

SENILE THOUGHTS AND 'BEAR' FACTS

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“AIR CANADA 856 for London Heathrow is ready for boarding. Would passengers in Business Class proceed through the boarding gate?” The old man turned round and took one last look at the airport lounge. He would not tread on *terra firma* again in Canada. It was 2022, 50 years since he had first arrived there. He was still sprightly, upright and clean shaven with silver hair. He was going home to die.

He prayed that he would not be sitting near any man wearing a striped tie. For him this was a manifestation of phoniness as if there was anything straight about human beings; the Doug Fords and Donald Trumps of North America had made him believe firmly in the “crooked timber of humanity”. Not that England was any better; he shuddered at the thought of Boris Johnson, a pampered ‘arsehole’; he recalled the English spelling which he had to relearn after fifty years of hearing North American ‘assholes’. He mused on Oscar Wilde’s – or was it Bernard Shaw’s? – aphorism about the difference between the British and Americans: “Two nations divided by a common language.”

An attendant asked if he needed help putting his holdall in the overhead. He was tempted to say: “Get lost, I’m not that decrepit”. Instead, he said, “No that’s fine, thank you”. Of course, he had problems with his holdall, and the attendant rushed to help. “Pride, pride, you stupid idiot, will you never learn?” the old man

muttered. “Was he a grumpy old man?” No, he thought himself quite affable. He took a quick look round, saw one striped tie and was glad he was not seated nearby, so did not feel obliged to vent his spleen. He watched the milling throng boarding. He smiled at the children, since he would be sharing a house with young grandchildren.

The old man dozed until the plane was well into the flight and the evening meal had been served. Suddenly he felt the need for company. He looked around and was pleased to see an attractive woman, neatly dressed, seated directly across the aisle. She was reading Ishiguro’s novel, *Klara and the Sun*. He guessed she was around sixty. He reached down and pulled a Teddy Bear from a bag, put it on his lap and began to address it: “Well, Sebastian, what does it feel like to be going home again?” The woman lifted her eyes with a bemused look on her face. The old man smiled at her and, not wishing to be rude, she smiled back. He seized his chance.

“This is my teddy bear, Sebastian; he is a rescue bear. I saved him from ursicide. He had just been thrown in a dumpster, when I last visited England. Do you have a teddy?” There was a moment’s hesitation; the old man held his breath; either the woman would respond positively or make some excuse to end the conversation.

Suddenly the woman laughed. “As a matter of fact I do; I’ve got one which I’m taking for a young niece in England. I must say I’ve never heard of the word ursicide before.”

“Yes, I coined it when I saw what the operator of the dumpster was doing. I shouted out, “You are about to commit ursicide. He is a pedigree teddy; have you no feelings!”

She laughed quite loudly now, “And what did the operator say?”

“You’d bet’er get it out of ‘ere quick, ‘cause I’m not stoppin’ for no sof’ toy.” I grabbed Sebastian. We bonded immediately. It was love at first sight.”

The lady put her book down because the attendant was now offering after dinner drinks. She asked for a red wine.

The attendant turned to the old man and asked him what he would like to drink. He said he never drank on planes but, pointing to the teddy bear, said Sebastian would like a cognac.

The attendant smiled. “That’s a very nice teddy; here we are, Sebastian.”

“You know, Sebastian is a pedigree bear. You see his green scarf. He’s forming a new green, world teddy bear movement. Its slogan is ‘teddy bears of the world unite; you have nothing to lose but man’s stupidity.’”

“That’s very nice, but I’ve got to move on.”

“Are you always so droll or should I say eccentric?” asked the lady opposite.

“No! I use Sebastian as a ploy to trap charming ladies into conversation.”

“Do you ever fail?”

“Oh, yes, it’s a percentage game, but if you don’t try, you don’t succeed and at my age I need all the success I can get.”

“Well, it looks like you’ve succeeded this time,” she laughed. “My name is Felicity Nightingale.”

“Charming! Mine is Frank Trueman. I’m delighted to meet you.” He had a twinkle in his eye.

“I always love ladies with Latin names, particularly ones that are of good omen.”

“You are outrageous,” she giggled. “Supposing I’d said that my name was Constance. What would you have replied?”

“I suppose something like I do admire women with Latin names, especially ones that show firmness of purpose. I cannot abide fickleness of character. But now I have established that you are a woman of taste by conversing with me, I would like to ask you, if it is not impertinent, why are you flying to the UK?”

“I have a younger brother; he and his wife had a daughter a year ago, and I’m going to to see her for the first time. What’s the purpose of your trip?”

“I’m going home to die.”

Felicity was startled. “Goodness me! Are you ill?”

“No, but I’m of an age when I could drop down dead anytime. Besides Sebastian and I got a strong feeling that we were not wanted in Canada anymore.”

“Great heavens! Why?”

