

HAWKS STORY

(in memoriam *ONLY ANGELS HAVE WINGS*, d Howard Hawks 1939)

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The University of East Anglia is a dull and ponderous name to describe towers of ivory, where words build fabulous structures of all kinds from palaces to labyrinths. Its architecture is more glamorous than its name if you like cool modernity, and to proclaim this air of modernity, to allow the average citizens in Norwich to sense the cool presence in their midst, it calls itself UEA. So when Dorothy Love got to the station, climbed into a taxi, and said “UEA please,” no questions were asked: the driver took her directly there. On reaching it, he broke his silence, “Exactly where to, lady?” to which Ms Love replied, “To the film department”. UEA he did know, the film department he did not. “I’ll drop you at the kiosk, sweetheart, you can ask there.”

Feeling no lady, even less a sweetheart, Dorothy inquired and was directed along an asphalt walkway among the blocks of concrete which make these towers of ivory. Presently, she turned in to the film department. Was this place like a morgue? More like a post-nuclear space, everything intact but evacuated of people. Dorothy pushed on, venturing down the corridor, until through a window she saw a young man at a computer with his back to her. The first words she noticed on the door read: ‘Through these portals pass the coolest academics in the world. She then read the name above, ‘Adrian Brimisker’ it said on the door, and she went straight in. Adrian looked up startled, and swung round in his chair.

“Adrian, I am looking for Geoffrey Carter.”

Adrian relaxed in his chair, and looked her up and down. He was a good-looking 30-year-old, kemptly bearded, but she looked even better, he thought, with black clothes, black stockings, and well-cut black hair, which was parted with perfect position on the right. Only the buttons on her blouse were red, to match her lipstick.

“I’m Adrian,” he said.

“Okay, I’ve read your stuff. I’m looking for Geoffrey Carter?”

“What are you going to teach?”

“Students.”

“That’s who, sorry whom, not what.”

“Isn’t that being pedantic?” Adrian just liked looking at her, which gave her the space to enjoy herself a little. “My interests are in psychoanalytical theory,” she said.

“Mine too. I look forward to a great partnership.”

“Don’t rush me,” she said with a smile.

“Okay, no rushing. Let’s see if Geoffrey’s in.” He led the way further up the corridor, knocked at a door, and went in. A figure was bent over a desk, and all Dorothy could see was a brown leather jacket and greyish hair curling at the back over a blue polka-dot cravat. It looked like it was made of silk.

“Geoffrey, Dorothy Love is here.”

A good 10 seconds elapsed before there was a response. Without turning round, Carter exclaimed, “I’ve had this e-mail from the vice-chancellor. The draft for the RAE I sent through is not good enough apparently.” No-one refers to the University of East Anglia, only to UEA; no one calls it the Research Assessment Exercise, only the RAE, not this time in order to be modern or cool, but rather to soften the impact, ward off the full burden it imposes.

Carter swung round in his chair to face Adrian and Dorothy, exactly as Adrian had done when Dorothy first arrived. Dorothy’s first impression was one of surprise. She expected someone neutral, demotic even, but there was a touch of the haughty about Carter. Something clicked in her brain: had she not read in an article Carter had written on Howard Hawks a reference to ‘Lord Hawks’ and his air of command on the film set, his professionalism which Carter had even likened to elitism, masculine of course but Carter had not made that particular point. And then she had thought of Lauren Bacall’s first epiphany on screen, and she had had some inkling of what Carter was getting at.

The swivelling in the chair brought her back to the present moment. She thought it was a male mannerism picked up from watching too many movies, and turned into a departmental quirk, like a Masonic sign. She’d have to practise it if she wanted to be accepted.

Carter exploded again. “That man lives in a fog up a mountain.”

“It must be pretty cold up there,” Dorothy chipped in.

“I mean he can’t see anything. Well, Ms Love, welcome to the snowstorm: emails, statistics, targets, reports – we handle them all here. Can you handle them, Ms Love?”

“I write a pretty good email. I’m pretty hot with statistics. I can be professional.”

“Well, glad to hear it. You’ll need to be. Any diseases?”

“What do you mean, diseases?”

