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# Gliding Flight

Translated from the Dutch by  
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# 1

Hello, Christian!

My name is Gieles. I saw you flying with your geese on an air show. I thought it was a magical spectacle. You were very high in the sky with your flying two-seater motorbike. My father says you were flying with geese barnacles, but I have certainty they were geese lesser white-fronted.

I apologise for my French. I have big problems with your language. I try to do good.

I am for years impassioned by the geese. I have fourteen years old. I have two brown geese, American Tufted Buff. They wear a tuft, very beautiful and very elegant.

Like you I am a goose explorer and I am training my geese for a project. My geese listen moderately average. They are not shy. Indeed, sometimes they are insolent. They resemble the children of Dolly, my neighbour lady. My neighbour lady is above average good-looking.

I do the training with a stick. The stick is not for violence but for obediencing. I always use different stick. When geese know my stick longer, the obediencing disappears. This is not desirable.

Your migrating varieties excel in listening. My compliments, also on behalf of your wife. Your geese regard you and your wife as an adoptive father. My geese regard me, I cry, as a cousin or brother to obtain tricks on. Just like the children of

my neighbour lady on whom I babysit.

I live in the Netherlands, next to an airplane path. Geese next to an airplane path gives difficulties, you will observe! I am in great agreement. Fortunately my geese do not fly through the path. That comes, I cry, from my training (I have a small pride in this). Rest assured, my geese do not live in captivity. Captive birds are a scandal that should be terminated. My geese live in liberty on our campground. It is a campground for people who adore airplanes. They collect airplanes as if it was postage stamps.

You ask of course, why does the boy write? I do not write in order to fly in the two-seater motorbike with you, although for me that would really be spectacle. Being the same high height as the geese in the sky, together with the migrating varieties past the cumulus clouds! Unfortunately, your professional tourism is too expensive for me. I am writing you for a very different motive, for the content of our mutual training of the geese.

Gieles hesitated. How could he make contact with this man—this world famous goose specialist, meteorologist, pilot, filmmaker, ornithologist, photographer, writer, vegan and activist—and ask him the most important questions without revealing too much about his incredible scheme? It had to be kept secret. Gieles stood up from his desk and walked to the open attic skylight. Leaning out with his arms on the roof tiles, he gazed over at the runway. Less than sixty metres away was a straight black strip with lights embedded in it, as well as pastures and fields. In two minutes' time Gieles could be out on that runway, causing chaos. He wouldn't have to do a thing. Just standing there would be enough to get himself on every TV station in the country. But then his father could kiss his

job as an airport bird controller goodbye.

Gieles looked over at the lights of a descending plane. The sky was calm. The only vibration of air that could be seen was around the wings. The roaring of the engines swelled steadily. He walked back to his laptop and filed the letter to the Frenchman Christian Moullec in a special folder. He had come up with just the right name for the folder: *Expert Rescue Operation 3032*.

In thirteen weeks and four days his mother would be coming home on flight 3032. Ellen had never been away so long before. Last week she had flown to Africa in the wake of a flock of wild geese. Geese migrated to survive. He understood that. But he didn't understand why his mother had to migrate. She went to places where there was nothing to eat or drink. His mother was migrating backwards, going against the flow. The birds would have thought she was out of her mind.

He went downstairs to the kitchen where Uncle Fred was sitting at the table peeling apples. 'Hey, Gieles,' he said cheerfully. Uncle Fred was always in a good mood. 'I've got peels for the geese.'

Gieles poured himself a glass of milk, swallowed it down in one gulp and wiped the moustache from his upper lip. The smoothness there irritated him. Not even a sign of peach fuzz.

His father and Uncle Fred were fraternal twins, but they didn't look at all alike. Willem Bos hardly had any hair left, while Uncle Fred had way too much with his mass of salt-and-pepper curls. His father held himself as erect as a statue of a powerful statesman. Uncle Fred, on the other hand, had a slight build and a shuffling gait, the result of childhood polio. He rode around on a mobility scooter and walked with a crutch. He refused to use a cane. There was something about

the crutch that suggested a temporary condition (not that his leg was ever going to heal).

