

"Some old guy just crumpled over in the parking lot and froze to death in the storm. The manager of the pretzel place got here first and called 911. They don't even know who he is yet."

"What time?"

"It's about ten-thirty-five. You've got plenty of time. You should allow an extra fifteen minutes or so, just in case, but it's okay if you don't get here right at one."

"No, I mean what time did he...did the guy...? Do they know...?"

"Well, it had to be late. I mean nobody saw him until this morning. He wasn't there when you left, right?"

"I didn't see him." Carolina's voice was husky. She clicked "End." Let Lisa think the signal had been lost.

"What was I supposed to do?" Carolina asked over and over, her voice rising in volume with the anguish. She gathered the down comforter around her body with desperate clawing gestures. The green numbers stared at her relentlessly from the clock radio: 11:10.

Flight of the Wickerplane

I saw the little wicker biplane in an import shop and had to have it. My wife thought I was crazy. I'd never told her the story. It's not something you expect people to believe. We didn't have much money at the time, so \$19.95 was a major expense.

Here's the deal: when I was a kid, I saw a late-night movie about this primitive tribe – from Africa, Indonesia, I don't remember – fascinated by a small plane they saw in their sky from time to time. Since they had no contact with the outside world, the plane became a mythic entity to them. First the children started trying to make imitations of the plane as toys, then the shaman created a model out of twigs and it became an object of veneration for the tribe. They told stories about the flying god whose eyes glowed in the dusk, who sometimes waved his giant arms at them, and who, by the claim of one tribal elder, could swallow up a man and take him away into the sky.

I told Marla about the movie, but that wasn't why I had to have the little wicker plane, or wickerplane, all one word, as I thought of it. It's time to get the story down.

I was pretty much a geek in high school. The Coke-bottle lenses in my glasses were an effective curtain between me and other people.

Nobody seemed to be able to see in to who I really was and I couldn't see them all that well, either. I could see to read and that's what mattered to me. My one claim to fame was winning a contest my senior year when the Tuesday Ladies' Study Club offered a prize for the best essay titled "Reading Opens Doors." I think they expected some cute girl in a plaid skirt to win, but they were nice enough when it turned out to be me who came to read and accept the twenty-five dollar check. After that, I started thinking maybe I could be a writer as well as a reader.

I was lucky my folks could handle tuition for two years at the community college. I did a little yard work and dog sitting to earn money for books. What with reading and mowing grass and picking up dog poop, I spent a lot of time looking down.

My dad was okay. I mean I loved him. We didn't talk much and neither of us was the kind to throw a ball around. It kind of surprised me that his dying left such a huge hole. I had just gotten a grant and a little scholarship money to finish my degree at the University when he died, but Mom said to go on. Grandma was moving in with her and it would be easier for them to get settled.

My apartment was about eight blocks from campus. A few decades earlier, it probably commanded a high rent because of its proximity to the university, but by the time I got there it was rundown enough I could afford it. The tenants included some students, a couple of

single moms and their kids, a woman I thought was a hooker, maybe an ex-hooker, and Deems.

Deems was a step up from a street person. Obviously he had a place to live, but he always had a three-day growth of whiskers. I never saw him either clean-shaven or with a full beard. When I thought about that later, it made me laugh – another of many mysteries about Deems. He wore an assortment of long-sleeved plaid shirts, winter and summer. His faded jeans always looked the same, so I don't know if there was more than one pair. Sometimes he wore a greasy ball cap, sometimes not. The boots were the most striking feature of Deems' wardrobe – not cowboy boots but smooth, black engineer boots, always clean and buffed to a soft sheen, nice as glove leather. I saw later that the soles were thin.

Deems seemed to be always outside, sitting in a folding chair in his open doorway or puttering with the accumulation of junk that started outside his door and reached around the end of the building. His was the last apartment in the row. He'd been there a long time.

Deems had a habit of talking to himself out loud, like some street people do. When you pass by, you're never sure whether they're talking to you or not. You want to be polite, partly for the sake of good manners and partly because you're just a little afraid ignoring them will be taken as an insult and set off a tirade. On the other hand, you don't want to encourage them too much and get drawn into some surreal discussion based on

their paranoia. Or make too much eye contact and have them ask you for money.

Anyway, going to and from class, I always spoke to Deems. At first, he just waved and bobbed his head. After a few weeks, he began to comment on the weather or the previous night's late partyers. I kept walking and made responsive noises that he could interpret however he wished. Finally, somehow, we exchanged names.

One of Deems' piles of junk was covered with a tarp and it seemed gradually to grow bigger under there. Once in a while, I'd see him pulling up the cover as I was leaving for an early class, as if he'd been working for a while and was just finishing up. Once I caught a glimpse of a wooden framework under the tarp and said something like, "Quite an undertaking." Deems muttered about his "project."

By the spring of what was supposed to be the final semester of my M.A. in literature, I had a few acquaintances, other grad school geeks who 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 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 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 that evening 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, 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.

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 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 horrible in the light of a new day. Difficult, yes, but not hopeless. What if I did have to grind out another semester? It wasn't 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.

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. "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 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.

Guardian

When I heard the pulsing whine of fire sirens weaving through my brain, the full pattern of the day finally became clear. It started this morning when I was sitting at the intersection of South First and Treadaway, wondering if I had ever made a green light there on my way to work. At least the billboard ahead changes every couple of months. This week it says, "Guardian Home Security Systems," and shows a house wrapped in chains with a big padlock. Anderson isn't a big city, but it has its share of crime, and I wondered if my wife Katherine and I should get a security system. We don't have a lot of stuff a break-in artist would want – the laptops, maybe the TV.

