

spent a lot of time looking down, reading, writing, researching, like me. We sometimes had a party at someone's place or met at a bar over cheap beer. Once I came home after midnight and Deems didn't hear me until I was close enough to see the "project" fully uncovered. He had constructed a half-size model of a biplane, like a Wright brothers' tribute or something. Only there was no canvas covering, just an assemblage of odd bits of wood, like the wickerplane I remembered from the movie.

"Cool!" I said. "It's the wickerplane!"

Deems didn't get the reference. "It's my project," he said quietly. I could tell he hadn't really wanted me to see it. But he didn't rush to cover it up. He liked that I didn't laugh, that I thought it was something cool. We stood there for a while looking at the plane. I walked around it, not touching anything.

When I spoke it was with true reverence. "It's amazing, Deems."

"You want to go up?"

That's when I laughed. "Sure!" Deems didn't seem to know he had made a great joke. He was covering up the wickerplane and ignoring me. I knew it was time to leave.

I didn't see Deems for a day or two. The next time I passed his doorway, he just stared. I couldn't see well enough to gauge people's expressions unless I was pretty close to them. I

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went more by tone of voice. Deems didn't say anything. His hand rested protectively on the tarp over the wickerplane. I felt bad that Deems thought I was making fun of him, but if his invitation to "go up" had been serious, he was on a different wave length than I had thought and I was leery of getting trapped in his fantasies.

Over the next few weeks, we started speaking again. I don't remember which of us broke the silence to repair what was a rather tenuous relationship to begin with. I was at a critical juncture in my thesis and my advisor was suggesting I add some French and German authors in my survey of flight images in early twentieth-century writing. I didn't see how I could do it without taking another semester, asking for an extension. It was pretty depressing.

I remember it was late March, when the weather could be gorgeous spring or mean winter from one day to the next. The afternoon I came dragging into the courtyard of the apartments was a beautiful blue-sky day, but all I saw were my ragged Chucks at the bottom of my ragged jeans and some dirty piles of ice left from a snowstorm a week earlier. Deems stood in his doorway.

"Hey, Deems."

As I came closer, I saw he was studying the sky. "Good night; good night," he said several

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times, though it was only about four in the afternoon.

Maybe because I was miserable with frustration over my own “project,” I felt a kinship with Deems just then. I looked at him through my thick lenses and tried to see what he was feeling. He rubbed his hands together in cartoonish anticipation. I’m amazed I could leave my own misery long enough to see what was going on. “Going up?” I asked.

Deems stared. I guessed he was sizing up my intentions, looking for any sign of my previous lack of faith. Finally, he repeated his earlier invitation. “Want to come along?”

I was too miserable to laugh at anything. “Sure.” It felt like I’d made a suicide pact—scary, final, inevitable.

“Eleven forty-five,” Deems said. I nodded again and scuffed into my apartment. I collapsed on the futon and fell into a dazed sleep, too old to cry.

It was about 10:30 when I woke up, still depressed and groggy from the unaccustomed nap. I heated water for a cup of noodles and looked for a spoon. I remembered Deems’ invitation, chuckled and peeked out the blinds. Deems pattered around the wickerplane like a flight crewman.

I didn’t know how the evening could possibly end well. At 11:30 I stepped into the courtyard,

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feeling that sense of inevitability again: whatever disaster awaited would be the perfect end to a disastrous day.

The night remained as clear as the afternoon had been and it was cold without wind. Deems was bustling around but not agitated. He pulled on a leather helmet with earflaps and goggles, like Snoopy's, and offered me a knit cap and scarf. "Might better take off your specs," he counseled. I almost laughed again, thinking of doing aerobatics in the wickerplane. When I slipped the glasses into my jacket pocket, I was very close to being blind as a mole rat.

Deems got in. Suddenly I felt a gentle rocking and the wind rushing past us. There had been no "take-off," certainly no roaring engine, but we were in the air! There was an empty feeling in my middle. My stomach had vacated its usual position and tightened into a little ball under my heart. I wasn't nauseated, just incredulous. I remember thinking I must be asleep, dreaming, on my lumpy futon.

The wickerplane didn't fly very high. We had to swerve around some buildings in an office park and the high-rise dorms on the university campus. Deems followed major streets around the city and I recognized most of the parks and churches. When I jammed my hands into my pockets to warm up my fingers, I found my glasses still there. How could I see everything so clearly? It had to be a dream.

