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# A Natural



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*...to John,  
who, if I'm lucky,  
will never read this book.*



**Dear Peter**

*9 May*

Dear Peter,

It's been a while, I know. The therapist suggested a long time ago that I write to you, but I never had the courage to get down to it. She said that it would speed up the healing process, and I would finally start to come to terms with all that's happened. And I wanted to, I really did want to reconcile myself with the way things are.

But even as I knew you were gone, my first thought when something funny happened at work was "*I have to tell Peter tonight,*" followed by a devastating sense of loss, the certainty that I would never be able to share all the little interesting or annoying things with you again. I still didn't want to let that first reflexive reaction go. It felt like part of you would remain here as long as this thought kept coming, and if I finally reached the stage of acceptance, then you and your memory would fade into the background, then completely disappear.

Even today, my mind keeps playing tricks on me. For a split second after I wake up, I still think I hear you turn on the coffee machine. But of course you're not here, and it's our son being the noisy teenager that he is, and I find myself returning to earth with a crushing feeling and a sudden weight on my whole being that makes it hard to go on with my day.

But the days have been getting brighter lately, and the weight has started to become bearable, and waking up is not such a devastating experience, and sleep is not where I go to get away from reality anymore. I wish I could say it was the therapy that helped, but it wasn't.

See, I'm writing to you today because this desperate, compulsive attachment to a memory I've been trying to keep alive for fourteen long months is starting to slip away. Because for the first time since you've been gone, something interesting happened, and my instinctive thought was not "I have to tell Peter." Instead, it was "I have to tell John."

Who is John, you will rightly ask.

I met him about six weeks ago at the Aerospace Centre café. The small shop was packed, and one of the few empty seats was across the narrow table from this grey haired gentleman, who looked out of place in the nerdy environment. He was typing on a tablet, and I assumed that he must be someone high up in the administration, since scientists generally don't walk around in expensive suits and polished shoes, and you seldom see anyone who is not an institute director or higher wearing a tie.

I picked up my coffee, walked over to him, and asked him if the currently unoccupied seat was free. "Be my guest," he answered to my German in a perfect Oxford English accent and excused himself for not quite being up to the task of speaking German, although he understood a little bit.

"It's all right," I reassured him. "My English is better than my German anyway."

His reaction was a raised eyebrow and a tilt of the head. "How so?" he asked me, putting his tablet down.

Now, I have to tell you right away that I didn't find this man particularly attractive. He was too well-dressed and rather too slender, he seemed too business-like, and his face didn't exhibit the characteristics commonly associated with the contemporary ideals of masculinity. His jawline was somewhat delicate, his lips a bit too thin for my taste, his eyes a very light blue color, his lineaments pleasantly symmetric but not particularly memorable. But it was a beautiful, sunny day in late March, and I couldn't concentrate on my tasks at work. I was in the mood for slowly enjoying my latte, and I take some

pleasure in chatting up strangers when I have the chance. I was therefore more than happy to inform him that, although my German was fluent enough, I was rather obsessed with English literature, specimens of which I had been eagerly devouring for the past twenty-odd years, as a result of which I found myself able to explain complicated concepts more effectively in his native language than in any other, including my own.

This seemed to catch his interest. "Which genre do you prefer?" he asked me, leaning forward.

"Fantasy and science fiction, mostly," I replied. "I also love the eighteenth and nineteenth century classics. I've read some American classics, although I'm not too excited about them. Except maybe 'The Great Gatsby'. A book that grows on you. Now let's see, what else..." He appeared to be listening attentively, so I continued. "I've also been reading some non-fiction books lately, mostly history." That covered most of it, I thought.

"Do you have a favorite book?" he asked as I took a sip of my coffee.

"Ah," I smiled. I was certain that this obviously highly educated gentleman would recognize the quote: "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune..."

"...must be in want of a wife," he finished with me. I smiled at him, and he smiled back.

"I know, I'm not showing much originality. Everybody loves 'Pride and Prejudice'."

"With good reason," he observed. "It *is* a good book."

"Let me see if I remember my favorite line," I said. "You are mistaken, Mr. Darcy, if you suppose that the mode of your declaration affected me in any other way..." I frowned in concentration, trying to remember the rest of it.

"...than as it spared me the concern which I might have felt in refusing you, had you behaved in a more gentlemanlike manner," he finished the quote in his lovely accent. I

was impressed and more than a little delighted to be hearing Jane Austen lines delivered in a perfect British pitch.

“Do you know the whole book by heart?”

“No, but I have read it a couple of times. I also portrayed Mr. Darcy in a school theatre play, about a million years ago. I must have heard that line hundreds of times during the rehearsals.”

“How interesting. You don't look like a Mr. Darcy.”

