie's rooms I feel more like a car undergoing a factory inspection than a man consulting a psychic. Admittedly it's a green leafy factory floor with dark drapes and Tiffany lampshades and the smell of old frankincense, but I feel processed: Money, question, speech, advice. Money, question, speech, advice.

My impression of a sex worker: take charge, take the money, take it out, take it to the top. A pat on the head: "Away with you now till the next time and be a good boy."

I figure that donating two consultations to the prize draw, rather than one, was Susie's idea. The second visit being the more important because that's when the seeds for a lifetime of dependency will be sown, watered, and fertilised, to sprout alongside the sceptic doubts over the following week. And yet her story on my return is consistent. "I see a void. You are not doing what you want to do. A relationship is holding you back. You are marking time. Perhaps you're avoiding something. What is it you want?"

"I want a 1948 Dinky Model T Ford," I say, "mint condition, boxed." This comes from nowhere. Am I joking? I have no interest in cars, much less their tiny replicas.

I look at Susie, expecting a put down, a look of anger. But instead she smiles. I feel the friction of the nylon as she squeezes.

"It's a start," she says. "Well done. Have you any questions?" Why am I so perplexed? But I shake my head.

Carol Ann is pleased also. It's a condition of her giving me the vouchers that I tell her all about the sessions and describe Susie and her rooms. She giggles over the little details and kisses me deeply and warmly when I mentioned the Model T.

"That is so horny," she says between kisses and we tumble onto the couch. "Any colour, so long as it's black," she whispers, and I assume she means the condom, but she doesn't object to a pink one.

It feels strange to be naked with Carol Ann on the same couch where I'd been the dormouse lodger, careful not to disturb, even as I felt slightly territorial. Now I feel she's retaking it.

"Sex isn't everything," Carol Ann says as we tidy up. I nod in agreement. Yet it does seem like an awful lot. Perhaps all I want? A body to sleep against and have regular sex with? What more can another person give? Having Carol Ann provides me with space. Somehow the world is smaller, the bed bigger, with someone in it.

"This came for you," she says and hands me a package. It's from England.

"Trevor died on June the 12th," the letter from Cecilia says. They'd become close friends after I left for Manhattan; bored with London and Cecilia's insistence that if we stayed together things would have to change. She writes regularly with news of London, but has never mentioned Trevor being ill. The rest of the package is his poems. "Trev wanted you to have them. They're love poems, addressed to you, although what he could have seen in you I cannot imagine (sic). Trevor's wish is that you take them to Colorado where he wrote them, apres ski, in January of '92, and burn them, scattering the ashes in the valley where he found enough peace to write them." She encloses a map to show me how to get there.

Life is too short for poetry. What's the point of burying meaning in a string of words that'll take a year to decipher when the thought could be expressed in a couple of sentences of prose? And after all that work, the thought is probably quite banal.

Trevor's poems went right over my head. Carol Ann cried and cried. I put them in my suitcase with some other mementoes from London and my Irish past. I hadn't decided if there would be a third session with Susie.

For a week Carol Ann said nothing; then I got an ultimatum: "go to Colorado and burn the fucking poems or find a new bed."

The couch appeared to be: "not an option."

Peter-Allen and Mildred are still at it when I am woken by the steward's voice announcing that the captain will shortly be turning on the seat belt sign. I close my eyes again and Mildred says; "hold on, I need to get out."

I stand up but before I sit down Peter-Allen is beginning to fill with the panic of being alone so close to landing.

"I like your cap," he says to me as I pull the peak down over my eyes. "I have a collection of caps, well over seven hundred."

I try to visualise seven hundred caps and can't. He's looking for attention.

"Really?" I mutter and smile weakly.

"Oh yes. I started out when I was young. All the teams in the World Series, and then some. Do you collect caps?"

He gives me a longer pause than any he'd given Mildred. I remember he's a salesman. He's giving me enough slack to engage myself.

"Oh but you're trying to sleep," he says, his voice more begging than contrite.

"Yes I am," I say and shut my eyes.

Will allowing him to feel his panic until Mildred gets back help him to grow up, or is he about to start hyperventilating or biting the person nearest to him? I look up again and smile to show I am making an effort.

"He's English," Peter-Allen tells Mildred, re-engaging with her as soon as I stand to let her in.

"I am not English," I say. "I'm from Ireland."

"Oh oh," they chorus in unison.

"I think he collects baseball caps," he says, "just like me."

I don't bother to deny it.

"Do you like flying?" Mildred enquires.

"I'm getting used to it," I say.

"One on my left, one on my right. He talks through his fears and you sleep through them. Men? I've never seen the like of it."

Mildred has pronounced. Fury explodes in me like an unpricked potato in the microwave. How dare she compare me to the wimp in the window seat? How dare she misread me?

I don't burn Trevor's poems. Far from Carol Ann's apartment, and from London (the only place I had known him), reading them is easier. In his quiet valley, his whining poems take on a new meaning. I even envy his obsessiveness, although how much of it is just artistic licence I will never know. Sane people don't become that obsessive, especially for lovers who aren't available to them. Do they?

Still, it's flattering to think the poems are about me. They make me feel irresistibly attractive. Even if I cannot imagine how I inspired him. What did he see in me that made him spin and weave and whirl it round and round until he had these crazy, obsessive, out of control love poems? He calls me his muse, his life. He screams at me in anger, begs me to return his love. He reminds me (in black and white) of places I had visited (thinking I was alone), re-describing the visits as if we'd experienced them together.

They are something really. I'm sure Carol Ann will be pleased I didn't burn them.

Mildred places a hand on each of her armrests as the plane descends towards the bridges and roads and factories of Newark. Peter-Allen clutches her left hand; my own two are in my lap, fingers knitted. I envy how easily he gets his security, and how easily she gives it. But I'm not ready for either role.

The runway is just below, and Carol Ann and Susie are beyond expecting answers. In the overhead locker Trevor's poems are safely tucked away, but they will have more to say to me. I feel the bump as the concrete begins to absorb the plane's excess energy; to bring it under control. I can already see myself heading downtown to find a toyshop with a small-scale reproduction of Mr Ford's famous car.