The brothers' personalities and hobbies were also different. His father was fond of birds and comic books. Uncle Fred liked cooking and literature. The only things they had in common were their height—almost two metres—and taking care of Gieles.

'Don't forget the goose poop,' Uncle Fred said, handing him the peels wrapped in newspaper. 'We have guests. A married couple.' He sounded pleased.

Gieles got a shovel and bucket from the barn. The deal he had made with his father was simple and straightforward: he could keep two geese as long as they didn't fly. The minute they took to the sky, they'd have to go. He was also responsible for caring for the geese, which mainly meant shovelling shit. The geese crapped about once a minute.

Next to the old farm was a pasture, where Uncle Fred ran a campground. He had recently gotten the campground listed in a farm-camping guide, although it didn't meet any of the criteria. No peace and quiet here. The planes took off and landed at about the same punishing tempo as the geese's bowel habits. The guide said it was a niche campground, which was absolutely true. It wasn't popular with families. The plane spotters who camped here were solitary figures by and large. The fact that the campground was not a success didn't bother Uncle Fred in the least. Nothing bothered him. He looked at the grey film of jet fuel covering the wooden sign that said WELCOME TO THE HOT SPOT and shrugged his shoulders.

The geese came toward him, greeting him with outstretched, swaying necks. Gieles patted the tufts on their heads and set the bucket of peels in the grass. They stuck their heads into the bucket with little enthusiasm, then began pecking at his thighs.

The geese preferred the speculaas cookies that they were more or less addicted to. But Gieles only fed them speculaas during their training sessions, knowing that otherwise they wouldn't listen to him at all.

Parked on the edge of the pasture was a trailer that looked like a spaceship. A woman was standing in front of it. She waved at him and motioned to him to come over. He planted his shovel in the ground like a flag pole and walked up to her with the geese at his heels, begging for food. The woman's face was full of creases and cracks, like an antique painting, but her eyes were as clear as a girl's. As if they had been restored somehow.

'Hello, ma'am,' he said politely. 'Everything all right here?'

Gieles enjoyed being excessively polite to old people. There was something sad about them, he thought, because they were going to die soon.

'Excellent,' she said kindly. 'What I wanted to ask you is that my husband and I want to barbecue tonight. Is that all right?'

'No problem, ma'am. Just as long as you don't build a campfire. That might confuse the pilots. And don't fly any kites,' he joked.

She smiled. 'Silly boy.'

The door of the spaceship swung open and her husband came out. He was wearing a pair of aviator glasses and a body warmer with pockets stitched onto it. A pair of binoculars dangled from his neck. And the knobby knees and fossilised calves that stuck out from beneath his shorts looked like they were wasting away.

The man began rubbing the rounded curves of the spaceship with a handkerchief. Dispensing with all formalities he got right down to business. He didn't even give Gieles a chance to say hello. 'Look at that. Mirror finish, huh?'

Mirror was right. Gieles could see his reflection in the door, and he noticed that his hair was standing straight up. He ran his hand over his head.

‘The origin of the Airstream,’ said the man proudly, tucking his aviator glasses into one of the pockets, ‘lies in the American aerospace industry. The wings are missing, but otherwise ...’

A descending Cityhopper drowned him out. They waited patiently until the sound died away.

‘Where was I?’ The man tugged at his white eyebrows. ‘What’s your favourite?’

‘My favourite what, sir?’

‘Plane,’ he said, sitting down in a lawn chair. Gieles didn’t have a favourite. The aviation industry left Gieles completely cold.

‘The Antonov 225, sir,’ he lied. The biggest plane in the world, number one for many spotters.

The man screwed up his face. ‘That Russian hulk? Let me tell you something. I once waited hours for an Antonov, and all for nothing. The Russians can have their Antonov.’