“What *should* Mr. Darcy look like?” he asked me, seeming rather amused by my spontaneous remark. *I don't know what Darcy looks like, but you look like you are enjoying this a lot*, I thought to myself.

“Well, proud and aloof, I suppose, at least on first acquaintance. You, on the other hand, seem quite approachable, and I only met you five minutes ago.”

“Ah!” he exclaimed and brought his hand to his mouth, as if to conceal a smile that was starting to form. “I assure you, most people would tell you that I am indeed both proud *and* aloof.”

“How strange,” I remarked, but I didn't bother pondering on this any longer. I sipped on my coffee, not minding the short silence that ensued, but the courteous English gentleman felt it appropriate to fill it with polite enquiries.

“So, what do you do, Ms...?”

“Pelati. Call me Stella.” I held out my hand for him to shake.

“A pleasure to meet you, Stella. McInroe. Call me John,” he said, accepting the offered hand.

This led to a brief conversation on the linguistic origin of his name, Scottish Gaelic being a language I had some interest in and also the ethnic identity of Mr. McInroe's long dead paternal grandfather, who, as I was shortly thereafter informed, often spoke the language to his grandsons, trying to instill within them the pride of being a Scot. Then Mr. McIn-

roe repeated his enquiry on my occupation. This prompted me to expound on my rather too romantic preference for a precarious life as an underpaid scientist on short-term contracts to higher earnings in the corporate world. He seemed to be entertained by these revelations, and I discovered the reason when he went on to divulge that he was the CEO of an energy company and an employer of several physicists like myself, who were in all likelihood less romantic but definitely better paid. We chatted on the importance of climate and data science in his field of enterprise until the time came for him to excuse himself. He was expected shortly in a meeting, he explained, mentioning something about a joint research endeavour between the Aerospace Centre and his company.

As he stood up, he slipped me his business card, insinuating that I might consider giving him a call should I ever get tired of being overworked and underpaid in my chosen scientific field, and then he made his way towards a rather bulky man in a drab dark suit who was waiting some way off. I returned to my half-drunk coffee, thinking that Mr. McInroe must be Oxford-educated, since all the Oxfordians I knew shared certain mannerisms and a distinctive body language, which I fancied I could discern in the gentleman in question. I thought of my PhD advisor, whom I hadn't seen in years, another Oxford-educated John, and what a peculiar coincidence that was, and that I definitely have to tell you about it, Peter, tonight.

After the too well-known pang of anguish at this thought subsided, I sat there inspecting the card for a while, wondering — not really seriously — if I was in the mood for a career change. I turned over the unassuming piece of paper to discover that the name of the company boasting Mr. McInroe's services was McInroe Energy. *CEO indeed*, I thought to myself. He must be an entrepreneur.

After I finished my coffee, I stuck the card in my wallet and almost immediately forgot about it and about the

whole incident, a pleasant enough respite from work though it had been.

## Gulfstream

*4 April*

My second encounter with Mr. McInroe was again a chance one. I was taking my usual afternoon stroll through the Aerospace Centre premises, which invariably brought me to a grassy field adjacent to the small airport serving the training planes of the local aviation club, the numerous leased private jets, and the occasional research aircraft. As I sometimes did on work breaks, I walked along the fence which separated the Aerospace Centre grounds from the parked jets, in the hope of seeing one of them take off. I had never lost the sense of awe I had first felt as a child when watching, feeling, hearing an airplane lifting off the ground. The powerful thrust of jet engines, brought to life by the combined miracle of human engineering ingenuity and physics, signified by deep, reverberating sound, resonated with some deep instinct and gave me goosebumps every single time.

On the other hand, as a scientist in a climate-related field, I tended to be more ecologically conscious than most, and jets were some of the worst polluters in the world, so I considered watching them as one of my guilty pleasures.

In the present instance a fine specimen of an aircraft was landing. It was a Gulfstream, one of the larger planes that were serviced by the small airport. I was almost certain that I hadn't seen this particular one before. As it taxied past me towards its parking spot, I could clearly discern the simple but elegant maroon writing next to the cabin door: McInroe Energy.

It took a second, but my overworked brain finally connected the dots. After briefly marveling at myself for having had a conversation about Jane Austen with someone who

actually had the means and audacity to print his name on an executive jet, I resumed my stroll, pondering on the exoticism of it all, but not in the least imagining that that first random encounter with Mr. McInroe had been anything else than a fluke.

As I walked along the fence, I saw three men disembarking the airplane. I could now recognize one of the figures as the slightly-too-thin, grey-haired gentleman whom I had joined at the café table a couple of days ago. The other two were more voluminous and looked somewhat intimidating. The small group seemed a bit discordant until it dawned on me that the man with his name on the eighty-million-Euro jet must be the kind of person who for various reasons might need to employ bodyguards. A sleek black car awaited the newcomers, and one of the large men — I thought it was the same one who had been escorting the businessman on the day we met — climbed into the driver's seat.

