

A DAY IN ETERNITY

Kathryn Gabriel Loving



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*For Andrew, with love.
May the blessings be.*

*Oh! Brave New World, what proof have we
That all the things that tarnish thee
Will definitely never be
Continued in the Next?*

—John Gillespie Magee, Jr.

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1

SLIPPING

ANSON ROE'S BODY slammed against something solid and came to rest inside a heap of twisted metal and debris. After moments of falling and rising through gradient phases of consciousness, he felt nothing but an aching nicotine craving that wouldn't leave him alone. He started to reach for a tin of Player's in his breast pocket then remembered he'd smoked all the cigarettes he'd brought from England. *Bloody hell*, he thought. *Now I'll have to go back to rolling my own.*

Gradually he became aware of swollen eyes, screaming ears, and labored breathing. He realized that the plane he was flying was no longer airborne, the cockpit that cocooned his body no longer existed. Instinct urged him to pull himself from the wreckage before it caught fire. By sheer willpower he moved ever so slightly, triggering an explosion of pain in his cranium and sending bolts of lightning down his spine to his extremities. In rapid succession, an iridescent light cascaded through his optic nerves and bubbles of pleasure hummed throughout his nervous system, squelching the pain and placing his awareness—elsewhere.

The floodlight in Anson's mind dimmed, and there appeared before him his old dorm room where he'd attended agricultural aviation school in America. He'd spent half of 1978 in this cramped cell, with its avocado cinder-block walls and orange-striped curtains. A stack of flight manuals lay open haphazardly on his former desk. Orchestral music blared from the small television set on his make-shift coffee table, heralding an Air Force film he'd watched every night when the station signed off the air.

He allowed his imagination to glide with the T-38 Talon supersonic jet as it rolled, looped, and rocketed through voluminous clouds against a cobalt sky. “Oh! I have slipped the surly bonds of earth on laughter-silvered wings,” echoed a baritone voice as if from heaven. “Sunward I’ve climbed ... and done a hundred things you have not dreamed of.” These words had always uplifted Anson, but he considered the final line a bit too sentimental. “Put out my hand, and touched the face of God.”

I may have to rethink my position on that, he realized as the room faded. Dropping into the abyss, he had another thought. *Where is Vivianne?*

2

THE HIGHER WE SOAR

ANSON ROUSED TO familiar environs on his feet and physically intact yet unaccountably dizzy. He took a moment to allow his mind to catch up with what he was now seeing—neither crash site nor dorm room, but the little Oklahoma airfield where he'd sprayed crops in 1980. In front of him stood Panhandle Ag Air's hangar as testified to in bright-red letters across the length of the steel building. The company's pair of buttery-yellow Volkswagen Beetles, each accented by large, black polka dots, huddled in front of the hangar. He gazed on the nearby runway that cut diagonally across the square-mile airfield, a perpetual welcome mat for aerial workers and the occasional visitor. He pivoted on his heels, visualizing a pilot's view of the short-grass rangeland of the High Plains imposed upon by acres of crops flourishing in the radiant heat of the morning sun. He relaxed, for he'd always felt at home here.

Anson's smile flattened. *Something's not right.* He had no memory of driving to the airfield that morning. He couldn't shake the sensation that he was on the wrong continent, in the wrong hemisphere, as if he'd been literally plucked from one place and reinserted into another. A scene flashed before his eyes—not the usual field of cornstalks, but cotton tended by farmers wearing muslin turbans rather than tractor-logo caps. The vision left him just as abruptly as it came, nearly throwing him to the ground in its wake.

The dream of crashing the aeroplane must have put me off my stride, he told himself as he regained his senses. Wondering if he

was still dreaming, he fluttered his eyelids more than once. *No, no change.* He shook his head to dispel the alarming images, while his mind slipped into place as easily as pulling on a pair of old shoes.

