



# The Silver Greyhound

By Peter Holdroyd

The Stewardess must be new, he thought

She smiled at him professionally and bent towards him so she could be heard over the roar of the engines.

'I'm sorry, Mr Martindale, but I have a lady in Economy who is pregnant, and needs more room. This' – she indicated the seat beside him on which he'd placed his white canvas bag – 'is the last place available up here in Business, and I'd be grateful if you would let the lady sit here.'

Martindale gazed at her for a moment, wondering what he should tell her. More experienced stewardesses recognised his white bag and respected his wish to be left in peace during the flight, but this one... It was just his bad luck to be faced with the kind of flight attendant who obviously hadn't finished her training. There were only a few men like him left, and he guessed that reference to such people carrying white canvas bags might have slipped down the list of priorities in cabin staff training school.

'I, er, did pay for the extra seat,' he said at last. 'Amanda,' he added, reading her name badge.

She wrinkled her smooth brow into a pleading look. 'Please, Mr Martindale. Mrs Epstein will be no trouble, and she is in considerable discomfort just now.'

He would bet she used that look very successfully to get her own way – his daughter had used the same technique.

He sighed at the memory. 'All right.'

'I'll put your bag in a locker,' Amanda offered.

'You can't,' he said, pulling his right sleeve up just far enough for her to see the black handcuff and chain which connected him to the handle of the bag. Her eyes widened.

'Can't you, er, unfasten it?' she asked. 'I mean bags are supposed to go in the lockers anyway...'

'No,' he replied. 'I don't have a key. If I did, there wouldn't be much point in being coupled to the bag, would there?'

She thought about it. 'I suppose not.'

'Go and fetch Mrs... Epstein, was it?'

'Yes.'

She smiled briefly, mission accomplished, and disappeared aft through the curtains into Economy.

Amanda looked to be in her mid-twenties, the same age his daughter had been when – the breath caught in his throat – ten years ago, she'd been diagnosed with ovarian cancer and died within a year. Two months later his wife, who never recovered from the shock, passed away as well. He felt his eyes moistening and brushed away the gathering tears with his left hand.

Behind him, the curtain parted and Amanda returned, guiding a heavily pregnant woman. He lifted his bag onto his lap and Mrs Epstein sat down carefully. Amanda checked she was comfortable before leaving them.

Martindale studied her surreptitiously. Dark hair, mid-thirties, olive skinned, fresh complexioned. She must have had a convincing reason for flying in her condition, he thought; airlines didn't usually like to carry women in the late stages of pregnancy.

She turned to him. 'It's very good of you to give up your seat,' she said. 'The stewardess said you'd paid for it but weren't using it.'

'It – it's for my bag,' he replied, glancing down at his lap.

'It looks heavy.'

He smiled at her. 'I'll be able to hand it over when we arrive at Tel Aviv. How long before your baby arrives?'

She looked at him. 'Not long now.' Her eyes glanced down.

There was no delight in her words, as he would have expected. If his daughter had lived, she would have been this woman's age, with perhaps a child herself.

'Are you looking forward to it?' he asked.

She continued to stare at her bump. 'It will be... a whole new experience.'

He smiled. 'Yes. I remember when my daughter was born. She was our only child. My wife worried for months about not being very maternal, not knowing how to bring up the baby. But she just instinctively did everything a mother needed to do. It was love at first sight for me, but I think my wife loved the child even before she was born.'

He was watching her as he spoke, and she glanced at him again, shaking her head. 'I don't think I feel quite the same about this.' She patted her bump then glanced at his bag.

He smiled reassuringly. 'I expect you'll have all the right feelings when it arrives. Do you know whether it's a boy or a girl?'

She shook her head. 'What are you carrying?' she asked.

It sounded an ingenuous enough question. 'Books,' he replied. 'Rare books.'

It was the usual answer he gave to such enquiries, and usually it was enough to satisfy the questioner.

'In English?' she asked, 'Classics?'

'Written in English for the most part,' he said, inventing on the fly, 'but not all of them are old classics.'

'Can I see them?'

'Ah, er, no. I'm sorry, but the bag is locked and I don't have the key on me.'

He pressed the service button and Amanda came through the curtain. He ordered a gin and tonic.

