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Opening Extract from...

Feeling the Fear

And Other Intriguing Tales

Written by Carolyn Pertwee

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FEELING
the FEAR
And other intriguing tales

CAROLYN
PERTWEE

APP

Alliance Publishing Press

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FEELING *the* FEAR

To go or not to go, that is the question. Linda sat in the airport lavatory clutching her evacuated stomach. She prayed that the twenty milligrams of Diazepam swilled down with vodka would soon give her the courage she required to step outside and catch the plane for a two week holiday in Portugal. She knew she was being silly, she knew she had far more chance of being killed in the mini-cab on the way to Gatwick than in an aeroplane. She was, after all, a rational human being.

Hugh had been so patient and reassuring the night before.

‘Feel the fear Lin, tackle it head on. It’s the thought that’s freaking you out.’

But it wasn’t just the thought; she could not eradicate from her mind last night’s dream, so vivid and so real. Roaring down the runway, an ear shattering explosion, the plane shaking and rocking violently from side to side, the cabin filling up with smoke, the overhead lockers flying open and thousands of oranges cascading out on top of her, their skins bursting open and bright red blood spurting out, splattering her face and hair. She tried to breathe but a body fell on top of her. She was suffocating as she tried to push the body away.

It was Hugh. She had been dreaming. Hugh took her in his arms and hugged her awake. Linda had sat up in bed, surveying their bedroom with relief till her eyes took in the bulging suitcase on the floor across the room.

She turned to Hugh and said, 'I'm not going tomorrow. I've got too much work on. Anyway I'd much rather spend my 30th birthday with you.'

Hugh smiled at her. 'You've been dreaming about planes again haven't you?'

Linda nodded. She had frequent nightmares about flying but this one had been different, this one felt as though she was foreseeing her own death. She started to tell him the dream but then clammed up as she remembered the old saying, 'Friday night's dream Saturday told, will always come true, however old.' It was just after midnight on Saturday morning.

'Oh God!' she said. 'If I tell you it might come true'.

'Oh Piglet!' Hugh tried not to show his exasperation, he kissed her on the tip of her nose. 'Of course you must go. If you give in to this fear you'll never get on a plane again. You've got to be brave. When you're actually up there it'll be a piece of cake, you'll see, you'll wonder why you were getting in such a state.'

Hugh didn't understand fear; he exuded confidence in everything he did. He wasn't afraid to be himself, holding strong and often controversial views on life which he had no inhibitions in airing both as a journalist and amongst their many friends. Linda idealised him and after five years of marriage still sought his admiration and approval. Hence this holiday with her old, recently divorced school friend Virginia, who had suggested she come over to celebrate her birthday.

Linda had been secretly hoping that Hugh was planning some sort of surprise for the big day and so was doubly disappointed when he insisted that she went.

She looked at her watch, it was five to seven. She should

have gone through the gate by now. The plane was scheduled for take off at seven thirty.

‘Come on, girl, stop thinking about it. Just get up and go - piece of cake,’ spoke the voice of reason.

Linda obediently got up, flushed the toilet, picked up her hand luggage and stepped outside. She went over to the basins and washed her hands, surveying her face critically in the mirror, her wide set brown eyes looked strangely disconnected as they stared forlornly back.

She looked tired and her make-up had that end of the day look about it. She reapplied some lipstick, cursing the mole above her lip which she detested and everyone else told her was attractive. She still looked like a schoolgirl with her turned up nose, another feature she disliked and had earned her the name of ‘Piglet’ when she was at school. She combed her straight fair hair cut pageboy style emphasising the squareness of her jaw.

‘Take a good look, Lin, you might never see yourself again, you’re going against your horoscope - remember?’ the inner voice whispered in her ear.

Please don’t let’s go through that again. Linda closed her eyes and tried to forget but its stark message wouldn’t go away:

‘Use today to reflect, make no rash decisions and do not undertake a journey - stay at home and attend to matters of the heart...’ She’d shown it to Hugh at breakfast suggesting that she change her flight to later in the week or perhaps not go at all.

‘Don’t be absurd Lin! Do you realise if everyone believed that garbage one twelfth of the world’s population couldn’t go to work!’