Still, something about the absence of people at the airfield impressed upon him. Overhead the sky was void of air traffic. The nearby highway, usually overrun by eighteen-wheelers day and night, looked empty. As far as he could tell he was alone—no sight or sound of another living soul for miles around. He stumbled to the hangar and tried the doors. They were locked. If the VW Beetles were present, he reasoned, then the Pawnee and Thrush were probably in the hangar, everyone gone for the day. Longing for home himself, he reached into the pocket of his cargo pants for the key to the company Beetle assigned to him and found nothing. He searched his other pockets with the same result. He rushed to his Beetle and discovered he'd left the door unlocked, but there was no key in the ignition. He searched the floor under and around the driver's seat—all the other seats had been pulled long ago to make room for equipment. He leaned to rummage through the glove box and found only a map and tire gauge. The car was a coffin in the heat and smelled of chemicals. He stepped out and rushed to jiggle the door handle of its mate, but of course it was locked.

That's bloody inconvenient, he thought. *How am I to get home?*

He removed his cap and scratched his head. *If only I had a cigarette.* He wondered if Vivianne had returned from the *Daily Record* yet. Sometimes she picked up a pack for him on her way home from work. He could use a cup of good ol' American joe to clear his mind—Waster's Choice, she called it. A shot of Jim or Jack would do nicely too.

The landscape suddenly swirled around him in a brief fit of vertigo. Heatstroke would explain his lapses, he thought once he

stabilized. *Best get out of the sun.* He stormed around to the north side of the hangar to stand in a narrow band of shade and have a think.

Straightaway he started obsessing over Vivianne. They'd quarreled recently. The timing and context escaped him now, but he knew how these arguments went. She'd grumble about him spending too much time at the airfield. He'd explain that his boss squeezed him for every penny he paid him, that he kept him working from dawn to nearly midnight hosing out the hangar or overhauling an engine. He'd contend that she needed to learn that his career came first, that he'd borrowed, begged, and all but swindled tuition money from everyone he knew for commercial flight school in Georgia. Not only that, he'd wasted more than a year struggling with Immigrations for over-staying his visa, and he didn't know how long he could maintain a crop-dusting career at his age. Now that he was finally flying, he needed to concentrate on that. Most of the time she understood, but in his opinion she sometimes lost her perspective—like all women.

Yet in his mind Vivianne was not everywoman. By world standards, he didn't think she would win beauty pageants, but he liked the way her olive skin gave luminosity to her coppery-brown eyes and her untamed black hair lent an air of Bohemianism to her otherwise quiet demeanor. She was an ideas person in search of a few windmills to tilt at, much like himself. He'd never imagined he'd find a woman like her in the proverbial No Man's Land of the Oklahoma Panhandle.

"Flat land is so surreal," she'd told him once. "In New Mexico, there's always a mountain in view, something to chart against. Here, I don't know where I am half the time. It's not fair that you get to soar among the eagles while I'm stuck on the ground."

"You'll cultivate an eye for the subtle beauty of this place," he'd responded.

“A survival mechanism, I suspect,” she’d retorted. “I bet even we could appreciate beauty in hell.”

The Panhandle, with its scarcity of water and trees, incessant wind, and harsh climate, was deemed inhospitable by most, but it was definitely not hell to Anson’s eye, for it had its moments. He had arrived in March and watched as Spring dipped a brush in pots of black-eyed Susans, purple prairie clovers, scarlet sage, or Texas bluebonnets, and painted broadly across the earth tones of the plains and freshly tilled farmland one color at a time. Even the dandelions conferred a brilliant yellow river against the bruised purple of an approaching storm. He longed for verdant England, but the Panhandle was the only place where he could land an aerial-spraying job in all of America. He felt he needed to capitalize on this opportunity to accumulate flight hours, or he would never be able to work in England. “Make hay while the sun shines,” Anson’s employer always said. His job here was just a stopgap, a sojourn in what he hoped would be a long, global career. He could think of worse places to be.

In the early weeks of Anson’s tenure at Panhandle Ag Air, he’d reveled in the excitement of flying by day and the solitude small-town life on the High Plains afforded him during his free time. As summer came on, a longing for stimulating companionship of the feminine variety created a foothold in his psyche. Not that women weren’t available, they were, but he didn’t fancy the typical farm girl physique and sensibility. Vivianne appeared suddenly as if his imagination had created her.