'Do you want anything to drink?' he asked Mrs Epstein.

She shook her head. 'No thank you. It – it seems to go straight through me and I don't want to leave my seat again.'

He smiled, understanding. Amanda went aft.

'Aircraft toilets are pretty horrible, aren't they?' he said.

'I don't know,' she said. 'I've never flown before.'

'Pray it's something you never discover first-hand,' he joked.

Amanda brought his drink, smiling. He thanked her.

'She is a nice girl,' said Mrs Epstein.

'Very helpful,' he said, 'but new to the business, I think.'

She turned her head slightly so she could see him. 'What makes you say that?'

'She didn't recognise a... didn't recognise me,' he said. 'I'm a frequent flyer.'

He ran the fingers of his left hand down the material of his tie.

There was a click as the public address system woke up.

*'This is Captain John Stoddard again, ladies and gentlemen. We're beginning to descend towards Tel Aviv airport, and should be landing in about twenty minutes. The temperature on the ground is...'*

Martindale noticed the throttles close and the aircraft tilt into a dive. A chime reminded everyone to fasten their seatbelts. He stopped listening as he became aware that Mrs Epstein had suddenly gone as white as a sheet.

'Are you all right?' he turned towards her as best he could, and didn't wait for an answer, hitting the service bell again.

'No, no, I shall be okay,' she said, panting.

He reached across with his left hand and gripped hers in what he hoped would be a reassuring way. She stared at it. It was, he recollected, the first time she'd flown.

'You'll be all right,' he said, 'flying is the safest form of public transport by a long way.'

She stared at him, still ashen, and said nothing. He plunged on.

'This plane lands and takes off all day, every day, and there's no reason to suppose today will be any different from yesterday. You'll see: we'll soon be down safely. Where are you going after we land?'

She shook her head, still without replying, and glanced at the small LCD monitor screen above them, where the plane's position was plotted, along with its airspeed and altitude. She swallowed.

He read the data as well, and noted the aircraft was now descending through five thousand feet. Amanda appeared beside them.

'Mrs Epstein seems slightly distressed,' Martindale said. 'I've told her how safe we really are, but I'm not sure she's convinced. I was worried in case the baby might be...'

He trailed off, hoping that his concern would communicate itself adequately to Amanda.

The plane, he noticed, had descended through four thousand feet. The descent was fairly steep, he thought, but it wasn't unusual when landing at Middle-eastern airports where there was always a greater threat of a terrorist rocket attack. The aircrews would stay as high as possible as long as they could before heading for the ground.

Amanda was the epitome of reassurance as she repeated much of what he'd said to Mrs Epstein.

'I expect your baby's well protected in there,' Amanda said, reaching forward and patting Mrs Epstein's swollen belly. The woman brushed her hand away. For a moment Amanda frowned, and it didn't seem to Martindale like she was frowning at having her hand removed – she shouldn't have touched the passenger and no doubt accepted the rebuke. She raised her eyes to his.

'Oh, I'm told I should apologise, Mr Martindale.'

'About what?'

'The Purser said I should have realised from the Silver Greyhounds on your tie that you were a Queen's Messenger and left you alone.'

The Silver Greyhound motif was embroidered into the neckties of members of the Corps of Queen's Messengers, a reminder of King Charles II, who had originally awarded them this unique symbol of their office.

Martindale waved his hand at her in an attempt to get her to lower her voice.

Mrs Epstein, her eyes fixed on the LCD screen which showed their altitude descending towards three thousand feet, suddenly spoke.

'Today, you will not be delivering your... books... to the British Embassy in Tel Aviv,' she said, darting quick glances at him, but always returning to the little screen. 'Today, you will go to hell – and I shall be with my brothers in the arms of Allah.'

'What!' cried Martindale. Amanda reeled back.

Mrs Epstein clutched her bump. 'Inside here is a pressure switch and a lot of plastic explosive – and you can do nothing about it. Allāhu Akbar!'

The sky three thousand feet above the city of Tel Aviv was suddenly filled with orange flame and black smoke. Moments later, the sound of the explosion reached those on the ground watching in horror as the remains of the inbound London flight plummeted towards the earth.