“My university has a program called *Learning in Retirement*. I offered to teach a course on ‘Julius Caesar – A Re-evaluation’. I was interviewed by two young ladies who asked impertinent questions. I claimed that Julius Caesar was guilty of genocide and should be scrapped from the history books. I also said July should be removed from the calendar. After all, why is it right to condemn Queen Victoria and John A. McDonald and not Caesar? The native Britons were never the same once the Romans came. I’m writing to the mayor of Rome, demanding that he hide the statues of all the Caesars.”

Felicity giggled.

“I could see the interview wasn’t going well, so I leaned down and pulled Sebastian out of my bag, hoping he would lighten things up. Well, I’m afraid he didn’t. The senior one said, ‘Thank you, Professor Trueman, but we need someone who is serious.’ Sebastian and I were outraged, so we are going home in a fit of pique. After all, when I was a student, I had a college tutor who taught in his pajamas, sitting up in bed. I did not think there was anything strange about that.

“I also miss the English countryside. Old people get nostalgic. I wanted to go back home while I’m still *compos mentis*, well at least in Sebastian’s opinion. Besides, I

thought that if my ashes were sprinkled over the countryside, they might restore some sanity after the Brexit fiasco. If some time is left to me, I've patented Boris Johnson mopheads to sell, as a nest egg for my grandchildren.

“I'm also irritated with the way the North American news media use stupid euphemisms. Have you noted how some TV bimbo, male or female, will say that someone is ninety years young? Well, I'm eighty years old; I'm not young; I'm not middle-aged, just plain old and, in some ways, old-fashioned. I believe in conversation. Once, plane journeys were interesting because you talked to people. Nowadays it's all technology and gizmos. Look! people are either playing games on their smart phones, watching boring films or blasting their ears off with some cacophonous noise. I'm a Luddite when it comes to technology. It is controlling us and we are forgetting our humanity. When I taught, the most sophisticated technology I used was a piece of chalk. I'm sorry, I'm getting boring. Forgive me.”

He paused momentarily. “I see you are reading Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun*. That is a perfect example. Klara is an AF, artificial friend indeed; she may have her uses, but can you imagine wanting to cuddle her? Why isn't she called Clara, a lovely Latin name? Now Sebastian is soft and cuddly.” He clasped Sebastian to his bosom. “He allows my imagination to soar into the stratosphere for nothing, unlike the narcissistic Branson's toy gismo or Bezos's phallos substitute.”

Felicity took the opportunity to say she needed some shuteye. Perhaps they could chat again in the morning. She turned away in her seat and left Frank to his own devices. He ordered another cognac for Sebastian and dozed fitfully for three hours or so.

They were woken up by the cabin lights being turned on and being offered a glass of reconstituted orange juice. Frank refused, saying Sebastian only drank pure orange juice and, since he was an ecologically-minded teddy bear, he did not drink water from plastic bottles. A glimmer of a smile appeared on Felicity's face.

Once Air Canada's delicious breakfast had been served, Frank asked Felicity where she was going to stay.

"Just outside London, in Surrey."

"Ah, 'Live in Surrey free from worry' was the adage when I was growing up, from those who lived outside the polluted metropolis. I do hope the recent pandemic has helped to clean the air. Unfortunately, Boris Johnson is still there".

"What about you?"

"I'm staying in Battersea, and tomorrow I'm visiting St. Mary's Church where a great English patriot was originally buried."

"Oh, who's that?"

"Benedict Arnold!"

Felicity almost spilt her coffee. "Isn't he the great American traitor?"

“Well, there are always at least two sides to every question. Those American rebels are the real traitors. I’ve never had much time for them since I heard they dropped all that nice tea in Boston Harbour. They always behave like loud, hyperactive adolescents, which they call American exceptionalism. Think, if they had stayed loyal to the Crown, the whole problem of slavery would have been solved for them when Wilberforce had slavery abolished in 1833 throughout the British Empire, and there would have been no need for their civil war. They would not now be straightjacketed by their constitution, and so would not be suffering from those idiotic gun laws. They might even have had English style Bobbies who don’t carry guns. Mark my words, if Canada were a republic, we might have had a Humpty Dumpty Donnie as president instead of Her Excellency Mary Simon as Governor-General to acknowledge our past sins in an attempt at reconciliation.”

“But didn’t you find things,” Felicity interrupted, “about The States to admire when you visited it?”

“Visit? I’ve never visited! I once went to Niagara Falls, and got a glimpse of the place, but fortunately the spray from the Falls was so great that my vision was blurred.”

A voice came on the intercom: “We will shortly be landing at Heathrow. Will you please make sure your seatbelts are fastened and the seatbacks are in the upright position?”

When the plane had landed, just before the seatbelt sign was turned off, Felicity said, “Well, you certainly made my flight different. You haven’t considered by any chance having your ashes sprinkled near Benedict Arnold’s grave, have you?”

Frank laughed. “Cheeky! Sebastian does like women who can turn a man’s words against him. Here, please take this small envelope; it has Sebastian’s business card in it.”

Frank and Felicity got separated in the scramble of disembarkation. While she was waiting at the baggage carousel, Felicity opened the envelope and looked at what she thought was Sebastian’s card, but all it had on it was:

**A FICTION**

**c/o Carleton University Retirees Association (CURA)**