He was taxiing his Pawnee to the hanger after a particularly grueling day of spraying when he spotted her leaning against his Beetle. He quickly surveyed the possibilities, the camera bag hanging off one shoulder, the poured-into blue jeans, and the camel-colored, western-style boots stacked on three-inch heels

that failed to disguise her petite stature. She waved self-consciously to him as he stepped onto the wing. *Ah, unsure to boot ... perfect!* He had underestimated her from the beginning.

When he hopped to the ground, her smile broadened in amusement. *Bloody hell!* He looked down at his body. Crop-dusting ruined clothes, so it didn't matter what one wore on the job. This morning he'd donned his pink khakis and work shirt, both stained by a stowaway red rag in the hot wash. His face turned the same peppermint tint as his clothes.

"Anson Roe?" She thrust a hand toward him.

"The same." He politely waved off her hand as he rubbed his own with the culprit rag. "Sorry. Grease, sweat, insecticide. Not a good combination."

"I'm Vivianne Keene ... from the *Daily Record* in Guymon? Nice hat." She pointed to the baby blue baseball cap on his head. He'd sewn a Union Jack patch to the front and had written "A V ROE" in black Magic Marker across the bill. He hoped the flag said, "Yes, if you haven't guessed by the accent, I'm English." Everyone asked anyway.

"Thank you, ma'am," he said. He suspected he was grinning like a fool.

"I was told you might be willing to hire out."

"For what?" he teased.

Her thick black hair billowed in the wind, and a single dimple showed in one cheek when she smiled. "A lift, actually. I need an aerial shot of the wheat mountains stacked outside the grain elevators."

"Sorry, love. I'm knackered."

"Anyone else available?"

"Afraid I'm it."

"I'm on deadline." She looked disappointed.

“Ah, well, on second thought there’s a bloke sometimes lets me use his private plane on Sundays. I’ll take you up tomorrow in exchange for copies of the photos.”

“Deal.”

“Come early before it gets too hot.”

“How about seven?”

“Six would be better.”

“You got it,” she said.

He admired the fit of her jeans over ample hips as she walked away. When he saw her climb into a barn-red Volkswagen Bus he became smitten. “And you can buy me breakfast afterward,” he called out, which elicited a wave of acknowledgment from her before she drove away.

Anson arrived at a quarter to six to prep the Piper Cherokee, only to find Vivianne already waiting in her van. “You’re early,” he said.

“What? No pink?” she replied.

“Ha ha.” He began to perform a quick check of the green-trimmed, white plane. She followed him as he walked all the way around it, sliding his hand along its seams and rivets with a pat here and a tap there as if it were aerial foreplay. He helped her climb into the cockpit and strap into the seat, relishing the nearness to a warm-bodied female and eager to show off his flying prowess. He couldn’t get over the shimmer of those copper-speckled eyes. He climbed into the left-hand seat next to her, worked through his preflight warm up, and started the engine. Once the prop began humming, he taxied toward the runway. Before long, they were airborne.

The grain elevator complex, virtual skyscrapers compared to all the one- and two-story buildings in the region, stood just minutes away from the airfield by car and instantly rose into view. “What do you want me to do?”

“Circle,” she shouted, looping an index finger in the air.

“I’ll need to get high enough to avoid the power lines and antennas.”

She nodded. “It’s a zoom lens.” He enjoyed the way she demonstrated it by twisting the lens to enlarge and contract the metal cylinder within it in a manner that was unintentionally suggestive. She selected camera settings, put the viewfinder to her eye, and began snapping and re-cocking in rapid succession. He flew around the concrete silo towers, which he’d heard could potentially store three billion bushels of grain before railroad cars took it to even larger elevators to await market. Despite the vast storage capacity, a mountain range of wheat sat on the ground next to the tracks. Vivianne burned through a roll of film in no time, while he flew a number of passes at varying heights and distances.