“You know, migraines, ME, that sort of thing.”

Dorothy was not a person to think ‘how dare he?’ but it crossed her mind, and showed in her face.

“Ok, ok, keep your feathers on.”

“Well, not me, I’m disease-free.”

“You mean, ‘not I’.”

“Isn’t that being pedantic?” She looked at Adrian who smirked and looked away. “Is this the department of crippled speaking?”

“Not at all. I don’t want anyone who might get lost in the snowstorm. Ok, Mr Brimisker will show you the ropes. I’ve got to work on my reply.”

“Sure I’ll show you the ropes, Dorothy. Pleased to. We’ll leave Geoffrey to defend the reputation of the department.”

As they turned to go, Carter barked again, “Ms Love, are you research active?”

“Well, I’ve got an article coming up in *Cinema Ontology* in three months.”

“On?”

“The Homogeneous Masculine in post-war Hollywood.”

“I’ll let the vice-chancellor know right away, to strengthen our case.”

Outside in the corridor, Adrian said to Dorothy, “He likes you, I can tell.”

“He’s got an odd way of showing it.”

“He called me Mr Brimisker. He’s never done that before. It was a way of pushing me aside in favour of you.”

“Is he always that rude?”

“Always. You’ll learn to ignore it.”

“Or learn to ignore him.”

“Even when you want to ignore him, you can’t. And by the way, one of his best articles is on overlapping dialogue in the cinema. It must have inspired him in a way.”

Without making much effort to ignore him, Dorothy found in the hurly-burly of the new academic year that their paths did not cross. In any case Adrian was true to Carter’s word, and showed her the ropes, artfully keeping her away from him, duty and pleasure combined. Then came Friday and quiz night. On the last Friday of every month, staff from the film department met at the Elizabeth Arms for a quiz. Dorothy was lukewarm: “That doesn’t sound like much fun,” but Adrian assured her it could be, “at least the way Geoffrey writes it.” When they turned up together Carter was at the bar. Adrian had a second go at introducing Dorothy.

Carter looked her up and down. “Have you got your course ready, Dottie?”

“Don’t call me Dottie.”

“What do I call you then?”

“Try Dorothy, Jeff.”

“Let’s get one thing straight. Never call me Jeff. What about Dorrie?”

“Not Dorrie. Dory’ll do, if you have to.”

“OK Dory. I am always Geoffrey, spelt properly. Now, what about my question?”

“I’ve got the answer, but you will have to remind me what the question was.”

Carter turned to Adrian. “Has she got her course ready?”

“What do you take me for?” Dorothy intervened. “A dumb blonde?” She gave him a black look and tossed her raven hair. “Of course, it’s ready.”

“Well, what are you covering?” Carter looked at her hard.

Dorothy looked back. “The masculine gaze.”

“I see, that eyeball stuff. The students flock to it, which means the vice-chancellor goes for it.”

“Does that mean you don’t?”

“I always see eye to eye with the vice-chancellor, otherwise we’re through.”

He turned away to get the quiz going. He commandeered the question-master’s chair, as he did every month, and no-one altered this ritual assertion of his position. Side by side in one team were Adrian and Dorothy. Facing them was Dave Skidwall, older than the others, roughly bearded, and you could see round the eyes that he was ground down by form-filling and assessments whose imposition he took more seriously than the rest. With him was Lester Smith, whom they all called Bluster.

Carter kicked off. “First question: name a film director who was murdered.”

While the others were riffling through their memories, Dorothy got in first:

“Pasolini.”

“Cool,” muttered Adrian. Carter acknowledged her with a glance.

“Okay, next question: name three films scored by Max Steiner.”

“A bit past it, isn’t he?” Adrian whispered to Dorothy.

She was going to ask whether he meant Carter or Steiner, but Dave interrupted:

“*The Informer*, *The Searchers* . . . um, *The Big Sleep*.”

“You could have made it easy on yourself and mentioned *Gone with the Wind*,” said Carter.

“Oh, that doesn’t count,” said Dave contemptuously.

Carter pressed on. “Score a point if you have read ‘The Movement-Image’ and ‘The Time-Image’ by Gilles Deleuze.”