I couldn't help but think about how for two decades I had struggled to make ends meet as an underpaid researcher on fixed-term contracts, while this well-spoken Oxfordian probably just spent the equivalent of my yearly salary flying from A to B on a jet which was much too big for the three passengers it had transported, and which had definitely injected some tons of harmful pollutants into the upper troposphere.

Still, he had been so pleasant to talk to.

As I walked into what to my recollection had always been an empty dead end street, I took out my smartphone and started googling Gulfstream models and their black carbon emissions. Just then I was startled by the sound of brakes, and lifting my eyes from the screen, I became acutely aware of the fact that I had almost been run over by a black Audi Sportback with tinted windows. As it turned out, the perennially closed fire gate separating the Aerospace Centre grounds from the airport was today, for the first time in my memory,

open, and so was the — also never used — gate to the main street exactly opposite it.

As I stood there, a mere half meter from the front bumper of the car, I finally noticed the newly installed sign notifying employees that the open passage was a temporary arrangement, made necessary by some extended construction work on the side street where the actual entrance to the airport was situated. At the same time, all three men got out of the car, and the CEO himself approached me.

“Good afternoon,” said Mr. McInroe, not showing any outwards signs of alarm. “Are you all right, Ms. Pelati?”

“Yes, I’m fine, thank you,” I answered, still a bit stunned by my near-accident. “This gate has never been open before,” I observed, pointing to the gap in the fence. “Anyway, I was just trying to calculate the amount of black carbon a Gulfstream... G550, is it?” I looked at him questioningly. He nodded, probably a little surprised at the sudden change of subject. “...Well, the amount of black carbon it pumps into the atmosphere while carrying three passengers from...?” I shot him another look.

“Aberdeen.”

“...Aberdeen to Munich.”

“Well? Is it large enough to justify you being run over by my car?”

Ah there it was. The tilt of the head. The calm voice, vaguely challenging, the lopsided smile, the slight aura of smugness, the bold stare. Had I noticed all those things before? Apparently, I had. As this dawned on me, I became a bit annoyed with myself, and I stubbornly decided to press my point.

“Well, it’s almost ten times the amount emitted per passenger compared to flying commercial. One might like to consider one’s environmental impact. Even though, to be fair, a Gulfstream is still a small aircraft and contributes only a drop in the ocean, emissions-wise, you know, what with the Airbus-

es and Boeings taking off every couple of minutes... still, if one can avoid it... I mean, Lufthansa will fly anyway, so... why wouldn't you..."

I was starting to blabber — bodyguards standing a couple of paces away, faces expressionless — and I had begun to discern amusement in that persistent stare, and I was a freakin' scientist who should be able to finish a sentence. I cut myself short, drew a breath, looked him straight in his pale, blue eyes and said, "Anyway, I should get back to work. Nice chatting with you." I turned to the driver. "Thank you for not running me over. Please, forgive my absentmindedness. Have a nice day!" With that, I flashed the three of them what I hoped was a nonchalant smile, turned my back to them, and crossed the street to reach the safety of the sidewalk.

As I tried to understand what had suddenly made me so uncomfortable that I had to flee the scene, I realized that he had fallen in beside me. I had always been a fast walker, but he seemed to be able to keep up without exerting much effort. *Long legs*, I noticed, admiring his stride, and at this inadvertent observation my irritation grew.

"You seem to know a lot about executive jets, considering you have such negative feelings about aviation," he remarked.

"I assure you, I consist almost entirely of contradictions," I retorted. We walked on. I passed the turn to my institute. I had no idea why I kept heading straight ahead.

"I thought the ladies would like her," he said tongue-in-cheek with a slight jerk of his head towards the private airplane. His hands were clasped behind his back, and he was looking at me with a cryptic expression on his face. "She's new. I managed to convince the board that we needed a jet for the C-level executives. I *might* have slightly overdone it," he added in a mischievously conspiratorial tone.

I looked at him in bewilderment. "Are you actually using a female pronoun to refer to an airplane?"

A brief silence. “I... am?” Narrowed, inquisitive eyes, sideways glance, smirk all but disappeared.

“Why do men do that?” I wondered aloud, but I suppose he was right to perceive it as a question directed towards him rather than the universe in general.

Another brief, contemplative silence. “I suppose” he started, but then paused, as if to carefully formulate his reply in his mind. “I suppose we try to compensate for our deeply rooted insecurities by attributing female characteristics to inanimate objects, on which we can actually feel that we exert some dominance.”