Of course he was right, she was just using the horoscope to justify not getting on the plane. She must pull herself together, stiff upper lip and all that. She breathed deeply drawing her

shoulders back and set off purposefully out of the Ladies toilet.

‘This is the final call for passengers flying to Faro on Flight number 202, will they please go immediately to gate thirteen.’ Linda’s ears pricked up at the announcement and her heart began to thump as she headed for gate thirteen.

‘You know, Lin,’ the inner voice spoke again, ‘you don’t have to go, you can turn back now and go home, nobody’s stopping you. Yes, Hugh will be cross, and yes, Virginia will be disappointed - but just think what you might be avoiding.’

Linda stopped. She was just a few feet from the gate, the choice was still hers, she was still in charge of her own destiny.

‘Don’t be a bloody idiot,’ came the other voice. ‘Nothing is going to happen to you except in two hours time you’ll be in Portugal and you’ll wonder what on earth you were doing standing dithering at Gatwick for - right?’

A few minutes later she was walking down the enclosed gang-plank to the plane’s entrance like a lamb to the slaughter.

She felt unreal as she fastened her seat belt for the fifth time bouncing forward to ensure it was secured. They had been waiting for twenty minutes while a mechanic in an orange boiler suit was opening and closing a fire exit door a few rows in front of them. The plane was packed but the conversation muted. Linda was in an aisle seat next to a plump and busy woman sorting out the contents of a bulging bag. She kept smiling at Linda who smiled briefly back and looked away. She couldn’t talk; her fear needed her undivided concentration.

The mechanic opened and closed the door yet again and then scratched his head.

‘What do you think he’s doing with that door?’ said the busy woman. ‘It’s making me nervous.’

Before Linda could reply the captain burst out of the cockpit and joined the mechanic.

‘What’s going on?’ he barked. The captain was an unhealthy looking man with a pale grey pallor: his uniform jacket had one button missing and fitted uneasily round his short stocky frame. He stood straight-legged, his arms folded, his head jutting forward as he listened to what the mechanic, who spoke quietly out of earshot, had to say. Both men then inspected the door. The captain straightened up and said quite clearly, ‘Oh, come on - it’s all right.’ With that he turned and strutted back into the cockpit, slamming the door behind him. The mechanic shrugged, picked up his tool bag and walked away down the aisle.

Linda felt paralysed with fear, if she could have moved her limbs she would have insisted on getting off the plane. The engines had started to warm up and the air hostesses had stepped into place to demonstrate, in the unlikely event of an accident, the various safety measures. She tried to concentrate on what they were saying and rationalised with herself that they wouldn’t be doing this job if they seriously felt they were at any moment about to die. The plane started to taxi towards the runway. Captain Cox announced himself and their imminent departure. Linda picked up her book and looked at it grimly.

‘Excuse me,’ the busy woman said.

Linda pretended not to hear and stared intently at the page as though engrossed. She then felt her sleeve being tugged.

She turned towards the woman, ‘Yes?’

‘You’ve got your book upside down.’ She smiled sweetly and with great understanding. ‘I’m Mary by the way.’

The noise of the engines obliterated any further conversation. Linda breathed in and out deeply trying to control her mounting

panic. The plane hovered a second revving and straining at the leash before it started off along the runway gathering speed by the second. Linda could scarcely breathe now, she was feeling the fear - Oh God was she feeling the fear!

In a minute it'll go up and then the worst will be over, Linda told herself. The plane was still on the ground at full speed - there can't be much more runway left!

Mary suddenly clutched Linda's arm, her face was stricken.

'This should have gone up by...' she didn't finish her sentence.

There was a deafening roar and then a grinding noise as the engines were thrown into reverse and the body of the plane shook violently. Linda turned round to seek reassurance from the other passengers but their faces were white masks of terror. The plane was trying to stop but Linda knew it was too late and she could almost feel the heat from the flames that at any moment would engulf them; each particle of hair on her head felt as though it were being pulled out from the roots, her heart was beating and banging against the wall of her chest. She gasped for air, Mary grabbed her hand, they squeezed each other hard and then brought their heads together. She thought of Hugh safe at home. She thought of her recently widowed mother now about to lose her only daughter. She saw them both standing side by side staring at her coffin - and then the plane miraculously stopped.