“That’s not a fair question, comrade Carter,” said Dave.

“Maybe, but I set them. My question is final.”

“In that case, I can say in all honesty that I have not read them, and do not intend to,” said Dave. On the other side, Adrian and Dorothy took a point each. Carter turned to Bluster.

“What about you, Bluster?”

“I admit I tried, so I think I get half a point. I did write a poem about him as well.”

“And?”

“And what?”

“You get a full point if the poem’s any good.”

Bluster hesitated and looked round, only to find everyone was looking at him.

“I’m not sure I can remember it exactly.”

“No bluster, Bluster. No points if it’s obscene, but a full point if we like it.”

“OK, then.

I shall not want brains in heaven
For I shall chat with Gilles Deleuze.
We’ll talk ontology and ‘différance’ –
Is it him or me who has half-baked views?”

“Well, gentlemen, alpha minus or beta minus?”

Dorothy and Adrian felt contemptuous, which they masked as indifference. Dave volunteered on behalf of his colleague: “It’s not bad. A point certainly.”

“OK, I’ll go along with a point. I should add that I rely on you chaps – that includes you, Dory – to be clued up on Deleuze on my behalf, for the reputation of the department, so to speak. OK, next question: who is Robbie Müller?”

“Wim Wenders’ cameraman,” said Bluster.

“What is the Academy Ratio?”

“Proportion of screen height to screen width – 1:1.37,” said Dave.

“I’ve got down 1.33.”

“In practice it’s 1.37.”

“Mr Skidwall, your erudition is, is . . . I don’t know how to describe it.”

“Exemplary.”

“Yes, talking of exemplary, give me an example of the cinema of hyperbole.”

“Oh come on, Geoffrey,” said Dave. “There’s too much to choose from.”

“Well, choose then.”

“*Lord of the Rings*, obviously.”

“That’s not what I’ve got down here.”

“*Troy*,” said Adrian.

“No.”

“*Alexander* then,” said Bluster.

“Maybe, but it’s not the answer I’m looking for.”

Dorothy leaned forward. “*The Perfect Storm*.”

Carter turned towards her, hyperbolically wide-eyed. Dorothy met his gaze, eyeball to eyeball.

“Dory, that’s just what I have got down. Well, chaps, you may applaud.” Dave looked at her for the first time that evening, Bluster beamed, Adrian said, “How cool is that?”

“Next question, wise guys. Who was Charlie Chuckles?”

Dorothy heard Bluster groan audibly and looked with surprise at Adrian when he said flatly, “He doesn’t exist.”

Dorothy whispered, “How do you know?”

Adrian whispered back. “You think he’s from some mythical British comedy, don’t you?”

Carter intervened. “How do you know that, Brimisker?”

“You’ve used the question before.”

“Have I?”

“He keeps calling me Brimisker,” Adrian muttered to Dorothy.

“Don’t let it get to you. I like you both.” She smiled at Adrian, then transferred the smile to Carter.

The quiz rambled on. Dave and Bluster won it, being better tuned to Carter’s psychology as question-master, but Dorothy had made her mark. As they broke up, Carter commented to Adrian, “She’ll do.”

“I knew that the instant she arrived.”

Six months later, Sean Gilhooley turned up. He'd been appointed by Carter on a short-term contract to teach post-modern cinema. Dave was the first to complain. "Why do we need someone to teach this claptrap?"

"I have a hunch."

"Oh yeah?"

"That it might look good in the RAE."

"Oh, that." Dave resumed his perpetual hangdog expression. "Well, you're the boss."

"I'd say give him a chance. Don't speak to him – if that's what you want. But I've got to put a team together. All the talents. The vice-chancellor's had a go at the department for looking a bit dated in what it's teaching, never mind we're not hitting our KPIs."

Even Dave knew what KPIs were: Key Performance Indicators. Unexpectedly, he suddenly looked animated, as if the passion of his youth was trying to rejuvenate him. "The other day, I woke up when it was still dark and made a speech to myself. It began, 'Target culture, be damned.'"

Carter laughed. "And how did it go on?"

"I can't remember exactly. Anyway, I denounced PIs as PMs. That stands for Pesky Metrics. And they aren't SMART, but Simply Half-baked Imposed Trouble."

