

Plane Stories

Peter Horsman

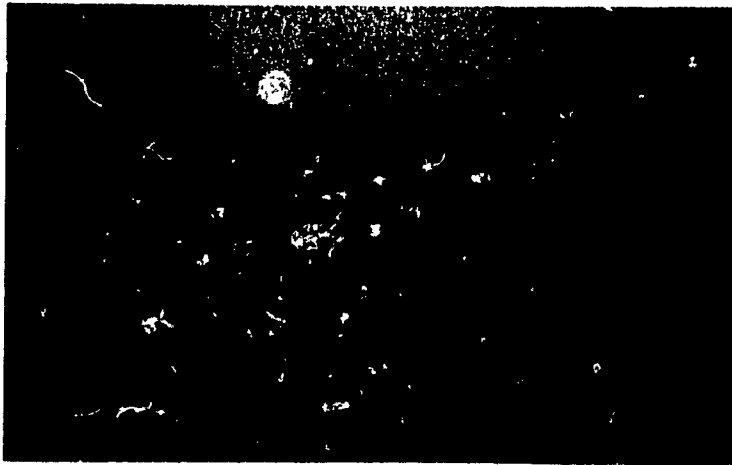
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Abstract

Plane Stories

by

Peter Horsman

This thesis consists of a series of short fictions that use the industry of bush aviation, and the setting and imagery of the Canadian arctic, as a backdrop against which characters, notably male, are developed. The stories, traditional in form and elegaic in tone, are thematically related by a recurrent concern with notions of flight and isolation, both geographical and human. The reader is piloted through these concerns by a narrator whose own story emerges as the series evolves.

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Ernie's Lament

My name is Ernest Probert and I am an insurance adjuster. The company I'm with underwrites the aviation industry for their accidental losses. My work is to fairly assess claims submitted for damage sustained, apportion liability accurately, and negotiate final settlements.

I like my job. The position allows me to travel and lets me keep in touch with aviation, an industry that remains as alluring and exciting to me as it did when I first began. I do not think this abiding interest in flight particular to me. A lot of people are attracted to airplanes. On summer evenings, along some side road that loops around the threshold of an active runway, I'm sure you've seen them -- whole families, couples, often solitary -- sitting back in the grass or angled lazily across their car hoods taking in the peak-hour activity. And I would wager that, when the opportunity presents itself, few of us can resist accelerating our clapped-out Chevilles so as to pass directly under the silver belly of some 747 on short final. If you're like me at all, you likely crack your window a notch to hear the low rumble of those RB211's idle down the slipstream, to let them murmur their tantalizing invitations to your wide-eyed offspring perched alongside, foreheads flat against the glass. Few among us become indifferent to such spectacle. I have not.

even now. Take a fine spring day like today: though I'm invariably outbound to review the remains of some unhappy landing, I'll get to the airport early, maybe catch a shoeshine, meander through the terminal, eye the active runway for as long as time permits. Airports, I have come to believe, display an itch to be airborne. And sometimes, it seems an itch that no amount of scratching can relieve for long.

In the public imagination pilots are generously gifted with a certain flamboyant capability, a deftness with the difficult and unexpected, a sure-handed ease with the romantic. I am not convinced that they deserve such inhuman characterization. In my experience, despite the facile adoration, despite the decorative outfits with which they are adorned and despite the awesome machinery in which they are propped, pilots are much like the rest of us. They walk upright. They put on their flight suits one leg at a time. And they make mistakes. Sometimes they make very big mistakes. The snag is, theirs are harder to ignore.

I do not devise this pinched characterization to belittle aviators. In my business I am obliged to consider such appraisals; our margin depends upon calculations that bear out: over ninety percent of accidents associated with flight are attributable to pilot error. You would be

surprised at the number of pilots who forget their control locks. You would be surprised at the number of pilots who run out of fuel. You would be surprised at the number of pilots who get lost in cloud, at the number who plain get lost. And where flight is involved, such strayed thinking applies to passengers in like measure. The next time you're outbound, the next time you find yourself settling into your window seat, a boarding pass clenched between your teeth and the book you've brought tucked tight under your arm, consider this: impact research conducted jointly by the Association of Aviation Insurers and Boeing has established that passenger injuries, including fatalities, would be reduced by sixty-three percent if aircraft seating was simply turned around. It isn't a maybe: it is a hard fact. Despite it, and despite the massive reduction in insurance costs implied, manufacturers continue to build aircraft with the seating facing forward. They have done the surveys and they are adamant that members of the travelling public do not want to sit facing the direction they're coming from. They want to be pointed in the direction they're heading; even at five hundred miles an hour; even if they can't see a thing from inside the plane, even if they sleep all the way. Personally, I'm all for turning around. No matter how fervent the whimsical impulses of our Walter Mittyish

hearts, it is important to remember that aviators, in the long, durable run, cannot afford much misty-eyed infatuation. This is not to say that aviation is simple-minded, nor that its principals live uncomplicated lives. Far from it.

Despite my enduring and naive enthusiasm for the milieu, my work now is necessarily concerned with mishaps and the calculation of risk. The claims I work on are those of the remote operators -- the smaller affair: one or two machines flying from some cluster of shacks half buried in ice a couple of thousand miles north of Pearson International. Having been a bush pilot myself for many years -- one who walked away from a near-fatal himself -- it is an area that I am particularly attracted to. And it is the bush pilot with whom I have become, professionally, most concerned: the aviators who fly our margins from staff houses or tents scattered here and there throughout the north. Although it sounds trite, they become a very different breed from the pilots you might periodically encounter, all decked out in braided blue hats, gold bars and shiny black shoes, mincing through the muzak at Pearson International. The Pearson strain, one might say, has migrated through the ranks to the point at which support structures purge a lot of bush-type looseness. Or you could

way to a point at which the pilot figures less prominently, as just one more component in a nailed-down grid that positively eliminates risk: so constrained, that he is fortunately denied much heroic opportunity. He normally flies the same routes to familiar destinations, well above the weather, on autopilot all the way. And he doesn't get cold -- this aspect is important -- his home life is normal. The Pearson variety of flyer works a short rotation, with limited duty hours, on a schedule that requires a regular home life. