

Alain de Botton: Essays in love

I

Romantic Fatalism

1. The longing for a destiny is nowhere stronger than in our romantic life. All too often forced to share a bed with those who cannot fathom our soul, can we not be excused for believing (contrary to all the rules of our enlightened age) that we are fated one day to run into the man or woman of

our dreams? Can we not be allowed a certain superstitious faith that we will ultimately locate a creature who can appease our painful yearnings? Though our prayers may never be answered, though there may be no end to relationships marked by mutual incomprehension, if the heavens should come to take pity on us, then can we really be expected to attribute our encounter with our prince or princess to a mere coincidence? Or can we not for once escape logic and read it as nothing other than a sign of romantic destiny?

2. One mid-morning in early December, with no thought of love or stories, I was sitting in the economy section of a British Airways jet making its way from Paris to London. We had recently crossed the Normandy coast, where a blanket of winter cloud had given way to an uninterrupted view of brilliant blue waters. Bored and unable to concentrate, I had picked up the airline magazine, passively imbibing information on resort hotels and airport facilities. There was something comforting about the flight, the dull background throb of the engines, the hushed grey interior, the candy smiles of the airline employees. A trolley carrying a selection of drinks and snacks was making its way down the aisle and, though I was neither hungry nor thirsty, it filled me with the vague anticipation that meals may elicit in aircraft.

3. Morbidly perhaps, the passenger on my left had taken off her headphones in order to study the safety-instruction card placed in the pouch in front of her. It depicted the ideal crash, passengers alighting softly and calmly onto land or water, the ladies taking off their high heels, the children dexterously inflating their vests, the fuselage still intact, the kerosene miraculously non-flammable.

4. "We're all going to die if this thing screws up, so what are these jokers on about?" asked the passenger, addressing no one in particular.

'I think perhaps it reassures people,' I replied, for I was her only audience.

'Mind you, it's not a bad way to go, very quick, especially if we hit land and you're sitting in the front. I had an uncle who died in a plane crash once.

Has anyone you know ever died like that?'

They hadn't, but I had no time to answer for a stewardess arrived and (unaware of the ethical doubts recently cast on her employers) offered us lunch. I requested a glass of orange juice and was going to decline a plate of pale sandwiches when my travelling companion whispered to me, 'Take them anyway. I'll eat yours, I'm starving.'

5. She had chestnut-coloured hair, cut short so that it left the nape of her neck exposed, and large watery green eyes that refused to look into mine.

She was wearing a blue blouse and had placed a grey cardigan over her knees. Her shoulders were slim, almost fragile, and the rawness of her nails showed they were often chewed.

'Are you sure I'm not depriving you?'

'Of course not.'

'I'm sorry, I haven't introduced myself, my name is Chloe,' she announced and extended her hand across the armrest with somewhat touching formality.

An exchange of biography followed. Chloe told me she'd been in Paris in order to attend a trade fair. For the past year, she'd been working as a graphic designer for a fashion magazine in Soho. She'd studied at the Royal College of Art, had been born in York, but moved to Wiltshire as a child, and was now (at the age of twenty-three) living alone in a flat in Islington.

6. 'I hope they haven't lost my luggage,' said Chloe as the plane began to drop towards Heathrow. 'Don't you have that fear, that they'll lose your luggage?'

'I don't think about it, but it's happened to me, twice in fact, once in New York, and once in Frankfurt.'

'God, I hate travelling,' sighed Chloe, and bit the end of her index finger.

'I hate arriving even more, I get real arrival angst. After I've been away for a

while, I always think something terrible has happened: all my friends have come together and decided they hate me or my cacti have died.'

'You keep cacti?'

'Several. I went through a cactus phase a while back. Phallic, I know, but I spent a winter in Arizona and sort of got fascinated by them. Do you have any interesting plants?'

'Only an aspidistra, but I do regularly think all my friends might hate me.'

7. The conversation meandered, affording us glimpses of one another's characters, like the brief vistas one catches on a winding mountain road — this before the wheels hit the tarmac, the engines were thrown into reverse, and the plane taxied towards the terminal, where it disgorged its cargo into the crowded immigration hall. By the time I had collected my luggage and passed through customs, I had fallen in love with Chloe.

8. Until one is close to death, it must be difficult to declare anyone as the love of one's life. But only shortly after meeting her, it seemed in no way out of place to think of Chloe in such terms. On our return to London, Chloe and I spent the afternoon together. Then, a week before Christmas, we had dinner in a west London restaurant and, as though it was both the strangest and most natural thing to do, ended the evening in bed. She spent

Christmas with her family, I went

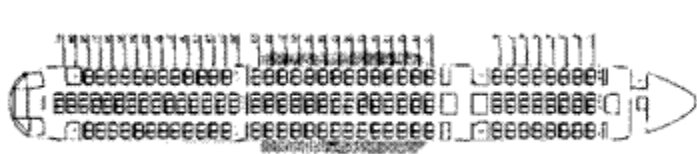
We even had the same copy of *Anna Karenina* on our shelves (the old Oxford edition) – small details, perhaps, but were these not grounds enough on which believers could found a new religion?