The deathly hush suddenly evaporated and everyone began to speak at once anxious to share the feelings that all of them had just experienced and the joy of being alive.

The terse voice of Captain Cox came through: "Owing to a technical fault we have decided to abort take-off. Please remain calm and leave your seat belts fastened."

Twenty minutes later the passengers of flight number 202

returned on spongy legs to a hospitality lounge at Gatwick to await the repair of the technical fault. Linda and Mary had supported each other off the plane and were sitting side by side on a comfortable sofa drinking champagne - the compliments of Vulcan Airways.

‘This is a bribe if you ask me,’ said Mary downing her champagne with gusto. ‘And I’m going to need a few more to get me back on that awful plane!’

‘Nothing will get me back - I’m going home,’ Linda said.

Mary’s jaw dropped open. ‘You’re not!’ she gasped. ‘Gosh you are brave!’

‘Brave? Hardly - my husband’s going to be furious with me.’

‘I’d love to have the courage to walk away but I feel like I’ve been sort of programmed to go - if you know what I mean,’ she laughed nervously. ‘Besides my daughter’s expecting me, I can’t let her down now can I?’ She looked appealingly at Linda.

‘No, of course you can’t.’ Linda leant forward and kissed Mary on the cheek. She smelt of sweet powder and lily of the valley scent. The two women swiftly bade each other farewell.

Linda felt like a Judas as she walked away from Mary. Perhaps she should have told her about the horoscope and her dream. She turned round at the door and looked back across the room; Mary was once more immersed in rummaging through the contents of her bag. She sent this kind woman a silent prayer before she left the room.

An hour later Linda sunk blissfully into her seat on the train back to Victoria. She had decided not to telephone Hugh in case he’d tried to persuade her to get back on the plane. Much better to just turn up, she assured herself, ‘fait accompli’. Fortunately she wasn’t being met at Faro airport. Hugh had booked her

into a hotel for the night. She would ring Virginia and explain everything when she got home. Vulcan Airways had been very civil when she told them that the false take-off had brought on an asthma attack; she'd wheezed several times before embarking on the conversation. They offered her a full refund and had her luggage removed from the faulty plane. Now all she had to face was Hugh.

The taxi dropped Linda off outside the pretty little mews house in Pimlico at quarter to eleven. She was surprised to see that the downstairs lights were off; Hugh usually worked late into the night. Tobias their tabby cat was sitting on the doorstep looking vexed.

Linda bent down to stroke him. 'Has that naughty Hughie locked you out?' She opened the front door. Tobias swept the length of his body against her legs before slithering through in front of her. Linda closed the door and leaned against it savouring the moment of once more being in the home she thought she'd never see again. She walked into the sitting room switching on the light. There was an empty bottle and a half filled glass of red wine standing on the coffee table. She smiled to herself. Hugh rarely drank and red wine made him horny. She began to undress watched indifferently by Tobias who had arranged himself along the back of the sofa. She stripped naked then slipped out into the hall and listened – all was quiet. She tiptoed into the downstairs bathroom and quickly showered the strains of the day away.

Five minutes later, refreshed and clad only in a T-shirt which barely covered the edge of her bottom, she crept up the stairs to face her husband.

The door to their bedroom was slightly ajar, a Bach fugue,

Hugh's favourite, was playing on the radio. Linda realised she was trembling, she felt like a child about to encounter the Headmaster for misbehaving. Hugh was fifteen years her senior and could be very stern. She edged the door open. The room was lit by a warm glow from the bedside lamp. She leant sideways and peered in. She blinked and looked again; it wasn't Hugh sitting up in bed but a statuesque woman, naked from the waist up: her splendid breasts brazenly displayed like two prize melons above the sheets. She was reading *A Brief History of Time* by Stephen Hawking and sipping a glass of red wine. Linda recognised her at once; it was Delia Plume, the witty editor of *Thinking Woman*. She had become something of a cult figure, known for her acidic pen and caustic wit and, in recent years, had livened up many a late night chat show on T.V. Hugh wasn't in the room but the en-suite bathroom door was closed, his striped towelling dressing-gown was strewn across the bed, his clothes lay abandoned on a chair.

