

Falling Through Clouds

a novel

by Anna Chilvers

“ when I’m in a plane, I can see the explosion, I can see me falling through clouds. I’m so scared of those few seconds of consciousness before you’re gonna die, you know, when you’re sure you’re going to die. I can’t stop thinking that way. It’s exhausting.”

from the film Before Sunrise

Chapter One

There was a guy across the aisle. He was gazing at the table top, and he didn’t look up even though I was staring at him quite hard. After Reading he finished his fourth can of beer and went off to the loo. I stopped trying to read my book and gazed out of the window at the countryside passing by. Cows, brown and white, May blossom hanging over the black water of a slow river, rooks circling above a ploughed field. I wished we’d bought some beer. He’d finished four cans and it was only one thirty.

I was on the train out of London with Dad and Marcus Sullivan - who is Dad’s colleague, my university lecturer and also, unbeknownst to Dad, my lover. I was meant to be going off to Egypt on an archaeological dig for the summer, but the trip was cancelled at the last minute owing to unstable politics. We were travelling to rural Wiltshire where my parents lived. I was trying to read *Atomised* by Michel Houellebecq. I was finding it hard to concentrate.

When the guy opposite stood up I got a waft of stale sweat and alcohol. It didn’t turn my stomach. It made me want to nuzzle my nose into his armpits. It made me want to drink until I fell over and was sick. He had greasy hair and his clothes badly needed a wash. He was wearing an old leather jacket which was scuffed white around the elbows and collar. I wondered if Dad and Marcus would notice if I moved across the aisle to sit with him. Or if they’d care. But then an old lady who’d just got on settled herself at his table with a magazine and some homemade sandwiches. He didn’t seem to notice her when he returned.

They were both going all the way to Plymouth. The conductor was a mutterer, checking the tickets and reading them under his breath – Exeter yes, Reading yes, Plymouth yes, Exmouth, change at Exeter.

When he got to them it was Plymouth yes, Plymouth again, and his voice rose a fraction as if he was pleased to get two the same in a row. I wanted him to say snap. I looked at the guy, hoping to exchange a smile, but he didn't look up. Dad handed the conductor all our three tickets together and he hummed as he scribbled on them with a biro, yes, yes, yes. The greasy guy left his ticket lying on the table where the conductor put it.

Marcus was sitting opposite me, next to the window in a rear facing seat. Dad was next to him by the aisle. Marcus has really long legs and his knees kept bumping mine under the table, which might have been accidental at first. But then I felt his foot sliding up my leg and he'd slipped off his shoe. He was in the middle of a rant about the parallels between Gilgamesh and the Odyssey – in fact he was making a point I made in one of my essays last term – and he didn't even glance at me. I knew that turned him on. Last year I would have reciprocated, snuck my foot into his lap and had a feel to see how much. But now I couldn't be bothered.

The old lady had got out a flask and was rooting around in her bag for something. Whatever it was she couldn't find it. She sighed and looked up and her eyes scanned the carriage, across to me with my book. I lifted it up in front of me so she could see the picture on the cover of a young girl in her underwear. She didn't react. She looked across to Marcus and Dad deep in conversation, along the aisle and back until her gaze fell on the man opposite her. She paused for a moment, then leaned forward.

“Excuse me, would you know if I can get any milk on this train?”

His eyes widened a little, then he smiled.

“You might be able to get some from the buffet car.”

I looked at him in surprise.

His voice was pure home counties, full of grammar school and cricket on village greens. He could read the news for the BBC. The lady with the bun showed no surprise though, only mild distress.

“Oh! I did want to avoid using the canteen.”

She looked up the carriage to where someone was coming through the doors with coffee and a paper bag of sandwiches.

“Is it that way?”

He nodded, then leaned towards her. She must have been right in the force field of his beer breath,

but if she was tempted to flinch she controlled it well.

He said "I'll get you some, I need more beer anyway."