10. We attributed to events a narrative logic they could not inherently have possessed. We mythologized our aircraft encounter into the goddess Aphrodite's design, Act One, Scene One of that primordial narrative, the love story. From the time of each of our births, it seemed as though the giant mind in the sky had been subtly shifting our orbits so that we would one day meet on the Paris-London shuttle. Because love had come true for us, we could overlook the countless stories that fail to occur, romances that never get written because someone misses the plane or loses the phone number. Like historians, we were unmistakably on the side of what had actually happened.

11. We should, of course, have been more sensible. Neither Chloe nor I flew regularly between the two capitals nor had been planning our respective trips for any length of time. Chloe had been sent to Paris at the last minute by her magazine after the deputy editor had happened to fall sick, and I had gone there only because an architectural conference in Bordeaux had finished early enough for me to spend a few days in the

capital with a friend. The two national airlines running services between Charles de Gaulle and Heathrow offered us a choice of six flights between nine o'clock and lunchtime on our intended day of return. Given that we both wanted to be back in London by the early afternoon of December 6th, but were unresolved until the very last minute as to what flight we would end up taking, the mathematical probability at dawn of us both being on the same flight (though not necessarily in adjoining seats) had been a figure of one in six.

12. Chloe later told me that she had intended to take the ten thirty Air France flight, but a bottle of shampoo in her bag had happened to leak as she was checking out of her room, which had meant repacking the bag and wasting a valuable ten minutes. By the time the hotel had produced her bill, cleared her credit card and found her a taxi, it was already nine fifteen, and the chances that she would make the ten thirty Air France flight had receded. When she reached the airport after heavy traffic near the Porte de la Villette, the flight had finished boarding and, because she didn't feel like



waiting for the next Air France, she went over to the British Airways

terminal, where she booked herself on the ten forty-five plane to London, on which (for my own set of reasons) I happened also to have a seat.

13. Thereafter, the computer so juggled things that it placed Chloe over the wing of the aircraft in seat 15A and I next to her in seat 15B. What we had ignored when we began speaking over the safety-instruction card was the minuscule probability that our discussion had been reliant upon. As neither of us were likely to fly Club Class, and as there were a hundred and ninety-one economy class seats, and Chloe had been assigned seat 15A, and I, quite by chance, had been assigned seat 15B, the theoretical probability that Chloe and I would be seated next to one another (though the chances of our actually talking to one another could not be calculated) worked itself out as 220 in 36,290, a figure reducible to a probability of one in 164.955.

British Airways Boeing 767

14. But this was of course only the probability that we would be seated together if there had been just *one* flight between Paris and London, but as there were six, and as both of us had hesitated between these six, and yet had chosen this one, the probability had to be further multiplied by the original one chance in six, giving a final probability that Chloe and I would

$$P_{\text{flight}} = \frac{1}{6}$$

$$P_{\text{seat}} = \left(\frac{162}{191} \times \frac{1}{190} \right) + \left(\frac{29}{191} \times \frac{2}{190} \right) = \frac{220}{(191 \times 190)} = \frac{220}{36290} = \frac{1}{164.955}$$

$$P_{\text{flight}} \times P_{\text{seat}} = \frac{1}{6} \times \frac{220}{36290} = \frac{1}{989.727}$$

meet one December morning over the English Channel in a British Airways Boeing, as one chance in 989.727.

15. And yet it had happened. The calculation, far from convincing us of rational arguments, only backed up the mystical interpretation of our fall into love. If the chances behind an event are enormously remote, yet it occurs nevertheless, may one not be forgiven for invoking a fatalistic explanation? Flicking a coin, a probability of one in two prevents me from turning to God to account for the result. But when it is a question of a probability of one in 989 727, it seemed impossible, from within love at least, that this could have been anything but fate. It would have taken a steady mind to contemplate without superstition the enormous improbability of a meeting that had turned out to alter our lives. Someone (at 30,000 feet) must have been pulling strings in the sky.

16. From within love, we conceal the chance nature of our lives behind a purposive veil. We insist that the meeting with our redeemer, objectively haphazard and hence unlikely, has been prewritten in a scroll slowly

unwinding in the sky. We invent a destiny to spare ourselves the anxiety that would arise from acknowledging that the little sense there is in our lives is merely created by ourselves, that there is no scroll (and hence no preordained fate awaiting) and that who we may or may not be meeting on airplanes has no sense beyond that we choose to attribute to it — in short, the anxiety that no one has written our story or assured our loves.