“You’re part of the problem,” she later told Anson over a plate of scrambled eggs in the Texhoma Café.

“How do you figure?” He was methodically striping a thick slice of Texas toast with a honey squeeze bottle, first one direction, then the other.

“There is no cause without an effect.”

“You learned that at university, did you?”

She waved off his comment with a chuckle and continued. “All those chemicals and fertilizers you spray on the ground, in addition to all the water being pumped up from the aquifer ... it all helps to produce a record bumper crop. Meanwhile, President Carter imposes a wheat embargo on Russia for invading Afghanistan, and now the entire system is backed up. The farmers have no choice but to dump the wheat on the ground, which then rots in the rain. The economy suffers. The farmers don’t care because they’ll be reimbursed no matter what, while taxpayers foot the bill.”

“You’ve obviously thought this through,” he said, still focused on the work of art his toast and honey had become. “Everybody must eat. The world’s food supply would diminish by half without fungicides and insecticides. They have aerial application down to a science now. Universities study the chemical droplet patterns and adjust the spray nozzles accordingly. We’re professionally trained to be careful.” He pointed a clean butter knife at her. “You would do well to look into the industry if you call yourself a reporter.” He spread his honey grid out to the edges of his toast with the same knife then waved it in the air again. “Become more informed before you make a judgment. You’ll call me a hero at the end of the day.”

He looked up to see her staring at him. “What?”

“Why do you spread the honey out like that?” she asked. “I mean, what’s the point?”

“I like every bit of my toast to have a consistent amount of honey on it with no wasteful spillage. We spread the chemicals on the fields in much the same way.” He noticed Vivianne looking at her own toast, perhaps considering how she had unconsciously slathered it with butter and raspberry jam. He had to admit he enjoyed making people squirm.

“You know who you remind me of?”

He shrugged, trying not to look too curious.

“The sea captain in the *Ghost and Mrs. Muir*.”

“Rex Harrison?”

“Hardly. More like Edward Mulhare, television version.”

“How so?”

“Oh, not the hat obviously, or the pink trousers, but the close beard and mustache. Impatient, frank, logical—well, logical at least in terms of your own universe, I’m willing to bet. And charming, very charming.”

“My hair’s a bit more ginger than his, but I’ll go along with your assessment if you women are attracted to that look.”

“Can’t speak for all of us. I suppose it’s the careful British accent that reminds me of a character living in the nineteenth century. And I’d say your beard is more of a rust color with bits of wheat in it like a tweed.”

He took note of her scrutinizing his looks so closely. “Mulhare’s Irish. Contrary to what you Americans think, we don’t all sound alike.”

“Well, he didn’t sound Irish in the show. To me your accent sounds, I don’t know, pompous?”

“So I’ve pulled it off?” Anson smiled with mischief.

Vivianne flicked her head to one side in a qualified agreement.

“You’ll hear many accents when you come to England.” This approach of inviting American women to his country usually worked for Anson as a means to an end. They all loved the idea of a little jaunt to Great Britain, whether it manifested or not. He wouldn’t mind if anyone took him up on his offer, for if he could have his way, he would bring all Americans he met to England and vice versa.

Vivianne arched her eyebrows. “What makes you think I’d go to England with you?”

“I wasn’t offering to take you,” he said, backtracking. “You strike me as the type of woman who wants to see the world, that’s all.”

“You’re saying I’m worldly?”

“Potentially.”

“Oh, I’ve got potential,” she said in a forced Brooklyn accent.

He ignored her taunting. “The way I have it figured, ninety-nine percent of the world’s population is quite happy to lead a small, routine life with head down, nose to the grindstone. Only one percent stands apart from the fray. And then there’s a special

corner of that one percent, the rare breed of person who rises above it all and even helps improve humanity along the way.”

“Obviously you count yourself in that special corner of the one percent.”

He nodded. “I’ll have to monitor your progress, but you might be included in that group as well.”