In stark contrast to our first conversation, I now felt no connection with this man. I asked myself if this could be the same person I had chatted with about literature and the Gaelic language. But, thankfully, we soon reached the exit of the grounds. The car with the tinted windows had been following us at walking speed and was now awaiting him on the opposite side of the road. One of the two security men was already holding the back door open for him. At that point I didn't really know how to behave anymore. Mr. McInroe obviously belonged to a universe different from the one I was familiar with and comfortable in, and I wasn't inclined to expend any energy figuring out the laws of nature in his strange world, and the notion that anything female needs to be dominated so that an already too privileged male can feel even better about himself was a bit too much to take, so I just stood there, and he just stood staring at me, bodyguards waiting, car door gaping. I had started to drift into musings on whether this qualified as the most awkward moment of the past year – or ten – and with the stoicism that had become my habit in the past twelve months or so, I waited for some conclusion to this suboptimal encounter.

“May I have your phone number?” he asked me, breaking the uneasy silence.

“What?”

“You have a mobile phone, I think? You were looking at it before you were nearly hit by my car.”

“Yes, yes of course. Well... yes, okay. How...?” I remembered that my phone was still in my hand, and I looked at it as if I was seeing it for the first time. I unlocked it and tried to start the procedure of adding a new contact, feeling a little dazed, not only because of my near-accident, but also because of a sudden, unexpected sensation that was creeping in, a subdued, almost imperceptible euphoria at the prospect of continuing the acquaintance.

“I remember giving you my business card, but that only has my work number,” he said with a dismissive gesture of the hand. “Here, this is my personal one,” he continued, taking the device from my hands, calling himself from it, and saving my number. After he was finished, he returned my phone to my stunned palms. “Have a very pleasant day, and please try not to get run over,” he said, then climbed through the car door and disappeared from my view behind the tinted windows.

*What the fuck just happened?*

*I have to tell Peter!*

So you see, Peter, my ecologically motivated objections to unnecessary flying, along with a little help from random circumstances, had gotten me the private telephone number of this exotic instance of a man. After a couple of days, the bizarreness of our second encounter had faded a bit from my memory, but the pleasantness of our first meeting had lingered on, so I earnestly contemplated sending him a message. At this point, though, I had started to feel intimidated, not only by him, but also by the extensive machinery and muscle seemingly associated with his presence. There was also the slight problem of not knowing what to say, and asking for advice on the advancement of my Gaelic studies seemed too feeble a pretext, and I was reluctant to admit to myself that I was intrigued and perhaps a little bit charmed. Tempted as I was, my pride in the end prevailed, and I resisted all urges to pick up the phone.

But, luckily, he didn't.

At first he proposed coffee at the small café where we had met – “Touching down soon, I have fifteen minutes. Coffee?” – and soon this became a habit. We'd get a hot drink and have a quick stroll, and off he would go to the black car and to whatever kind of duty called. The well-spoken gentleman, thoughtful, attentive, and always perfectly composed, seemed to enjoy the respite from what I supposed was a quite busy life. The conversation would often return to the subject of Scottish Gaelic, which I had taken up again with some fervor after our second meeting. It was an almost unprecedented reward to my linguistic nerdiness to be able to interact with a native speaker of an almost-dead language. And of course it

was immensely flattering to be sought for company by a member of the opposite sex after so long. I fancied that Mr. McInroe was flattered himself by the attention he was receiving. He obviously wasn't used to women appreciating his linguistic prowess more than his spending power.

I couldn't imagine where this acquaintance was going, since there seemed to be no pattern and no other purpose to the meetings than to chat for a while. My better sense was irritated by the fact that I was gradually becoming alert to the sound of approaching jet engines, which was followed by an involuntary, near-compulsive reach to my phone to see if I had missed a message.

Now, if *that* wasn't a sign that I was in danger, I didn't know what was.

A younger version of me would have pushed for clarity in a similar situation. Twenty- or even thirty-year old Stella would never have tolerated living in uncertainty for more than a second. But my middle-aged self knew better, and I consciously embarked on the exercise of resisting my controlling nature and just enjoying moments, thoughts, and feelings. I began studying my mind on the matter of John, and, I am embarrassed to admit, I sometimes daydreamed about him. I reassured myself that this was all fine. The long-legged, pale-eyed gentleman would soon lose interest as the novelty of a female who was both a language and a science buff wore off, and everything would go back to normal, myself being hopefully only a little disappointed for a while, and returning to my existence of working, caring for my nearly grown child, and waiting for menopause.

What my otherwise intelligent self hadn't come to reflect upon was that the businessman with the jet and the bodyguards would certainly have a first-class coffee machine on the plane, or at home, or at his office, and he would certainly have his car at his disposal the exact moment he needed it — the belatedness of its arrival often serving as the pretext for