17. Romantic fatalism protected Chloe and me from the idea that we might equally well have begun loving someone else had events turned out differently, shocking given how closely love is bound up with a feeling of the necessity and uniqueness of the beloved. How could I have imagined that the role Chloe came to play in my life could equally well have been filled by someone else, when it was with her eyes that I had fallen in love, and her way of draining pasta, combing her hair, and ending a phone conversation?

18. My mistake was to confuse a destiny to love with a destiny to love a given person. It was the error of thinking that Chloe, rather than love, was inevitable. But my fatalistic interpretation of the start of our story was at least proof of one thing: that I was in love with Chloe. The moment when I would feel that our meeting or not meeting was in the end only an accident, only a probability of one in 989.727, would also be the moment when I

would have ceased to feel the absolute necessity of a life with her - and
thereby have ceased to love her.

2

Idealization

1. 'Seeing through people is so easy, and it gets you nowhere,' remarked Elias Canetti, suggesting how effortlessly and yet how uselessly we can find fault with others. Do we not fall in love partly out of a momentary will to suspend seeing through people, even at the cost of blinding ourselves a little in the process? If cynicism and love lie at opposite ends of a spectrum, do we not sometimes fall in love in order to escape the debilitating cynicism to which we are prone? Is there not in every coup de foudre a certain wilful exaggeration of the qualities of the beloved, an exaggeration which distracts us from our habitual pessimism and focuses our energies on someone in whom we can believe in a way we have never believed in ourselves?

2. I lost Chloe amidst the throng at passport control, but found her again in the luggage-reclaim area. She was struggling to push a trolley cursed with an inclination to steer to the right, though the Paris carousel was to the far left of the hall. Because my trolley had no mind of its own, I walked over to offer it to her, but she refused, saying one should remain loyal to trolleys, however stubborn, and that strenuous physical exercise was no bad thing after a flight. Indirectly (via the Karachi arrival), we made it to the Paris carousel, already crowded with faces grown involuntarily familiar

since boarding at Charles de Gaulle. The first pieces of luggage had begun to tumble down onto the jointed rubber matting, and faces peered anxiously at the moving display to locate their possessions.

3. 'Have you ever been arrested at customs?' asked Chloe. 'Not yet. Have you?'

'Not really, I once made a confession. This Nazi asked me if I had anything to declare, and I said yes, even though I wasn't carrying anything illegal.'

'So why did you say you were?'

'I don't know, I felt guilty: I have this tendency to confess to things I haven't done. It somehow makes me feel better.'

4. 'By the way, don't judge me on my luggage,' said Chloe as we continued to watch and wait while others got lucky, 'I bought it at the last minute in this discount shop on the Rue de Rennes. It's a bit of a freak.'

'Wait till you see mine. Except that I don't even have an excuse. I've been carrying mine around for over five years.'

'Can I ask you a favour? Could you look after my trolley while I look for the loo? I'll just be a minute. Oh, and if you see a pink carrier bag with a luminous green handle, that'll be mine.'

5. A little later, I watched Chloe walk back towards me across the hall,

wearing what I later learnt was her usual pained and slightly anxious expression. She had a face that looked permanently near tears, her eyes carried the fear of a person about to be told a piece of very bad news. Something about her made one want to comfort her, offer her reassurance – or a hand to hold.

6. Love was something I sensed very suddenly, shortly after she had embarked on what promised to be a very long and very boring story (indirectly sparked by the arrival of the Athens flight in the carousel next to us) about a holiday she had taken one summer with her brother in Rhodes. While Chloe talked, I watched her hands fiddling with the belt of her beige woollen coat (a pair of freckles were collected below the index finger) and realized (as if this had been the most self-evident of truths) that I loved her. However awkward it was that she rarely finished her sentences, or was somewhat anxious, and had not perhaps the best taste in earrings, *she was adorable*. I fell prey to a moment of unrestrained idealization, dependent as much on my emotional immaturity as on the elegance of her coat, the after-effects of flying and the depressing interior of the Terminal Four baggage area, against which her beauty showed up so starkly.

7. The island was packed with tourists, but we rented motorcycles and...

Chloe's holiday story was dull, but its dullness no longer counted against it.

I had ceased to consider it according to the secular logic of ordinary conversations. I was no longer concerned to locate within it either insight or humour, what mattered was not so much *what* she was saying, as the fact that *she* was saying it - and that I had decided to find perfection in everything she could utter. I felt ready to follow her into every anecdote (*there was this shop that served fresh olives...*), I was ready to love every one of her jokes that had missed its punchline, every reflection that had lost its thread. I felt ready to abandon self-absorption for the sake of consummate empathy, to catalogue every one of Chloe's memories, to become a historian of her childhood, to learn all of her loves and fears. Everything that could possibly have played itself out within her mind and body had promptly grown fascinating.

