



My Flight with James Hunt

In September 1992 I boarded a flight to Milan on my way to a meeting. As I settled into my aisle seat in the front row of the cabin I realised that I was sitting next to the famous ex-world champion racing driver, James Hunt. We didn't converse until after breakfast had been served. Before I'd freed my cutlery from its plastic shroud he'd already wolfed down most of his sausage, egg and bacon. He beckoned to the stewardess who was clearly smitten by him and said, "You wouldn't have another one of these to spare darling?"

A second breakfast tray was promptly delivered and he attacked the food with the same gusto as before. He had polished off both trays before I managed to finish my meal.

He had a reputation for indulging himself to the absolute limit in all things pleasurable or dangerous - sex, booze, smoking and drugs. Observing him eat these cooked breakfasts seemed to be a metaphor for his appetite for life.

Once he'd taken on this necessary 'fuel' he became quite chatty.

I asked him where he was headed.

"I'm going to Monza to commentate on the Grand Prix with Murray Walker."

"What's he like to work with?"

"OK once your ears recover from the battering he gives them. That guy has only two notches on his volume control, booming and ear-splitting. We've had our ups and downs. It's partly because our producer insists that we only have one mike so we don't talk over each other."

"Why's that a problem?"

“Why?... Because he hogs the bloody thing! Getting it out of his mitts is a nightmare. Once or twice I’ve actually yanked the cable like a whip to dislodge the mike. Last time I did that he threw a punch at me.... I get up his and the producer’s nose by leaving it to the last minute to slip into the commentary box. My habit of drinking a couple of bottles of wine during commentary doesn’t go down all that well either.”

“What do you think of your nickname ‘Hunt the shunt?’”

“Frankly it’s pretty irritating. I drove hard and fast and in the lower motor racing divisions there were some spectacular pile-ups. But in Formula 1 my crash record was no worse than any of the other leading drivers. My mate Niki Lauda payed me a huge compliment. He said, ‘I could drive next to James...2 centimetres, wheel-by-wheel for 300 kilometres or more and nothing would happen.’”

“Was he your greatest rival?”

“Absolutely...and one of my best friends. A man of incredible courage and willpower to come back from his horrific fire-ball crash at the Nurburgring in 1976.”

Our chatting finished when he focused his attention on the attractive lady in the window seat. We landed and I never saw him again.

Nine months later I was saddened to read that James had died suddenly on 15th June aged 45. It caused me to reflect on our brief encounter. He was an incredibly handsome, charismatic individual with an unconventional irreverence that was quite endearing. Physically he was of normal athletic build but I remembered that he had extraordinarily thick wrists, presumably developed by the muscular repetition of hauling racing cars around thousands of miles of track.

I’ll leave it to his friend and rival Niki Lauda to deliver a fitting epitaph.

‘When I heard he’d died of a heart attack aged 45 I wasn’t surprised. I was just sad. James was one of the few people I liked, in a smaller number of people I respected and the only one I envied.’