"And you felt better for this speech?"

"I did," and gave a laugh like a foal roaming freely in a field.

When he'd come back to normal, and a bit of the hangdog had returned, Carter said, "Dave, try and be nice to young Gilhooley, and if you can't, keep out of his way."

In the days that followed, he cold-shouldered Sean as much as he could. Sean gave classes on gay cinema, Dave stuck to his Marxist readings of John Ford.

And then not too long after Sean's arrival, Carter called Dave in again. When he arrived, Carter sat in his chair without saying anything and tapping away on his laptop. When he finally swivelled round in the departmental manner, Dave commented, "Another riposte to the vice-chancellor?"

"No, a personnel crisis. I was asking HR about what's involved in making someone redundant."

"Oh yes? And what is?"

"A lot of paperwork, it seems."

"You're thinking about young Gilhooley. He's not making the grade."

“No, he’s okay. How old are you, Dave?”

“59,” but Dave still did not see it coming.

“When did you first start thinking about applying Marxian analysis to John Ford?”

“Marxian? What’s wrong with Marxist?”

“A sort of rebranding, Dave. Ignore it. Anyway, answer the question.”

“Rebranding be damned. Revisionism more like. I took to Marxism early on, and then started applying it to the cinema. There was an article in the *New Left Review* in 1971 which was formative.”

“That’s 30 years ago. Look Dave, students have stopped being interested in John Ford, and Marxism’s . . . well, Marxism’s taken a knock.”

Dave looked cornered, suddenly, with the millstone back on his neck. “Like hell it has. It’s still a way to understand power relations in the world, understand the vice-chancellor, make sense of class relations, that’s better than anything else currently on offer. It’s still a good framework to use. And if students don’t watch John Ford, they bloody well ought to. Isn’t that the point of university, to foster a historical consciousness of the past, so that intellectual horizons are widened away from the present?”

“The vice-chancellor doesn’t seem to think so.”

“He’s trying to destroy the place.”

Carter said nothing, while the two men looked at each other. Dave turned away first.

Carter broke the silence with, “You’re through, comrade.”

“You never called me comrade before.”

“Okay. You’re through, kid.”

“What do you mean, ‘through’?”

“Through. Fin. Fine. Konets. That’s Russian.”

“Soviet!” Dave snapped.

Carter ignored him. “Or as Hollywood states it, ‘The End’.”

Dave looked wide-eyed through his beard. “When?”

“That’s what I was trying to work out with HR. It looks like the end of the academic year.”

Dave looked more defeated than ever. “If I’m going to go, I’ll go now.”

“Keep hanging on, Dave. It’s near the end of term anyway.”

While Carter just looked at him, Dave said nothing, but then blurted out: “But this is my whole life!”

“Certainly, Dave.”

“I’ll miss working with you, miss the department.”

“Yes. Me too.”

Did his tears flow like wine? Dave wasn’t the crying type, but just turned and left. Carter spun round and round in his chair, looking vacantly ahead as the room revolved round in a multiple 360° pan shot. A coin lay on his desk. He picked it up mechanically and span it in the air. On the twelfth time, he failed to catch it. Picking it up from the floor, he aimed it at the map of the University on the wall, more precisely the site of the vice-chancellor’s office, and threw it. He missed, but he may have felt better.

Members of the department soon learned what had happened, because coming out of his interview with Carter, Dave had passed Bluster in the corridor. Bluster remarked brightly, “Coming to the Vice-Chancellor’s pep talk this afternoon? It’s on the pursuit of excellence.”

Dave looked through him stonily, then burst out: “He can hang from a lamp-post in hell, for all I care,” and swept off.

“What’s eating him?” thought Bluster, and found out that afternoon at the pep talk. Carter arrived late, and at the end Bluster went over to him. He was going to say something smart on the lines of “Like the vice said, I tick all the boxes,” but instead came out with, “Dave was in an odd mood this morning. Is he all right, do you know?”

“I had to fire him,” Carter said and went to talk to someone else.

“Fire him?” Bluster mused to himself. As he came outside, Adrian and Dorothy were already there, Adrian lighting up Dorothy’s cigarette. Bluster said, “Have you heard? Geoffrey’s fired Dave.”

The self-absorption faded from their faces. Dorothy said flatly, “Fired him? Gee, that’s tough. When did Dave come here?”

“1972. Something like that.”

“Tough on both of them in a way,” added Adrian. “Geoffrey’s a great survivor, but Dave isn’t. He’s only lasted in a way because Geoffrey helped him to survive. Well, as Dave likes to quote, ‘There are some things a man can’t walk around.’”

Although the camaraderie of the department was shaken, this could not be told from Carter’s behaviour. He carried on just as before. Dave was to be seen drifting about but was largely incommunicado. His mild and friendly hailing of colleagues as comrade

stopped. The tension in the air snapped one morning when Dave went in to pick up his post and overheard Sean praising *Brokeback Mountain* to Veronica, one of his students, who went around wearing a ‘Make movies not missiles’ T-shirt. Dave muscled in, “That film is rubbish. Full of hyperbole. That cowboy necking another cowboy in front of his wife, for God’s sake. A travesty of the Western. Political correctness gone crazy.”

“It may have cowboys, but it’s not a Western.”

“What do you mean, it’s not a Western?”

“It’s about modern America, not pre-modern America.”

“You mean post-modern, don’t you? But what do you know about it? You’ve hardly seen any Westerns.”

Veronica watched this altercation with a certain degree of alarm, but Sean made no attempt to raise his voice. “I’ve seen a few. I think it’s a much better film than you’re giving it credit for. I’ve done an article for an online journal on it.”

“An online journal? Who reads those?”

“Lots of people. Veronica here does.”

Dave ignored her. “I like something you can hold in your hand. Online articles are like sand in a sandstorm, comrade.”

“Oh yes, and hard-copy journals are solid rock, I suppose. Well, Dave, I’ve got to say, the world’s turning to sand.”

Dave snorted like a shire horse on a frosty morning and went to look for his post. When he turned back, Sean ambushed him by giving him a piece of paper with the web reference for the article. “Here, I thought you might like to look at the article sometime.”

Dave stared at him, but took the paper and put it in his pocket. “That’ll be the day,” he said and Sean watched him as he lumbered out the door.

On the last Friday of term, and the last quiz, Adrian stepped aside, so Dorothy could team up with Dave opposite Bluster and Sean. Carter fired through the questions and Dave found he could answer more than the others. Sean did not do too badly either, shining especially in the round on the films of Antonioni.

At the end, Dave came up to Sean at the bar and said, “I read your article.”

“Oh yes?”

“Yes.”

“What did you think?”

“I liked your point about how desperate those rural lives were. And the economic oppressiveness of the system. That was good.”

“I have a confession too. I’ve been catching up on Westerns. I was stung by what you said. I’ve been looking at John Ford especially. I’ve always liked Peckinpah, but I can see there’s a lot going on with Ford.”

“Peckinpah’s good but he’s hyperbolic, Ford’s not. It’s like Classicism degenerating into Mannerism. You get this falling off.”

This pronouncement capped Dave’s career as a Lecturer in Film at UEA, and enjoyed a modest circulation in the university in the months afterwards as Comrade Skidwall’s Famous Last Words.

As for Carter, by the end of term he was in a good mood because both Sean and Dorothy had boosted the research outputs for the RAE. Dorothy was lining up a major study on Marguerite Duras, and Sean’s online articles were piling up nicely. Carter stood in Dave’s vacant office with Mike, the departmental technician.

“Has he cleared out all his stuff?”

“I think so,” said Mike. “Very meticulous was Comrade Skidwall.”

“Ah yes, Comrade Skidwall.”

“He told me he never wanted to be Professor Skidwall, that he was always happy with Comrade Skidwall.”

“Did he now? That was Dave.”

“All I’ve found were these.” Mike pointed to a small pile.

“Anything there?”

“There’s one of his pipes, but I think it ought to be burnt. A subscription form to something – filled in but never sent. And some article I found fallen down the back of the filing cabinet.”

