

Virgin Atlantic

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Stories rarely begin above the Atlantic though they happen there. We found that out, didn't we? Two old men randomly commenting about this or that before the flight took off from LAX to Heathrow. Neither knew or probably cared about the other till chance took hold for the ten hours that intervened. But that's the beginning of a story isn't it? A question asked, rhetorical even, no answer anticipated, yet it leads to another and then another. How strange then to meet a man who found ultimate refuge in this 21<sup>st</sup> century in an abandoned light house on a jut of land that faced the coast of Normandy, across the straits, echoed across the millenniums, in the ebb and flow of human forlornness. What unexpectedness creates a story out of the casual conversation of total strangers who weave meaning out of nothingness.

There were no answers when we began to probe the whys of an abandoned light house nor any expectation that a rationale existed. Yet behind that move, the change in the value of the pound for those retired forced decisions into the unknown of what would be, by virtue of a lottery, and a bid, on property unseen yet within reach, happened. And so the future evolved as unexpectedly as the reality, caught as it turned out between a nuclear plant adjacent to the lighthouse, indeed residing in its back yard, and the unrelenting reality of the churning channel of the Dover Sea that moved ineluctably beyond the front door as it had done for centuries before the building of the lighthouse. How strange that image as it bulged into my mind, those enormous contrasts of cement enormity and human will against the eternal power of the channel that split England from France before they were England and France.

And so our conversation continued as we flew beyond time devouring the miles beneath us unconscious of those below or the irony of this day that told of a tsunami in Japan that devastated a nuclear plant sending untold thousands to their deaths and others to refuge beyond homes lost to the sea. What connections in the mind bring those lives lost this day to mind before the mind knew of them and yoked them now in this conversation that wraps the globe in the never ending sound of the seas ebb and flow of love and loss.

Are our realities an intricately woven fabric of thoughts strung together in time and circumstance and you, Martin, become a person of my own design because you sit next to me by some circumstance of seat allocation arranged by a software designer playing God. What did he know of the tsunami, or the nuclear plant that sat on the shore of Japan North of Tokyo as your home sits on the edge of the channel awaiting perhaps the clash of the plates that slide beneath the land masses we now call England and Normandy.

How many unknowns determine what is awaiting the confluence of facts and figures, frustrations and fears to assemble that we might unravel this mysterious stew to understand or not understand. It was then, Martin, that you explained the purpose of your trip to the United States, a trip that would take you to some unidentified location between Barstow and Las Vegas where a lone gambling casino sat in the street, isolated from all but the landscape of rising and falling hills and valleys of salmon colored sand stretching for endless miles beyond sight and sound until they merged with the light blue sky. That very

scene you sought as refuge against the unrelenting wind stirred by the low clouds that hovered above your lighthouse home wind-whipped by the sea.

Stranger still, that as you flew from this refuge of isolation in the barren wastes of America's desert, ironically transforming Nature's meadows into a Mecca for thousands seeking fortunes as limitless as the sands that stretched beyond the horizon, you found the most startling revelation of your trip, the throbbing of the northern lights pulsating through the night sky as the plane made its way home to Britain. How rare and marvelous, how exciting and unexpected to witness this marvel of our universe encapsulate the entire globe in a wonder of greenish glow awakening us to the aura of the Almighty as He appears in the glorious aurora borealis. How that magnificence touched you as you craned your neck back to drink in its wonder witnessing it from above as though you were an angel of the Lord enveloped in the manifest glory that is God. What determined this interruption of the sea's dominance that drove you to the desert with a display of illuminating magnificence that altered forever the expectation of this vacation?

Could it be that we are driven by geography, that our behavior seeks exposure to what we do not know or rarely see? You said, didn't you, that it had been twenty years since you were in America and last felt the warmth of the intense heat and looked at the flowing desert that flamed out beneath the setting sun. How impossible to grasp purpose and meaning in 6000 miles of travel to seek the silence of a barren landscape where only the wind's whisper speaks to the ear. Yet I, too, sought silence in coming to Oxford, silence of a different sort, silence broken only by words typed more than half a century ago by men unknown speaking of events long since passed yet conveyed in documents stamped with a forbidding declaration, "Most Secret." How does one explain purpose where time is devoured scouring papers that describe crimes committed, terror unleashed, and plans unveiled that recount ruthless intent and merciless death for the voiceless victims who lived and were lost in time? Is that but a rhetorical question, Martin, or does it resonate with meaning if linked with all the detritus of lost information buried in the silent bowels of the Rhodes House Archives.

What is it that slides beneath this narrative connecting it to our experience of 70 odd years each, lived in different countries, united by people neither of us know, drenched in thoughts brought to our respective minds by waves of knowledge created by thousands of minds lodged in books that we absorbed over time and made our own, all present to our senses as they respond to the six inches that separates our hearing from each other travelling at speeds beyond 500 miles per hour, 35000 feet above the earth we walk upon and call our habitat?