He came back five minutes later with a carrier bag of beer, which he put on the seat next to him, and a handful of plastic containers of milk which he gave to the woman.

Marcus's foot was at the top of my thigh now and he was wriggling his toes nearer to my crotch. Soon he would find the hard bit of the seam in my jeans and push against it so it rubbed. He sometimes did that in seminars, under the table, when there were other students there, or even other tutors. Once he'd even made me come, right there in the seminar. I'd had to bite my lip and clench my thighs and buttocks as hard to the seat as I could not to show it. He always managed to keep his mind on the subject in hand though. After, I'd go to his office and he'd lock the door and we'd fuck on the floor, or sometimes on the chair or the desk if he could clear enough space. I wondered how soon he was hoping for a fuck this time.

Mum was meeting us at the station, and when we got home we'd all have some tea, then Dad would drag Marcus off to his library until dinner time. They'd chat more over wine. So I suppose it would be after that, when Mum and Dad went to bed. Unless he was hoping to get a quickie in the bathroom somewhere along the line.

His toe found the seam and pressed hard. I stood up suddenly.

"I want a beer. I'm going to the buffet."

Marcus quickly dropped his foot back to the floor. He and Dad both looked at me.

Dad said "We'll be there soon. Won't it wait?"

I shrugged and walked away down the aisle.

I changed my mind about the beer when I got to the buffet car. I looked at the books and magazines. I wondered why I was so angry with Marcus. It's not as though he'd made any promises. I always knew it was just fucking and just for fun.

Last year we giggled like silly children in the narrow bed I've had since I was seven. I thought it was hilarious sixty-nineing with my teddy sitting on the pillow. Afterwards he made it talk in silly voices and I got my old rag doll to answer back. We'd had sex in the garden too, not far from Mum and Dad's bedroom window, and he had to put his hand over my mouth to stop me shouting out. That whole fortnight was edgy

and exciting, and I supposed that's what he was hoping for again.

But this dig in Egypt had changed things. We'd been going to go together. Just me and him. He was leaving his wife and kids behind and going away with me for the summer. When it fell through, I thought we could do something else – it's not as though the world is short of archaeology. We could have gone to South America or China or anywhere. The world of the summer was our oyster. I even asked him to go to Glastonbury with me. But he said it would be too difficult. His wife would get suspicious. My Dad had invited him to come and spend more time on the book they're writing together (and have been doing for five years now), so we could have some fun there. Like last year.

Last year. Fuck! Last year was last year.

The loud speaker coughed into life and the conductor's voice announced that we would shortly be arriving at Westbury. I walked slowly back along the train to our carriage.

Marcus and Dad were standing up, pulling on their coats and lifting luggage down from the rack. I reached up to get my own suitcase, but Marcus stopped me.

"I'll do that."

I put my book in my bag and slid my arms into my jacket. We were pulling into the station and I could see Mum's green quilted figure at the far end of the platform.

The old lady was talking to the man with the leather jacket.

"But now Mother's dead I thought it was time to see a bit more of the world."

She bit into an egg sandwich and the guy nodded and smiled. For a second his glance flickered my way, but it didn't hold.

Marcus was following Dad down the aisle, carrying my suitcase as well as his own bag. I had to go. I looked back when I got to the end of the carriage. The guy was cracking open another beer. He pushed a can slightly towards the lady and said something. She shook her head.

On the platform Mum was hugging Dad, then Marcus. I stepped forward and she hugged me too.

"It's good to see you, darling."

Marcus was on the other side of me, and he put his hand on my bum and squeezed. Then they were all three walking off along the platform, taking my luggage with them. I looked at the train, and through my

reflection in the window, I could see the guy with the leather jacket. He was watching me.

The guard blew a whistle, and I didn't stop to think.

Ten seconds later the doors had closed and the train was pulling out of the station. Marcus was nearly at the end of the platform. He hadn't turned round. I watched him as we passed.