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In the city, there are always a few cars, even at one or two in the morning, but there was no traffic. Deems flew into a new subdivision at the south end of town; no trees, raw-looking yards, cookie-cutter houses. As we got closer, I saw a crowd running toward us from a side street.

I leaned forward to stare at the runners. They were dark-skinned, dressed in loincloths. Some had streaks of white paint on their faces. It was the tribe from the wickerplane movie!

When we got even with them, Deems steered to move parallel with their running. We floated along for a while, maybe forty feet above them. We turned a few corners and crossed a playground, but the runners continued to move with us. I noticed the tribesmen always looked up. They never looked at their feet or tried to gauge when a corner was coming up. Even cutting through the park, they kept looking up at us.

Finally, Deems nudged the wickerplane over a highway and we left the runners behind. I was elated. The night was incredible. I wanted to babble on to Deems about the tribe of runners, about being sorry I had ever doubted his "project," but I was too full for words. I pulled my hands out of my pockets to pump my fists in the air like I was Rocky Balboa. My glasses tangled in my fingers, then flew out ahead of us in a slow-motion arc; there was no mistaking the missile. Deems turned to look at me. Maybe I

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only imagined hearing a tiny crash of thick glass on pavement.

I felt a wave of horror and nausea at the loss of the lenses that were my lifeline. The dream was turning into a nightmare.

Then, we were in the courtyard again; no more fuss at landing than there had been at takeoff. Deems put out a hand to help me out of the plane. I must have looked awful, still thinking about my lost glasses. I shook his hand silently and trudged off to bed.

The next morning I woke before the alarm. I felt relaxed even when I thought of my thesis problem. It didn't seem so hopeless in the light of a new day. Difficult, yes, but not hopeless. What if I did have to grind out another semester? It's not like Harvard was holding a position, waiting for me to finish.

I remembered the "flight" of the wickerplane. I smiled and stretched, still feeling it must have been a dream. Maybe I'd tell Deems about it. I reached for my glasses. They weren't on the bedside table. I sat up and felt on the floor. I turned out my jacket pockets, then started to panic. I didn't have money for another pair. Anyway, the specially-ground lenses took a week or more to order in. How was I going to get any work done without them? I searched the bag where I had trashed the Styrofoam cup from my noodle supper. No glasses.

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I stared out the window. Deems had left a cap with a Dallas Cowboys logo on the hook below his mail box. I could see the star...from my window...without my glasses.

I got a little crazy, reading everything I could find from as far as I could, squinting and reading with one eye, then the other, then both. When I ran outside, it felt like being let out of a box. Since I'd never had much peripheral vision with glasses, the whole world was suddenly very wide. I felt almost drunk, learning to walk without constantly looking down. In the morning sky, swallows swooped by. I could see their scissor tails. I thought of the runners from the night before, looking up at the wickerplane, running with their heads up. I laughed.

Deems opened his door a crack, waiting for me, but he didn't want to meet my eyes. "I'm sorry about your specs."

"No, it's fine, really. No problem. Thanks for a great ride, Deems." He closed the door, duty done. I shouldered my backpack and headed toward campus. I resisted the urge to grab everyone I passed and ask if they had any idea how beautiful they were. I'm sure the grin on my face was scary enough.

Reworking my thesis was tough, but it was for the best. The research gave me the idea for my first novel. And, that's the summer I met Marla in the library. I would never have noticed

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her smiling at me over her computer if I hadn't learned to look up now and again.

I think Deems stopped working on the wickerplane after our flight. I asked him once if he was going up again. He started talking about aerodynamics and weather patterns and lost me; himself, too, I think.

Fourth of July weekend, I took the bus home to see Mom and Grandma. I hadn't told them about losing my glasses and certainly hadn't said I could see without them. They didn't say anything except how "healthy" I looked.

When I returned, the manager was pulling furniture and other junk out of Deems' place. "Heart attack," he said. I rested my hand on the wickerplane under its tarp. I thought about whether I wanted to see the plane one more time or just remember the glorious flight. Finally, I flipped the cover up. On the ground, near a supporting strut that would have had a wheel on a real plane, I found what was left of my old glasses, earpieces twisted, a little of the thick glass in one frame. When I straightened up I saw a little plane coming into view trailing an advertising banner: LEARN TO FLY call 555-WING. That's what I printed on the ribbon tied to the tail of the little wickerplane I bought.

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## Miss Truman's Travel Bag

Diesel exhaust always made Jeanne think of Europe and the year she and Tom traveled the continent by bus and train. That experience afforded plenty of adventure and contact with local people at a modest price. Five years later, the waiting room of the Abilene bus station held no romance, but Jeanne could not escape the powerful evocations of the exhaust fumes. Funny how smell is such a powerful trigger of memory.