Carter picked up the article and glanced at it. It was dated 1977 and entitled, ‘The power of the gun: economic determinants of consciousness in the gangster film.’ He leafed through it. “The authentic Skidwall,” he mused to himself. Then, more loudly, “Not much to show for 35 years, is it, Mike?”

“Not a lot.”

“I’ve got a mind to send it to the Vice-Chancellor to remind him that the film department has been around sometime, that there is a historical continuity.”

“I wouldn’t know about that.”

“Or maybe not.”

Carter left Mike to it and drifted outside. Sitting on a bench in the sun, he closed his eyes restfully for a minute, and an image of Dorothy, lit from above and with a fill light on her silken skin, floated into his mind. In this black-and-white image, her lips glistened and her black locks fell to her fair shoulders. If you had been standing close to him, you would have heard him say *sotto voce*, “One helluva picture”. It was an added pleasure to him that on opening his eyes, Carter could see Dorothy at the end of the walkway coming towards him, dressed in black as usual, and with the added touch of sunglasses. As she approached, Carter called to her, “Hey, handsome, come and talk to me.”

Dorothy was cool. “I was going to anyway. You’re not bad yourself.” She sat down.

“You know, Dory, I like you.”

“Oh yes? That’s what you say to all the department.”

“No, I like you.”

“Any particular reason?”

“I like the dark tone of your voice. You bring kudos to the department. You bring cool to the university.”

“And no one else does?”

“I used to, but people take me for granted now. What I mean is . . . the vice-chancellor said to me the other day, ‘You’ve made a good appointment with Ms Love. She brings something modern to the University. Her work shows up well in the assessments.’ So, I’m grateful. It makes my life easier.”

“You just whistle, Geoffrey, and I’m happy to oblige. You do know how to whistle, don’t you?”

Carter never looked at her, but said abruptly: “Sean Gilhooley and Veronica Burskase. You can see they’re in love. They keep gazing at each other.”

“Why shouldn’t they?”

“Dory, what I’m getting at is, why don’t we sleep together?”

Dorothy turned to him, but Geoffrey continued to avert his eyes. “And what would Adrian say to that?”

“He won’t mind. We share everything in the department.”

“No dice, Geoffrey, you’re too old.”

“I don’t know about that. I don’t need a toupee. I’ve got all my marbles.”

“Marbles you call them.”

“Yes, marbles!”

“Ok, keep your follicles on.”

Geoffrey relaxed. “Okay, just kidding. *Mors patet, hora latet.*”

“What’s that, the family motto?”

“No, although now you mention it, it could be.”

“For God’s sake, Geoffrey, what does it mean? I’ve never done Latin, and I don’t think you have.”

“Oh yes, I have, long ago in the pre-modern age.”

“Well what does it mean?”

“It means ‘You’re through, kid.’ But it then goes on to say that the question is not in the fact of it, only the when. So, I thought I could pursue the opportunity of sleeping together before it was too late.”

Dorothy removed her sunglasses. “Geoffrey, you’re a swell guy, but I’m going to stick with Adrian.”

“Okay, Dory. Have it your own way. I’ve always appreciated departmental solidarity.”

“I hope you’re not being ironic.”

“No. I leave that to the post-modernists.”

“Gee, thanks.”

“Well, I must go.”

“Where to?”

“Plan my holiday. Salmon fishing.”

“Me too. I mean, not salmon fishing, I’m going to Shanghai.”

“Shanghai Dottie, eh? Can’t say I envy you. Oh, by the way, you can tell Adrian what I said. There are no departmental secrets.”

“I will.”

“And if you change your mind, just whistle.”

“Okay, Jeff. I’ll do that.”

Carter was about to correct her, but stopped himself. In the pause, Dorothy got in first.

“What was that motto?”

“You mean, *mors patet hora latet?*”

“Yes.”

“You’d better get in a good break before the hour strikes.”

“Or the term starts again.”

“Or the vice-chancellor sends me an e-mail.”

“Precisely.”

Geoffrey was standing by this time. He finally looked at her hard as she leant back on the bench smiling at him. “Dory, you’re just fine, I’m sure of that.”

THE END

Any resemblance between persons, places or institutions in this story and any existing persons, places or institutions is purely coincidental.