“Sounds like delusions of grandeur to me.” She wasn’t buying it, but she looked amused, if not a little intrigued.

Anson shrugged. “The higher we soar the smaller we look to those who cannot fly.”

“Quoting Nietzsche now,” she teased. “You’ve just proved my point.”

“Nietzsche stole from me, actually.”

“Riiight.” She laughed and took a sip of her iced tea. “Why the hat?” She nodded to his headwear bearing the Union Jack.

He grabbed the brim and pointed to the patch. “Oh, this is just to toy with the locals, match their zealous patriotism with a little of my own.”

“Interesting. Proud of your heritage, are you? Tell me about your home. I’m curious about what you’ve been doing for the last, what, thirty years?”

He grinned. “Curious, eh?”

She raised her shoulders. “Just being a reporter.”

“Okay, I’m what you Yanks might call a military brat. I was born in a little thatched-roof cottage in a village in Essex. Went to school in Asia where my father had served in the Royal Air Force since World War II. Spent my teens and twenties in Norfolk. And yes, I’ve just turned thirty-one.”

“And the accent?”

“The King’s English, you mean? Comes from elocution exercises in grammar school. Mother was a stickler for proper

enunciation, which I'm afraid does come off as sounding a bit posh to you Americans."

"You're an elitist, then."

"You'd have to make up your own mind on that. What about yourself? How did a woman like you end up here?"

"I graduated from the university a few weeks ago. Needed to find my first job in journalism, but the local papers wanted more experience than I had. I drew concentric circles in hundred-mile radii around Albuquerque on a map and sighted on Guymon, just three rings away. Wouldn't you know, Guymon has a newspaper."

"Population 10,000? Hardly a real job, now is it?"

Vivianne pouted flirtatiously. "The *Daily Record* is the largest paper in the region and owned by a multimedia corporation."

"So, you called for an interview sight unseen?"

"No, I decided to check it out first. Arrived early one evening when the building was closed and the street deserted."

"That's one thing about being here. Bugger-all to do."

"I'm with you on that," she said. "Anyway, I peered at the web press through the store-front windows, and instantly my heart pulled at me."

"Nothing like a printing press to make a girl feel at home, I imagine."

She placed a hand over her heart. "The smell of ink and newsprint, the promise of a byline for a job well done—there isn't anything like it. On a hunch I presented my degree in journalism with a minor in ecology to the editors the next day, and they invented a job as the soil and oil reporter just for me right on the spot."

"Clever girl. You are in a special corner of the one percent." Anson sat back.

"Oh, typing up a tedious list of oil prices or sounding the alarm on the latest insect scare is not the adventure I'd hoped

for, but I can tough it out for a year or two and then move on to Denver or any place greener than Oklahoma.”

“It’s a stopgap, just as Texhoma is for me. I’d guess you’re in your mid-twenties. What took you so long to complete your education?”

“A marital hiatus that lasted approximately three years.”

“I daresay. What happened?”

“I wanted to do something exciting like join the Peace Corps. He’d been a medic in Vietnam and wanted to settle into mainstream life. We were at cross purposes.”

“Fair enough.”

“How did you become a crop-duster, of all things?” she asked, interrupting his next question.

Having finished his toast, he lit a cigarette and sat back to tell how he’d traveled to Kenya and the Sudan to develop a business. When that didn’t pan out, he’d gone into motorcar racing but realized there wasn’t a lot of money in it without frequent wins. It was when he became a farm manager in Norfolk that he’d discovered crop-dusting. He’d enrolled in flight school in England and then attended agricultural aviation school in Georgia. He decided to skip the bit about looking for a suitable candidate to marry him to settle his visa woes, now that she seemed genuinely interested.

She started gathering and pulling her thick curls off her neck with one hand and fanning her glistening face with the other. “It’s already hot this morning,” she said.

“You haven’t adapted yet, have you?” He stroked his beard and smiled to himself in the suspicion that his secret powers were working. Then he noticed his own damp palms and rubbed them on the legs of his trousers. *If it weren’t for those eyes of hers, I’d be fine.*