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Kirk T. Pistol Closely Encounters Enormous Flight Changes At the Last Minute—Sans Starship: A True James Gunn Appreciation Story

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By Marleen S. Barr

During my return trip to the States, I arranged to go to England to attend a science fiction conference at the University of Exeter. Immediately after the Exeter conference, I planned to stop in New York before flying on to Kirk T. Pistol's conference in Kansas. Pistol was concerned that I was cutting things a little too close. "You must promise that you will arrive no later than when the clock strikes three," he stipulated in an e-mail message. This blunt statement struck me as being rather ominous. I mean what if Pistol was yet another member of my supernatural creature friendship circle? Since one can never be too careful, I asked for further clarification.

"What will happen if I arrive after three?"

"All hell will break loose. I am a perfectionist. My conference must run smoothly. You must arrive at three, not one minute later."

"I give you my word of honor that I will arrive exactly on time."

Pistol's response, although he would never use these particular words, clearly constituted a case of "oy, don't ask." If "all hell will break loose" meant that my lateness would function as a Pandora's box in which monsters would really appear and terrorize Kansas, he would never tell me so directly. I had to be aware of the possibility that my lateness could cause Kansas not to be Kansas anymore. Myriad magical catastrophes could ensue. What if I arrived at one minute after three and the Wicked Witch of the East decided to drop her house on the conference venue? Simply resolving to be on time, I forced myself to stop imagining potential supernatural *tsuris* (the worst kind—as I know well).

I boarded my London to New York flight. I planned to pick up my Pistol conference paper in Forest Hills before traveling to Kansas. The flight progressed smoothly until the captain made the following announcement: "We are immediately returning to London because a passenger's luggage has been misplaced. There is no problem." While everyone calmly accepted the captain's comments, I knew that he was not telling the truth. Planes do not turn around due to misplaced luggage. I tried to hope for the best. The plane landed on the first available runway. I had a full view of what was ensuing on the tarmac. I saw people in white spacesuits converging around the luggage compartment and hysterically screaming "Get it. Get it." I kept this information to myself; alarming people would serve no purpose. I knew that I was watching a bomb search. I remained absolutely calm. How I don't know. A space suited figure emerged from the luggage compartment with a suitcase in hand. She/he threw it into an armored vehicle. The captain instructed the passengers to vacate the plane. Upon reaching the gate lounge,

passengers were told that they could take another flight in the morning. All of my aforementioned composure was now nowhere in evidence. I began to cry; the full import of the situation became apparent. I could not see how it would be possible for me to keep my promptness promise to Pistol. I phoned the University of Kansas English Department. I was still sobbing when the secretary answered.

“Hello. This is Sondra Lear. I wish to leave a message for Kirk T. Pistol. Please understand that I am very upset because I am in the London airport and I have just been flying in a plane involved in a bomb scare. I have to let Kirk Pistol know that, due to this unforeseen circumstance, I may not be able to arrive at his conference before three. Tell him I will try my best to make it. Thank you so much for taking my message. Bye.”

Next, I explained my situation to an airline official. “I have to be at a conference in Kansas at three sharp the day after tomorrow and it is necessary for me to stop in New York to pick up my scholarly paper. It is imperative that I arrive on time; I gave my word to an eminent member of my field. All hell might really break loose. Since I can’t fly out until the morning, it will be impossible for me to follow my schedule.”

“We will do all we can to help you. I have a solution. If there is someone available to give your paper to a courier, we can deliver it to the Kansas airport in time for your arrival. The courier will make it unnecessary for you to stop in New York. You can use our phone to make a free call.”

“What a wonderful idea. I’ll phone and make the necessary arrangements. I so much appreciate your help.” Luckily my parents had not yet left for Florida. My mother’s familiar knife piercing screaming voice soon assaulted my ears.

“Where are you, Sondra?”

“The London airport.”

“Did you look for a husband during your flight? Are you looking for a husband in the airport lounge?”

“My plane had to return to London due to a bomb scare. I knew about the bomb throughout the entire return flight. I am very very upset. Please. I can’t cope with the husband thing now. For once in your life desist with the husband thing. I need you to locate one of my papers so that a courier can pick it up. If the courier receives my paper, I will be able to arrive at the Kansas conference on schedule.”

“You and your papers and your conferences. Your papers and your conferences are the ruination of your life. All of the women sitting at the beach club watching their cute little babies are not involved with papers and conferences. Why can’t you be normal? The bomb scare is no excuse. The bomb did not go off. You are alive. Instead of wasting time being frightened for nothing you should use your energies to find a husband. Maybe there was a rabbi on the plane who could have married you. If worse came to worse and the plane exploded at least you could have been

married in the afterlife. At least your death certificate would say that you were married. Because you didn't bother to look for a husband during your flight, you are still in your same situation: you are still alive and you are still single. What good was accomplished?"

"I can't cope with this conversation. Put my father on." Mother complied.

"Hello Sondra dear. How can I help you?"

"I need you to find one of my papers filed in a red folder. The folder is on top of the book pile on the left side of the window. A courier will arrive early this evening. Please give my paper to the courier."