It wasn't funny, though, to be reminded of Tom while trying to think of anything but. Jeanne recited her resumé silently, imagining the job she hoped to find and the life she would build apart from Tom. Mentally tallying her small savings again, she opened the creased and highlighted classified pages from Sunday's Dallas paper.

"Are you expecting anyone else here?" Jeanne looked up to see a grandmotherly woman gesturing at the place next to her.

Jeanne glanced at the many vacant seats in the terminal but her southern manners carried the day. "No, that's fine." She inched her backpack nearer her feet and drew in her shoulders imperceptibly.

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The woman settled into the awkward chair like a contented hen, smoothing her printed rayon dress with almost audible clucks and mutters. Jeanne noticed the woman carried a felt and leather handbag in a style at least fifty years old.

“There,” the woman announced when comfortable. “I do enjoy traveling, don’t you?” As Jeanne searched for a polite but impersonal reply, the woman continued, “Oh my, I’m sorry. I haven’t even introduced myself. I’m Vera Truman, like the president, you know, from Silverton, the Silverton Trumans. And you are...?” She waited expectantly, smiling, her pleasant face covered with softly powdered wrinkles.

“Jeanne...Wilson,” Jeanne heard herself say. Snap! I meant to start using my maiden name right away. She felt helpless as a fly in a fresh web, but this spider had come to her while she was minding her own business. As much as she’d like to, Jeanne could not summon the rudeness required to escape Vera Truman’s instant chumminess. She waited warily for the interrogation to continue. Instead, Vera rummaged in her outmoded bag and pulled out a large sandwich wrapped in waxed paper. Diving in again, she produced some paper napkins.

“Here,” she said, opening the packet, “why don’t you eat half of this?” Jeanne’s hungry eyes followed the sandwich. She’d had nothing since the bitter bus station coffee in Lubbock that morning. She planned to eat at the end of the day in Dallas, as a reward for reaching her goal. Polite protests remained in her mouth while

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Vera placed the larger portion on her lap. By then, refusal seemed rude.

Jeanne managed to say, "Thank you, Mrs. ... Truman," before beginning to eat.

"Oh, it's Miss Truman, dear, Miss." Jeanne heard a wistfulness in her voice. "What about you, dear?"

"Yes," Jeanne replied, nodding. "This is wonderful roast beef; so moist," she added, moving further from Miss Truman's question. She had no intention of sharing her marital problems with any stranger, never mind an old maid.

Miss Truman explored her bag again and produced two small paper cups. "Would you like some water, dear?"

Jeanne wiped her mouth. "Yes, thank you. Let me get it." She laid the newspaper on her backpack and took the cups. When she returned, Miss Truman was reading the marked listings.

"Moving to Dallas, I see. How exciting!" Jeanne felt more than ever like a trapped fly. She sat down, searching for some part of the truth to share with this generous busybody. Miss Truman did not notice Jeanne's hesitance. She inclined her head and confided, "I wanted to live in Dallas when I was young."

Jeanne turned her wrist subtly to read the time. Forty-five minutes. Maybe I can just nod and smile and she'll do all the talking. She cleared her throat and Miss Truman reached into her bag.

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“Would you like a mint for that cough, dear?” She offered a wrapped peppermint.

Jeanne couldn't resist a chuckle. “Is there anything you don't have in that bag?”

“Well, I ... I always seem to have what I need!” Miss Truman's voice rose with the statement as though she were discovering an amazing truth. She smiled brightly.

Jeanne gave up trying to protect herself and turned toward Miss Truman. “So, tell me, Miss Truman, where are you going today and why didn't you go to Dallas when you were young?” What was that saying about the best defense?

Miss Truman, clearly pleased to talk about herself, smoothed the folds of her dress while she spoke. “Well, my fiancé, Richard Allen, died in the War, in France.” Miss Truman told the story of her lost love without self-pity. Richard's letters and her study of his last months led her to become quite a Francophile. In fact, she became a teacher of French and visited France every two or three years during her teaching career. Sometimes she traveled alone and sometimes with a group of students, but always she thought about what it would have been like to see the country with Richard. Miss Truman pulled a well-worn guidebook from her bag to illustrate some of her memories.