8. Then the luggage arrived, hers only a few cases behind mine, we loaded it onto the trolleys and walked out through the green channel.

9. What is so frightening is the extent to which we may idealize others when we have such trouble tolerating ourselves – *because* we have such trouble... I must have realized that Chloe was only human, with all the implications carried by the word, but could I not be forgiven for my desire to suspend such a thought? Every fall into love involves the triumph of hope over self-knowledge. We fall in love hoping we won't find in another

what we know is in ourselves, all the cowardice, weakness, laziness, dishonesty, compromise, and stupidity. We throw a cordon of love around the chosen one and decide that everything within it will somehow be free of our faults. We locate inside another a perfection that eludes us within ourselves, and through our union with the beloved, hope to maintain (against the evidence of all self-knowledge) a precarious faith in our species.

10. Why did this awareness not prevent my fall into love? Because the illogicality and childishness of my desire did not outweigh my need to believe. I knew the void that romantic intoxication could fill, I knew the exhilaration that comes from identifying someone, anyone, as admirable. Long before I had even laid eyes on Chloe, I must have needed to find in the face of another an integrity I had never caught sight of within myself.

11. 'May I check your bags sir?' asked the customs man. 'Do you have anything to declare, any alcohol, cigarettes, firearms...?'

Like Oscar Wilde with his genius, I wanted to say, '*Only my love*,' but my love was not a crime, not yet at least.

'Shall I wait with you?' asked Chloe.

'Are you together with madam?' enquired the customs officer.

Afraid of presumption, I answered no, but asked Chloe if she'd wait for

me on the other side of the border.

12. Love reinvents our needs with unique speed. My impatience with the customs ritual indicated that Chloe, who I had not known existed a few hours ago, had already acquired the status of a craving. I felt I would die if I missed her outside – die for the sake of someone who had only entered my life at eleven thirty that morning.

13. Chloe had waited, but we could spend only a moment together. She had parked her car nearby. I had to take a taxi to my office. Both parties hesitated whether or not to continue with the story.

'I'll give you a call some time,' I said casually, 'we could go and buy some luggage together.'

'That's a good idea,' said Chloe, 'have you got my number?'

'I'm afraid I already memorized it, it was written on your baggage tag.'

'You'd make a good detective, I hope your memory is up to it. Well, it was nice meeting you,' said Chloe extending a hand.

'Good luck with the cacti,' I called after her as I watched her head for the lifts, her trolley still veering insanely to the right.

14. In the taxi on the way into town, I felt a curious sense of loss. Could this really be love? To speak of love after we had barely spent a morning together was to encounter charges of romantic delusion and semantic folly.

Yet we can perhaps only ever fall in love without knowing quite who we have fallen in love with. The initial convulsion is necessarily founded on ignorance. Love or simple obsession? Who, if not time (which lies in its own way), could possibly begin to tell?

The Subtext of Seduction

1. For those in love with certainty, seduction is no territory in which to stray. Every smile and word lead to a dozen if not twelve thousand possibilities. Remarks that in normal life (that is, life without love) can be taken at face value now exhaust dictionaries with their possible meanings. And for the seducer, the doubts reduce themselves to a central question, faced with the trepidation of a criminal awaiting sentence: *Does s/he, or does s/he not, desire me?*

2. The thought of Chloe did not stop haunting me in the days that followed our encounter. Though under pressure to complete plans for an office building near King's Cross, my mind drifted irresponsibly but irresistibly back to her. I felt the need to circle around the object of my adoration, she kept breaking into consciousness with the urgency of a matter that had to be addressed, though my thoughts had no point to them, they were (objectively speaking) utterly devoid of interest. Some of these Chloe-dreams ran like this, *'Oh, how sweet she is, how nice it would be to . . .'*

Others were more visual:

(i) Chloe framed by the aircraft window

(ii) Her watery green eyes

(iii) Her teeth biting briefly into her lower lip

(iv) The tilt of her neck when yawning

(v) The gap between her two front teeth

3. If only I had summoned such diligence for her phone number, for the digits had altogether evaporated from my memory (a memory that felt its time better spent replaying images of Chloe's lower lip). Was it *(071)*

4. 607 9187

609 7187

601 7987

690 7187

610 7987

670 9817

687 7187 ?

4. The search began badly. *607 9187* was not the beloved's abode but a funeral parlour off Upper Street, though the establishment didn't reveal itself to be one until the end of a trying conversation, in the course of which I learnt that After Life also had an employee called Chloe, who was summoned to the phone and spent agonizing minutes trying to place my name (eventually identifying me as a customer who had made inquiries into