"I see the paper right now. No problem. Rest assured that it will be safely placed in the courier's hands. Have a safe trip. And listen to your mother." Imbued with thankfulness that at least one of my parents was reasonable, I made my way to an airport hotel. When I boarded my morning flight, I felt relieved that I would arrive in Kansas on time.

I looked up from my reading material when I heard a commotion emanating from the front of the plane. I heard a woman screaming. Brandishing a plastic knife, she ran down the aisle shouting "kill, kill." Unlike all the other visibly agitated passengers, I was able to take the screaming stride. (At least this female mouth was not telling me to get married.) A plastic knife is not a weapon of mass destruction. So there was screaming in the cabin. Screaming I am used to. I grew up with screaming and interpret it as a normal occurrence. I helped the frazzled flight attendants serve drinks. A male flight attendant subdued the woman.

The captain announced that the plane was returning to the airport. This announcement made me more unhinged than the entire knife wielding scenario. I did not know if the next available flight would enable me to make it to Kansas by three. As soon as the plane landed, two men entered, put the woman in a strait jacket, and removed her. Due to the unusual coincidence of being on board two returning to the airport bound planes, mother's usual behavior, and the stress regarding my again jeopardized scheduled arrival in Kansas, I thought that I might need a strait jacket too. If I were put in a strait jacket, mother would insist that even though my arms were bound, I was still free to open my mouth to inquire about the most probably male straight jacket deployer's marital status.

I was told that the next available transatlantic flight and domestic connections would enable me to land in Kansas at one thirty. No longer thinking about mother, I considered phoning Phileas Fogg. If he could travel around the world in eighty days, I could fly from London to the University of Kansas in accordance with my time parameters. I phoned the department secretary to let her know about my revised schedule. When she expressed surprise, I used my tried and true "don't ask" refrain. Luckily, it works just as well for real events as for supernatural ones.

"Hello. This is Sondra Lear—again. Due to further unforeseen flight circumstances (don't ask and ya shouldn't know from them) I'm still in the London airport. Please tell Kirk Pistol that I am now scheduled to land in Kansas at one thirty. I expect to arrive at the conference by three. I appreciate your help."

I flew over the Atlantic Ocean, changed planes in New York, and landed in the middle of America. During the flights, I was obsessed with one thought: the courier might have failed to deliver my paper. After the plane landed at one thirty, I ran to the ticket counter. “Do you have a package for Sondra Lear?” I asked the agent.

“Just a moment please. I will look in the package storage area.” I died a thousand deaths until I saw her return with the package. I hailed a cab and asked to be taken to my campus dorm. I arrived at the dorm at two fifteen, jumped into the shower, put on professional attire, grabbed my paper, and attempted to find the conference venue. This was no easy task. There were few available people to provide directions during intersession. To make matters worse, it was ninety nine degrees in the shade on the four mile wide campus. Sweating, exhausted, and bedraggled to the max—but present nonetheless—I arrived at the conference at two fifty eight, sharp. An exceedingly perturbed Pistol—who was steeling himself against the possibility of all hell literally breaking loose—was at the podium explaining that I was delayed by unexpected flight changes.

His face lit up when he saw me. He breathed a sigh of relief and mopped his brow. “Sondra Lear has arrived just in time to present her paper,” he said to the audience. He smiled at me and flashed an a-ok sign. I translated this sign as dignified male Midwestern WASP language for “oy I was so worried about you and what you had to go through and I thought you wouldn’t make it and if you didn’t how would I fill the time you were scheduled to use but now I don’t have to know from this problem because you are here—and last but not least all hell did not break loose.” I omitted the myriad potential supernatural *tsuris* possibilities from this translation. Instead of using the minute I had to spare to approach Pistol and say “oy you should never know from what I had to go through to get here such a trip I had,” I cut to the WASP cultural chase. I nonchalantly returned his smile, calmly approached the podium, took a sip of water, and presented my paper. It was one of the best paper presentations I had ever delivered.

Pistol, fully aware of the effort I had made to keep my promptness promise, became my friend. Once upon a time (no fairy tale intended), his reputation and demeanor intimidated me to the extent that I was afraid to speak to him. But, in contrast, an enormous change had happened during this last minute. Pistol told me that he wished to contribute to my anthologies and co-edit one with me. He explained that co-editing is akin to marriage: co-editors have to get along well over a lengthy time period. I was honored that he thought that I could live up to his high co-editorship standards.

Pistol’s proposal would never satisfy mother, however. She would never buy the idea that co-editing is analogous to marriage. Continuing husband hunting failures aside, I flew to New York while basking in the glow of my new friendship with Pistol. I felt honored beyond words.



The chance to know and to work with James Gunn is one of my most cherished professional and personal experiences. Thank you Jim.

(Translation: Jim, being your co-editor and your friend means more to me than I can ever say. I really went to Kansas; oy, I really was not in New York anymore. And I really had the great

honor to work with a Grand Master/Grand Person—the Wizard of Ours; “ours” means the whole grateful science fiction critical enterprise.) Love (enclosed with a big kiss which is appropriate because I am not attending the Eaton/SFRA Conference), Marleen