

MEN LIKE AIR

TOM CONNOLLY

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First published in 2016 by

Myriad Editions
www.myriadeditions.com

First printing
1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available
from the British Library

ISBN (pbk): 978-1-908434-88-3
ISBN (ebk): 978-1-908434-89-0

Designed and typeset in Stempel Garamond
by WatchWord Editorial Services, London

Printed by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

For Ruth and Joe

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‘The rain woke me,’ Dilly said.

She turned a little in half-sleep and pulled him to her, so she could rest her head.

‘Don’t think so,’ Finn whispered.

‘Yes, I could hear the rain against the windows,’ she insisted, with soft sleepy affection. ‘It was definitely raining. It woke me. It was nice. Felt dreamy.’

He let it go. He was beginning to get the hang of the way she saw things, and to know not to try to talk her out of any of it. Her eyes were closed. She made a low purr, at his thick-veined, boxer’s hands stroking the soft skin of her forearm. An elderly man across the aisle smiled at the two of them, as they repaired his skewed, lazy, ungenerous notion of youth. He was too old to notice the chasm of an age gap between a raw nineteen-year-old boy and his flamboyant twenty-four-year-old girlfriend. They all looked like kids to him, everyone on board.

Dilly slept again and Finn sat at an uncomfortable angle, so as not to wake her. She had not heard the rain. There was no rain up here. If she had looked out of the window and craned her elegant neck downwards, she would have seen the clouds, thirty thousand feet below. Finn watched the softness that fell upon her face on the rare occasions it was not tied up in speech, and he felt pretty sure that he loved her. When she turned away from him in her dreaming

it freed him and he massaged the stiffness out of the slim, bindweed muscles that roped down his neck.

The roar of the engines, which in its relentlessness had become silent, returned to him and reminded him where he was headed, provoking the shiver of excitement that had been denied his childhood. In four hours, he'd be in New York City. It still seemed impossible.

When Dilly woke, she found Finn filling out a visa waiver form.

'Why have you ticked the "have criminal record" box?'

'I've got one.'

'And you've put Glenn's address on the form.'

'We're staying at Glenn's.'

'He's in prison. You can't mention his name. What the hell, Finn!'

He scratched out Glenn's address and scrawled in microscopic handwriting above it that of Dilly's parents on Long Island, which she dictated. He changed his answer to the criminal record question, wedged the form into his pocket and kissed her on the lips. She pulled the blanket across them both and beneath it she unzipped him and rested her hand inside. Later, over Newfoundland and Nova Scotia, he watched her as she studied her Lonely Planet. Occasionally her eyes flared and she scribbled a note into the margins or drew an exuberant circle around the name of a bar or a shop that promised her the fulfilment of some uncertain desire.

'I wanna *own* the Lower East Side,' she said, and her eyes did the dance that dared him not to agree. 'I want to fuck it and come. And you call it the LES, by the way. Everything's abbreviated.'

He had read the book for himself, perhaps the only person to read a Lonely Planet guide from cover to cover, like a novel.

'LES? You sure?' he muttered.

‘Are you American or am I American? Me, I am. Am I a country peasant who left school aged twelve or is that you? It’s you.’

‘Sixteen,’ he murmured.

‘Yeah, and more fool you.’

More fool you. He thought about it. More fool you.

Morefullyou.

A couple of months ago he would have wondered what it meant, but now he knew not to look for meaning. What she said rarely signified anything. Conversation was for her all about ebb and flow, about musicality and muscularity, about humour and pace and a smattering of facts. Facts could come either with or without foundation. What made something factual was the force with which it was said.

He didn’t like conversations to drag on. He simply wanted to be her boyfriend, to keep getting away with it. He was proud of the age gap, beyond happy at the state of his sex life. He was convinced now that he was in love with her. He might tell her so after they first made love in New York City. He had intended to tell her at the top of the Empire State Building, until she’d mentioned, when he was going down on her the previous week, that she didn’t believe in the Empire State Building and that the Chrysler Building was the thinking person’s ESB.

She liked to read during the early stages of cunnilingus. It was when she put a book down, folding back the corner to mark her page, that he knew he was doing alright. The previous week, she had placed the Lonely Planet on the bed and combed her fingers through the mop of his hair between her thighs. ‘I wouldn’t be seen dead going up the Empire State Building with a load of Japanese tourists,’ she had said, and shut her eyes.