Linda retreated behind the door again, her heart once more on the rampage. Suddenly everything fell into place: Hugh's insistence on her going away, his distracted air, the way he'd hastily put down the phone when she'd walked into his study the previous day, the lack of love making over the past few months, but he'd been working round the clock and she had accepted his excuses of being too tired. Even that very morning he'd slipped early out of bed before she'd woken; in the past they'd always made love before a separation. Everyone had warned her before she married Hugh that he was a womaniser, even her vague and scatty mother, who was a mine of mis-quotations, had said 'You'll have to watch him, Lin, a tiger doesn't change his stripes or do I mean zebra, dear?'

But Hugh had promised that his days of womanising were

over, that he took his marriage vows seriously and like a fool she had believed him. She felt intimidated by the impostor in her bed - not only her superior breasts - Hugh laughingly referred to hers as 'mini mams' but by her obvious intellect as well; Linda had never got past the first chapter of Stephen Hawkings' book; nor would she want to before having sex and with someone else's husband! Suddenly flight 202 to Faro seemed an idyllic dream with Mary cosy and comfortable at her side. Instead she was standing in a nightmare scenario facing a confrontation with her husband and his intellectual mistress which would effectively end their, what she had thought, happy marriage.

'You can walk away,' said the inner voice. 'Nobody knows you're here...'

'But I shall always know and I couldn't live with that,' Linda silently replied. She pushed open the bedroom door and boldly stepped inside.

Delia looked up startled, her arm jerked out sideways, the red wine tossed violently in the glass like a sudden tidal wave. 'Christ almighty, who are you?' her voice conjured up smoke filled bars. She was a magnificent looking woman on a grand scale: her faded ginger hair piled high on her head in a cluster of careless curls, heavy lidded olive eyes flecked with amber, her face a mass of freckles.

'You know perfectly well who I am.' Linda glanced over nervously to the still closed bathroom door.

'Do I?' Delia looked her up and down and raised an eyebrow; Linda wished she had left her clothes on. 'Hugh told me there was a *cat* - he certainly didn't mention *you*!' She half smiled showing the famous gap between her two front teeth.

Linda was so taken aback by this woman's apparent lack of shame or modesty, not even bothering to cover up her breasts,

that she couldn't think of how to continue the conversation. She tugged her T-shirt down and with as much dignity as she could muster walked across the room towards the bathroom. She stopped and turned towards Delia who was watching her curiously.

'You've got five minutes to get out of my house - I'm going to speak to Hugh,' Linda indicated the bathroom door.

'*Your* house?' Delia said incredulously.

'Yes, *my* house,' Linda felt her strength returning. 'I'm Hugh's wife.'

Delia looked aghast, she put her glass down. "His *wife*? Oh my God!" she said and covered her head with her hands. 'What a mess! You're supposed to be in Portugal.'

'Yes, well I'm not – sorry to have been so inconsiderate.' Linda replied sarcastically, feeling the balance of power returning in her favour. 'Now will you please *go*!'

'What a cock-up!' Delia said, ignoring Linda's last remark.

'In the circumstances - not an expression I would use!' Linda quipped back. 'And now, if you don't mind, I'm going to speak to my husband.' She opened the bathroom door; it was hot and steamy and smelt of Badedas, a towel lay crumpled on the floor but Hugh was not in sight.

She stepped back into the bedroom. 'Where is he?' She suppressed an urge to peer under the bed; French farce was not Hugh's style.

Delia lowered her hands and looked at her watch. 'He's on his way to Portugal,' she said wearily. 'To surprise you on your birthday.'

Linda stood colt-like staring at Delia in disbelief and then burst into tears. Delia clambered out of the bed, pulling on Hugh's dressing gown. She hurried over and put her arm round

Linda's shoulders; the dressing gown felt damp and smelt of Hugh. She led her back to the bed where she sat her down and listened sympathetically while Linda recounted the day's events. She didn't even laugh when Linda told her about the horoscope and said that wild horses wouldn't have got her on that plane either. She then explained to Linda that her flat was being treated for dry rot and that Hugh had offered her the use of the house for a few days while he was in Portugal in return for feeding the cat.