Arnold understood something of this problem as he stood looking over Dover Beach; he saw the connection that flowed beyond time in the sounds of the ocean that caught somehow the infinite minds that stood on shores around the globe hearing the cry that bound all to each in suffering and silence and loss. What binds, Martin, is never lost, and you must know that as you stand at your doorway and look at the sea lapping the pebbles that form the earth beneath your home. You, too, must hear that never ending roar and feel the ligaments that bind you to Arnold and Sophocles, and all you've never met who listen to the eternal sounds. And in that home you have been restoring these many years now, filled with the ghosts of men that survived the wicked waves lashing the cemented rocks that formed the base

of that lighthouse, who heard the wind whipping against the small windows set in the stone casings above the stairs that wound up through the turret as they brought new light to the summit, a beacon of life for the distressed seeking succor from the relentless sea.

I, too, Martin restored a home, oh, not one on a channel's edge, not one where the echoed voice of humankind rings through the lines of Arnold's throated cry, but an ancient home nonetheless if ancient is relative to time and place. It was the Bailey's place from 1750, perched on a rise at the tip of a small valley sliced in more recent years by the main street of a small New England town. Seven fireplaces warmed the house over the centuries, all in desperate need of repair by the time we moved in to reset the flues against the wind and rain. Wrapped around the largest chimney was a wooden staircase that revealed the feet of ages grooved deep in the triangular steps forcing reflection each time we climbed those stairs, a silent communication with the dead. The winter wind roared across that valley pebbling the blown glass windows with ferocity not unlike the grating roar flung upon your Dover shore, a telling link between you and me. How strange these thoughts that create a narrative that bind two strangers in mid flight.

There are others, too, that shared this story unraveling in the night sky above the frozen tundra of the pole before its decent into London, though they knew nothing about the flight or you and me or how their lives became intermingled with ours as the hours passed. But you had seen the book I had brought to read before we fell to talking, a book of great sorrow and remorse where indeed the eternal note of sadness gathers in tremulous cadence slow and leads now as then, in Arnold's day, to the darkling plain of human plight. Curious how the tales of suffering link the centuries seeking suffrage in faiths that ebb and flow in intensity fighting science with superstition even as science succumbs to barbaric weaponry to stave off that very superstition. If Arnold saw the revolutions in Europe and Napoleon's siege of Rome as harbingers of human helplessness where neither joy, nor love, nor light, nor certitude, nor peace were possible, how might he perceive the eternal conflict that rages in the Holy Land today where, indeed, superstition and scientific folly unleash, with God's grace, depleted uranium and white phosphorus on helpless souls as their very bones glow through the seared flesh consumed with fire. And though we grew up in different countries, Martin, we have the same visceral reaction to the revolutions sweeping the Plains of Abraham as Arnold and his wife looking upon the darkling plain where ignorant armies clash by night.

This conflict, Martin, became the substance of our meeting, as we, two old men who had lived through the most devastating years of human history, if it be human determined destruction of their fellow humans that is the hallmark of our existence, attempted to grapple with the minds that ruled this new century where ancient temples and coded laws gave license to a new barbarity. But is it new after all? Is it not like the storied albatross that hangs from Marlow's neck as he retells yet again how the Thames flows ineluctably from London to the heart of darkness brought there by the Pureza de Sangre that flows in our Eurocentric veins making natural our perceived dominance over our determined inferiors. And that perception, that very perception, does it not, Martin, reflect the insanity of our cultures' destructive desires to achieve ascendancy through beliefs founded on myths that link our faith to the Almighty through Divine Right that demands the rebirth of infidels in Christ? Duty to God becomes the propellant that justifies our divinely ordained mission of insanity to spread absurdity across continents.

Such is the flow of destiny century after century as we become but the current viewers of its manifestation. Strange how I had gone to England, to the learned village of Oxford by the Thames, only to meet a former Londoner who now lives by the channel into which that river flows before it makes its way toward Africa.

Are we but the newest residents of a world shaped by ideologies forged in the mind from birth by those who command our beings, our drives, our dreams, our reality that thrives on blood made evil deceptively dressed in the cleanliness and purity of the lamb? What after all drove Leopold to the throbbing black heart of Africa but the lie that licensed the endeavor, to save souls for Christ; what brought that same righteousness to the Puritan Divines that saw God's presence and blessing in their slaughter of the Pequots, Satan's minions; what malevolent tome of miraculous words from tribal days consumes our Congressmen and Rabbis who determine God's gift of a homeland to be theirs regardless of the consequences to the innocents who live there, damned by that same God to everlasting Hell. What after all, Martin, do we see and comprehend from this muddle of unknowns that forms our reality; do we bring nascent thought into play or reconfigure all that impinges on our beings into a reality that is but regurgitation of some monolithic power's will to which we submit.

How, then, does this become a narrative dressed in the expectations of the short story we began? If I am the author and you the protagonist, are you the you in your mind, in your image, in your flesh that sat beside me on the Virgin flight across the Atlantic, the fictional approximation of my mind, or is there a narrative that can be told of another whether conceived in the mind or fastened on by time and circumstance, a reflection that bears no semblance to reality except as a distillation that leaves it out. Certainly, Martin, it must appear strange to you that I would have attempted a short story framed within the ten hours of our chance meeting. But then what is a story but the recounting by a writer who can suggest a great span of the interaction of humans in chance occurrences that "distil(s) a world into a few square inches." That by the way, Martin, is the understanding of your *Today Programme's* James Naughty in his Introduction to *The BBC National Short Story Award 2010* collection of award winners. Given that prescription, I would suggest, my friend, that your story is not mine to tell. (March, 2011)