Maybe he wouldn’t say he loved her. He didn’t want to make a fool of himself. Only, it felt as though he ought to say he loved her, considering what she was doing to him most

nights and allowing him to do to her, both of which were, presumably, love.

She delved into her bag, with undue urgency. 'I have to brush my teeth or I'll go insane,' she said, rummaging furiously. Facially, she made searching for a toothbrush look like a non-pilot landing a 747 in a storm, mid-colonoscopy.

Above Boston, she snuggled up to him and kissed him tenderly, with minty breath. Her kisses were brief and soft and dared him to believe he had found peace. He lay across her, his head in her lap and his feet pressed against the cabin window, his long legs, clad in cheap, skinny, market-stall jeans, concertinaed across the seat. She stroked his hair, which he loved. He clasped the sleeve ends of his sweater and turned his head into her body. He flirted with sleep, aware of the dried blood in his nostrils and the bruising to his ribs that were the legacy of a farewell fight with his uncle and for which the silent, pushed-away part of him knew he would have to pay.

Finn was a quiet man, but when he smiled his face illuminated as if against his wishes. It was the smile that made people think they could take advantage, or take him under their wing. Neither was true. Beneath his stillness lay the capacity to be excitable, or dreamy, or incisive. He was more intelligent than he would ever admit. There were rooted explanations for his reticence, but it was also, simply, that he suspected that most thoughts which occurred to him had been voiced by others and he saw no point in repeating what had already been said.

Dilly had contrived their first meeting, when all she'd known was that he was the lad who had blown up the garden shed of a man caught punching his wife's dog to death. She had noted his boyish looks, his flushed cheeks, and the mop of jet-black hair, parted to the side to let her in on one half of his soft, youthful face. He was pretty now and in a short time he'd be handsome, no doubt in her mind. Welded to that face

was a stern, unforgiving diffidence that could have seemed ugly if he weren't so fucking beautiful to her, if his pale green eyes weren't so insanely intense and his smooth, high cheekbones so incredibly fucking fine. She used expletives to describe his beauty to her sister Phoebe in San Diego. Phoebe tried to copy Dilly but could no more swear than she could undress with the light on. Dilly told Phoebe that when she and Finn were out together passing dogs came up to him and stood patiently for him to pet them, which he did with an easy, firm love that made her wonder if he should be living wild. Sometimes this made her admire him; other times it made her envy him, and panic about all the things she would never be.

She opened her brand new journal and wrote across the top of the first page, 'April 10th 2006'. She stared at the blank paper, determined not to be obvious or banal, but nothing emerged immediately in the place of cliché and soon she saw failure in the empty page. The man sitting in front of them was not suffering the same lack of words. His voice had been irritating Dilly for some time and now she watched the back of his head lean fractionally towards the woman beside him as he showed her a photograph of his daughter.

'That's my little girl. Isn't she beautiful?'

The woman sighed but no words followed, only a sound that indicated she was precisely as stupefied by the exquisiteness of the man's spawn as etiquette demanded.

'Doesn't she just have the happiest face?' the man continued.

'What is she meant to say to that...?' Dilly hissed, under her breath. Under her breath lay Finn, who opened his eyes and saw Dilly muttering to herself. 'Is she going to say the child's got a hideous face?'

'Eh?' Finn asked.

The woman in front lobbed the ball back. 'Absolutely, she's beautiful. Oh, yeah.'

The man continued at an easy, knock-up pace. ‘I know. She has the loveliest temperament – nothing fazes her or stresses her out.’

Finn felt Dilly’s substantial abdominal muscles tauten beneath his head as she sat forward, wedging Finn against the seat-back of the row in front.

‘Just what do you imagine your daughter’s got to be stressed about?’ Dilly asked the back of the man’s head. ‘She’s, what, two years old? For Christ’s sake!’

Finn sat up and put his hands over his eyes, in the hope it would make him invisible. The man and woman in front turned in disbelief but Dilly had already returned to her Lonely Planet. Finn smiled apologetically.

‘It’s true, though,’ Dilly whispered, to a glossy photo of Times Square she felt embarrassed to have stumbled upon. ‘Why do people talk about children as if they’re adults? Let them be children. I wish I could be.’

Her eyes were full of questions she knew no one would answer for her. She had once cried as she lay next to Finn. ‘I feel like an alien,’ she had said. ‘No one sees things like I do. No one gets me.’ And he had been unnerved at seeing her both naked and tearful, as if the combination made him in some way brutish. ‘I’m an alien,’ she had snivelled.