Jeanne thought again of Tom and their year in Europe. There had been the awful experience of having a miscarriage in that Greek village with a less-than-modern clinic. But, she had experienced what Miss Truman suspected: discovering things in the company

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of your beloved made everything more wonderful. Maybe we just ran out of things to discover in Morton, Texas. Her mind wandered while Miss Truman described Versailles and the Louvre.

They went back to Morton to help Tom's mother with the family dry cleaners after his father's heart attack. It was supposed to be temporary. But then, Thomas, Sr. died, and Tom decided they needed to stay. His sister had plenty to do already with four children and helping with the farming. Tom and Jeanne promised each other they would get out and travel, go somewhere fun, every year, but apart from a few days in Austin, they hadn't been anywhere.

Tom and Jeanne wanted children, but it just hadn't happened. Jeanne sometimes wondered if she were being punished. She had been glad about the miscarriage, willed it to happen. They were so young and so far from home. She knew she might even have sought an abortion if she hadn't miscarried. It hardly seemed right to complain that she couldn't have a baby now, when it was convenient. She kept busy with bookkeeping for the business and some volunteer activities, but she felt her failure to produce a child made their position in the family and friendship with other couples increasingly awkward.

And it was her failure. They went to the fertility clinic in Lubbock for a long round of tests and treatments last year. Substandard care after the miscarriage had left Jeanne unable to bear a child. Almost everyone in town knew the unfortunate details, thanks to Tom's mother.

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Tom suggested they look into adoption but Jeanne declined. She decided she wasn't worthy to be a mother, though she never confided that to anyone, not even Tom. There were a couple of divorcees and at least one young widow in Morton who would be glad to have a husband who owned his own business. He won't have any trouble starting over.

Jeanne was surprised by the tears of anger, guilt and grief that welled up in her eyes. She thought she had let all that go when she stopped counting days and weeks and buying pregnancy tests. She sniffed and blotted the corner of one eye with a finger.

At the sight of Jeanne's tears, Miss Truman, pulled a packet of tissues from her bag. "No, you mustn't feel sorry for me, dear, I've had a wonderful life."

Jeanne managed to laugh and pointed to the handbag. "And everything you needed!"

"Oh, yes. Everything I needed." She patted Jeanne's leg. "I expect you'll find what you need, too, dear." She looked at the station clock. "Oh, my! We'll be leaving soon. I could watch your things while you go to the Ladies'. We could take turns."

"You go ahead," Jeanne offered. Miss Truman placed her handbag carefully in her seat and rustled away to the Ladies'.

Jeanne did not worry until the dispatcher announced the boarding of their bus. She gathered up Miss Truman's bag and her own things. In the ladies' room, a young mother fastened her toddler's overall straps. A pair of ragged blue jeans and sandals showed under

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one stall door. The other four stalls swung open and empty.

“Did you see a little woman in a flowered dress?”  
The mother shook her head.

Jeanne returned to the waiting room where there were more passengers and family members than an hour earlier, but no Miss Truman. Great! What now? She ran to the breezeway where the Dallas bus waited. “Did a little lady in a flowered dress get on already?” The driver allowed her to step on the bus to check. No Miss Truman.

Back inside the terminal, Jeanne felt the beginning of panic. I’ve got to get on the bus. What am I going to do with this bag? She scanned the crowd again, searching for the relentlessly cheerful face of Miss Truman. She dropped her backpack and twisted the gold clasp of the old brown bag, not knowing what help she expected to find. The bag was empty.

Aghh! I thought she had everything she needed in here. Clawing further into the darkness of the bag in desperation, her fingers found something. She drew out a small, clear plastic box. It held a pair of crocheted baby booties, white with pink and blue trim. A folded sheet of paper was taped to the bottom of the box.

The crowd surged around Jeanne and the bus for Dallas left the station. She sat in one of the hard chairs again and stared at the paper she had found in Miss Truman’s bag. It was the initial application form for an international adoption agency. She thought of Miss

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Truman saying, “I expect you’ll find what you need, too, dear.”

Jeanne traded the rest of her ticket for a return trip to Morton. Before boarding her bus, she decided to leave the handbag and the Dallas paper in her chair. She kept the booties, expecting to need them.

Jeanne napped most of the way to Lubbock. When the bus stopped, a girl across the aisle jumped up and grabbed a bag from the overhead rack. She hurried off the bus and into the station ahead of everyone else. Jeanne was rubbing sleep from her eyes, but she could have sworn the long scarf in the girl’s belt loops was the same flowered print Miss Truman had worn.