‘And the Boeing 747 400,’ said Gieles to oblige him. ‘They’re awesome too, sir.’ All plane spotters loved the 747 400.

He clapped his wrinkled hands. ‘That’s what I like to hear! One phenomenal looking plane, especially when it’s frozen. Wingspan?’

Gieles gave him a puzzled look.

‘What’s the wingspan?’ It was obvious from the way the old man asked the question that he already knew the answer. ‘Sixty-four-point-four metres,’ he said, looking at a plane through his binoculars. ‘An Airbus A321. My wife goes for the take-offs, I love the landings. You?’

Gieles couldn’t care less. A landing plane wasn’t even in the same league as a flock of descending geese. Suddenly appearing

with all that cackle and flapping of wings. Then sweeping over the land like a wave that finally, slowly, disintegrates.

‘I love geese when they land,’ said Gieles, and he cast a glance at his geese, who were pulling up clumps of grass. ‘The racket they make when they come down. The last metres before they hit the ground. They’re really funny then. As if they can’t remember what they’re supposed to do.’

Gieles spread his arms and pretended to be losing his balance. ‘Once they’ve landed, they strut around like anything. That’s from pride. Sometimes they cover three thousand kilometres! They come all the way from the northernmost tip of Norway, and they all start shrieking together. “We’re back! We’re back!”’

The man and his wife looked at him in amazement.

‘Geese talk to each other all day long,’ Gieles went on. ‘Just like a bunch of women, my father says. And they’re never alone. They always fly together. The whole family.’

‘Goodness,’ said the woman with wide eyes. ‘I didn’t know that. But how do they know which way to go? The sky is so—how shall I put it?—so vast. It’s easy to take a wrong turn.’

Gieles crossed his arms self-confidently. Geese were his speciality.

‘The most important things are the sun and the stars.’ He spoke the words with an air of importance. ‘They’re migration signposts. And the little ones learn from their parents. Chicks straight from the egg don’t know anything at all. When they overwinter for the first time, they fly with their parents to learn the way. Sometimes it’s thousands of kilometres.’

The woman listened attentively to Gieles while her husband spotted the next plane.

‘And the chicks that have no parents? Who do they learn from?’

‘There’s always an aunt to take care of them,’ said Gieles. ‘Or a nice uncle.’

‘Oh, of course,’ she sighed, sitting down in the other lawn chair. ‘How many geese do you have?’

‘Two, ma’am. Just these two.’

‘But they shit for ten,’ said the old man disdainfully. ‘Better to have a dog. They don’t shit nearly as much.’

They watched silently as another plane descended. One of the geese was foraging along the bank of the canal. In the four years he had had them, not once had the geese ever gone into that filthy water. They never even considered it.

‘Very dangerous, geese near a runway.’ The man squeezed the binoculars so hard that his knuckles turned white. ‘I’m sure you’ve heard of that emergency landing? On the river in New York?’

Heard of it? Gieles’s eyes lit up like fireflies on a dark night. The emergency landing on the water—a ‘ditch’—had made a huge impression on him.

‘The Miracle of the Hudson, sir,’ Gieles exclaimed. The words rolled off his tongue in such an orderly fashion that it made him sound like a news presenter. ‘On January 15th, 2009, Captain Chesley Burnett Sullenberger of US Airways landed on the Hudson after a flock of Canada geese flew into his engines. He felt as if he had been hit by a gigantic bolt of lightning.’

Gieles mimicked being struck by the lightning, his body jolting, and then continued. ‘Captain Sully—everybody calls him Sully, and that’s what’s printed on the T-shirts and mugs and underpants—Captain Sully saved all hundred fifty-five passengers of flight 1549.’

‘He checked the plane twice for stragglers,’ the man added excitedly—this was a boy he could talk to—‘before evacuating, the last man to leave the sinking ship. Which actually hap-