‘No, you’re not.’ And he had wrapped the bedsheets around her.

Finn watched her now as she wrote notes in the guidebook. If he told her to apologise to the people in front, she would refuse and freeze him out and they would endure a silence that was as natural as breathing to him and a huge act of will for her. They possessed only one method of making up and they couldn’t resort to it on a plane, despite legends to the contrary. He would say nothing. He didn’t want to upset her right now. Or to lose her. He’d never meet another girl like her. And, after all, sometimes she was sweet. And after she reached orgasm she was soft and helpless and

affectionate, almost humorous. Those were his favourite moments, better even than the sex or her long, rambling, obscure stories about places she might have been to in the hazy chronological inconsistency that was her adult life thus far. And often she cooked exotic meals and put chillies or spices in her mouth while preparing the food and sucked him while the food cooked and then told him to fuck her while his manhood was burning rock-hard with fire. And it made her feel great and it made him feel like a stud, though he could feel little else. None of this did he wish to lose.

He clambered over her and stood in the aisle, did a few stretches, and took a look around. He wondered if all the people on board had sex lives similar to theirs. Why not? What did he know? Maybe the modest, embarrassed, fumbling sex with Sharon Mitcham, the girl who had asked him out on a date soon after his dad checked out... maybe that sort of sex was rare and most men regularly had their penises marinated as foreplay. Sharon Mitcham was Finn's only other lover, and she used to hug him after they made love. He was pretty sure, as he recalled it now, that on the four occasions they slept together, despite his poor showing, she'd hugged him for hours afterwards. He missed that suddenly. Sharon didn't talk much. He liked her. It occurred to him now, in mid-air above the Eastern Seaboard, just how much he had liked her. He hadn't thought about it when he was sent to the detention centre for blowing up the shed. There was too much else to think about. He went to the Mitchams' house to explain to Sharon why he had to go and they sat together on the sofa holding hands while Mr and Mrs Mitcham sympathised with Finn for all he was going through, and hid their relief. He couldn't remember feeling anything that day, for her or about her, or about leaving. But, he was feeling it now. All of a sudden, two years later. Out of the blue, at thirty-eight thousand feet. He was missing Sharon Mitcham, and all the hugging.

Dilly looked up at him. ‘Germaine Greer said, *You’re only young once, but you can be immature forever.*’ She nodded in the direction of the row in front. ‘That’s the point I was trying to make to that guy before he chose to get offended.’

Dilly often quoted women to back herself up. Finn, who, the Lonely Planet guide to New York City aside, had read one book in the past three years (*Sleepers*, stolen from the reception of his lawyer’s office), found her quotes impressive. But the name Germaine Greer meant nothing to him and he didn’t want to ask who she was and get dragged out of his own thoughts right now, and especially not into Dilly’s. He smiled politely and retreated to the back of the plane, which banked left and began the earliest stages of its descent. His stomach fluttered and, beneath the anticipation, he felt a stab of nausea at what he had come to New York City to do. He had come to tell his brother what had gone on, and to punish him for it. The trip had other purposes and dreams, of course. To accompany Dilly to her parents in Long Beach was a purpose; to see the Rangers at Madison Square Garden a dream – and to stand at the top of the Empire State Building (alone, it would seem), eat a hot dog on a street corner, find the museum where they shot the last scene of *The Squid and the Whale*. And he had convinced himself he’d bump into those guys who made *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (they just had to be the sort of people who lived in NYC) and thank them for it. Fifth Avenue, Central Park, cheap jeans, riding the subway as if he knew where he was going – all of these things awaited him, as did the ambition to meet Glenn out of prison in five months’ time and give him some of the cash he had earned, in lieu of rent. But primarily, Finn was here to deliver a deft, powerful left jab to the brother he had not seen for eighteen months (his right hook was way too dangerous), in return for the humiliation and pain his brother’s leaving for New York City had visited upon Finn’s life.

Stooping to look out of a window, he jettisoned these thoughts and those of Sharon Mitcham into the firmament and replaced them with the anticipation of what awaited him: New York City. It was a prospect like no other. These people around him now would scatter across the city, into buses, taxis, cars, into the arms of people or the grip of solitude, into a city of a billion fragments that made perfect sense for some but remained shards of confusion for others, standing at angles that did not piece together and among which Finn would hope to define the shape of his brother, Jack.