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## Widow Black

The filaments were fine and silky, like spider webs, and Marty thought that's what they were for a long time. Never a good housekeeper, she was no stranger to spider webs. Most of the time she told herself it was a good thing to have spiders. They caught flies and nasty bugs, didn't they? But, when she found herself grabbing at the silvery threads to get them away from her face one morning, she decided it was time to call an exterminator.

Drat that George! He left me with more than one kind of mess.

Marty Black was widowed in April. George always did the record keeping and bill paying, and six months later she was still trying to sort out his system. Why the spider webs were his fault she couldn't say, but she had a sort of permanent irritation with George now that he was gone, so it felt natural to blame him for the webs as well as anything else she had trouble with.

The exterminator said he didn't think the filaments were evidence of spiders, but he was glad to lay down a toxic fog with the wand from his sprayer tank and charge Marty for it before he told her so.

What an idiot! George didn't leave enough insurance for me to throw money around for no reason.

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She thought about calling the Better Business Bureau but decided to settle for complaining about the company to anyone she knew. She muttered about the exterminator's incompetence as she padded around the house, catching dust bunnies on her slippers. At least she thought they were dust bunnies. After a while, she realized what was accumulating on her shoes was more of the web-like filaments. Bunched up like that, they were a soft, white mass.

Marty kept hoping her daughter would make the two-hour drive from Lewiston and offer to help with housecleaning. The apple had fallen very far from the tree in this case because Marissa actually enjoyed cleaning house. Marty was always happy to let her. But when Marty hinted, Marissa made excuses about her heavy schedule at the hospital. She was the new charge nurse in the cardiac unit and couldn't get away often. Marty tried a not-so-subtle appeal to guilt, but Marissa said she'd come over when she could and didn't succumb to her mother's manipulation.

You'd think that girl would be more help to me, considering all I've been through and everything we did for her. George always did spoil that child.

Marty's cousin Annette was always asking if she needed help with anything, now that George was gone, but she never climbed down from her Cadillac SUV in Marty's neighborhood. Annette wasn't likely to pick up a dust mop or even bring over her fancy vacuum.

Thinks she's really something because her husband's oil change franchise is raking in the dough.

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And to think George lent them money to get through the first year.

Marty had worked as a clerk in the nearby pharmacy for several years and her manager was very generous with time off during George Black's final illness and death. Jim let Marty come in whatever hours she could and worked the rest of the employees around that. She knew he worked a lot of extra hours himself to accommodate her and she was grateful. Taking a few hours away from the hospital to work every other day had been a relief, a kind of respite. And after the funeral, going to work gave her something else to think about. But now Marty was having trouble getting to work and Jim was growing impatient with her.

So, what? I owe him because he helped me out before? He didn't really want to help me, he was just racking up I.O.U.s for my time? If George had worked for the city instead of White's Truck Repair, I wouldn't have had to work anyway!

Whenever Marty entered the house, she kicked off comfortable leather clogs and walked into her house shoes. Web-like filaments continued to collect on the bottom and sides of the blue terry cloth slippers, eventually puffing up around the tops, too, so it looked as if she were scuffing around in cocoons of a giant moth species.

Marty grew so used to seeing the dangling threads everywhere she stopped trying to brush away the filaments that grew down from the closet ceiling and rested on the clothes there. Individually, each line had a lot of tensile strength. When she pulled out a garment

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to wear, several of the thin, silvery threads dangled from the shoulders. If other people noticed them when she went out, no one commented.

When Marty hired a carpenter to make repairs to the back fence, he trampled the chrysanthemums. She was angry with him, of course, but also with George, again, and even dredged up some bitterness for her son who was killed three years earlier in Iraq. When they were thirteen, Alan and a friend borrowed some boards from the fence to make a skateboard ramp. Even after George put the boards back, that section of the fence was never sturdy.

That boy could come up with more ways to torment me. And when he ran out of ideas, he joined the Army and went off and got himself killed. No consideration for his family at all. That carpenter should have joined the Army. They probably don't have flowers for him to step on next to their fences. George never liked those flowers there. It's a wonder they survived, the way he was always running the mower into that bed.

Marissa called at least once a week to check on Marty, even though she couldn't get over to visit. If she had come to the house that fall, Marissa would have been alarmed. Puffs of the webby material were collecting in small drifts in every corner of the house. Marty's favorite robe, a match for the blue terry cloth slippers, had so many of the filaments embedded in the looped fabric it was starting to look like a giant cocoon, too.

Marty didn't tell Marissa when she stopped going in to work. She didn't tell Jim either. He let it slide a day or

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