'Now,' she said, 'we've got to get you off to Portugal, with any luck we might get you on the same plane as Hugh. I don't think his was leaving till one o'clock.'

Thirty-five minutes later at 11.40 p.m. the two women were bowling along the M4 towards Heathrow Airport in Delia's red Fiat car. She drove in the slow lane just in case any speed cops were around; she was over the limit, though, she assured Linda, one of her ex-husbands said she drove better when she was fuelled with drink.

Linda had been amazed at the way Delia had taken over; it seemed she had contacts in all the right places including British Airways with whom she'd organised the ticket on condition it was collected as near to midnight as was possible. It was the same flight as Hugh's though he was unaware that she was joining him.

'You can surprise the old sod instead – people who organise surprise parties should be shot!' Delia scoffed. She was surprisingly derogative in all her references to Hugh, but then she'd known him for years she said. They'd cut their teeth together on the Guardian as journalists.

'We were younger than you,' she snorted derisively, 'if that's possible.'

Linda laughed. ‘Oh come on Delia! I’m not that young.’ She looked at her watch. ‘In fact, in exactly 10 minutes I shall be 30. I was born on the stroke of midnight.’

Delia grinned. ‘It’s my birthday next week – I wish I was going to be 30.’

Linda looked warmly across at her as they drove along; she felt that they were kindred spirits and wondered why Hugh had never introduced them and they shared the same birth sign.

Suddenly the Fiat was flooded with a harsh light as a large lorry pulled up close behind them.

Linda turned round to look, ‘Oh gosh! He’s a bit close for comfort!’

‘Certainly is. I’m pulling out.’ Delia pulled sharply out into the middle lane not noticing the white van coming up close behind them causing the driver to swerve into the third lane, blasting his horn and gesticulating at them furiously. ‘I detest white vans,’ said Delia unreasonably, ‘they always drive too fast.’

At that moment the lorry they had avoided pulled up alongside them and overtook them also blasting his horn.

‘Bastard!’ Delia yelled. She noticed the Spanish number plate, ‘A Spanish Dick on wheels! We’ll show him!’ She put her foot down on the accelerator.

‘Please don’t,’ said Linda, her heart was racing.

Delia glanced at the frightened face beside her. She patted Linda on her arm and reluctantly pulled into the slow lane allowing the lorry to get away. ‘Sorry love,’ she said. ‘You’ve had enough scares for one day.’

An exit sign for Terminals 1,2 and 3 appeared.

A thousand miles away Flight 202 had landed safely at

Faro Airport. As Mary stepped out of the plane the heat of an exhausted day wafted up to meet her. She looked up into the ink blue sky alive with winking blinking stars and let out a long sigh of relief. She thought about her frightened little friend with whom she'd thought she was going to die and felt sad that she didn't know her name.

The Fiat turned off the motorway. Linda checked the time and smiled, they would make it just in the nick of time. She felt happier than she'd ever felt in her life; her fear of flying had somehow magically disappeared. She turned to Delia, 'I don't know how to thank you, you've just been wonderful.'

'You can thank me by staying on that plane and not reappearing half way through the night and scaring me half to death!' They both laughed.

'No way!' Linda said, 'and I shall be with Hugh. I'll give him your love, shall I?'

Delia looked across at Linda, their eyes met briefly.

'Yes, give the old bastard a kiss from me. Tell him he's a lucky man.' She brought her eyes back to the road too late to avoid the Spanish lorry slewed across their path, the white van in flames, crushed beneath it. The back doors of the lorry had swung open, wooden crates were toppling and tumbling out smashing on to the ground and breaking open. Thousands of oranges spilled out on to the road.

The Fiat and its passengers didn't stand a chance.

It was one minute to twelve.

Hugh never knew what happened on that night in June. He could only speculate on why his wife and mistress were killed in the same car on the way to Heathrow Airport and it would haunt him till his dying day.