When the light changed, I turned left and found myself behind a tire shop van. The logo showed a car being carried by four angels. "Trusty Treads: We Keep You Safe." I thought about the spot on my left front tire that's wearing unevenly.

In the parking lot behind the office, I put on the emergency brake and clicked the lock on my ten-year-old sedan. A decal on the back window caught my eye: "Saf-T-Glass®." My brain started stirring bits of the morning together into a stew. Safety. Security. Warning labels on everything. Lots of them responses to people who sued manufacturers because they didn't have good

sense themselves. Nobody's going to keep you safe. Got to look out for yourself. The world's a dangerous place.

I stopped the train of thought before it could take me to the little house on Cedar Street where we were living when Dad left. In the Parkview Business Suites, I picked up mail and sorted it as I headed to Merkel Accounting. Mostly junk mail, including a full-color flyer from the Guardian Home Security outfit I'd seen on the billboard earlier. They advertised fire alarms, smoke and carbon monoxide detectors, along with break-in alarms.

That flyer really sent me back to Cedar Street – the time my brother Carl and I almost burned the house down when we draped an old scarf over a lamp so we could read in bed after lights out. Then we got up and sneaked into the living room to watch TV instead. Mom was sound asleep, always tired from working at the cafeteria to support two hungry boys. We didn't know it would be dangerous, fabric so close to the lightbulb.

Smoke started tickling our noses in the living room about the same time the scarf burst into flame. I grabbed the cord to unplug the lamp and we carried glasses and bowls of water from the kitchen and bathroom and tossed them into the fire, but a curtain and the bedspread were partially burned. Mom woke up and beat out the flames with a throw rug.

The landlord was really mad about the burn marks on the windowsill and the scorched linoleum. Mom had to talk fast to keep us from

being thrown out. Until then, I just knew she worked long hours and didn't have money for the kind of toys and clothes other kids had, but I hadn't thought we were "poor."

That's probably part of the reason I became an accountant – growing up counting every penny. I've thought about going out on my own lots of times. Even had clients tell me I should leave Merkel's and they'd follow me. I can see the name on the door alright – Ben Ward, C.P.A. I'm glad to have a steady job, but there's so much we could be doing more efficiently if Merkel would move into the twenty-first century and really go digital. Still, I'm not inclined to take on the risk of running my own shop – especially now that I have a wife to take care of; maybe a family one of these days.

Quarterly tax reports are due in a week and I had five accounts to work on today, including Anderson Lock and Key, Castle Rock Gates, and Safe Shield Glaziers. I thought again about the theme of "safety" that seemed to be popping up everywhere. I remember thinking *I can play this game!* and made a mental note to pick up some condoms on my way home.

I broke for lunch, but Merkel was working through again and wanted me to bring back a sandwich. Outside our suite was one of those collapsible orange signs warning "Caution. Wet floor." I avoided the sign but almost ran into the mop and bucket parked at the corner of the corridor. While I walked to the diner, the word "caution" played more games in my head: a big

black crow cawed, "Shun the corned beef!" But I always do.

At the counter, I studied the menu while I waited, though I know most of it by heart. I noticed a box on the last page that never caught my eye before: "City of Anderson water supply safe for public consumption. Marvin Appleton, State Health Inspector."

In the afternoon, a new client came in. Merkel sent her straight to me. "My associate, Ben Ward, will take care of you, Mrs. Covington. He's very good; handles some of our most important accounts."

Mrs. Covington has started a new business producing leashes for toddlers – bright yellow with black accents. Her logo is a fat bumblebee; the company name "Bee Safe." She misunderstood my quizzical look. "It only looks cruel to people who've never tried to keep up with a three-year-old in a busy mall." But I was just thinking, *What's up with all the safety stuff?*

I did remember to get condoms on my way home, but only because Katherine called and asked me to stop for her allergy medicine. I strolled around DrugRite waiting for the prescription. The number of products that invoke the words "safe" or "safety" is amazing: medic alert jewelry, rubber-tipped canes, bathtub liners, buffered aspirin, baby shampoo...

By the time I got home, I was feeling anything but safe. I think the world feels more dangerous when you're hounded all the time to "be safe." I tried to settle down with a magazine before supper. The first page

had a big sailing ship advertising Steady On Life and Health Insurance.

Somebody knocked and I wondered why whoever it was didn't use the bell. The stranger had dark, wavy hair, softly draped tweed trousers and Italian loafers but he offered a strong hand. "Hi. I'm Angelo Guardi. You don't know me but I know you. Please call your wife."

I'm sure I scowled at him. I don't like door-to-door salesmen and I wasn't inclined to bother Katherine while she was trying to make dinner. The stranger stopped smiling. His voice became firmer but I didn't feel threatened; I felt compelled by Angelo's instructions. "It's important, Mr. Ward."

All of a sudden, I felt I had to get Katherine to the front of the house. I left the door open and ran to the kitchen. Katherine was pouring greens from a bag into salad bowls. I grabbed her hand. She was too surprised to resist when I pulled her to the living room.

The guy wasn't at the door. I hurried Katherine out to the front walk. She had begun to babble irritated questions. I told her, "Just wait, Honey. We need to see what this guy says."

Then, a muffled boom pulsed through the house. Through the open door we saw flames pouring from the kitchen into the living room of the bungalow. Katherine screamed. I held her tightly as we moved away from the house.

I finally got it while we were waiting for the fire trucks. I found a business card on the sidewalk: Guardian Home Security Systems,

Angelo Guardi, Licensed Representative. Everybody can use a little help sometimes.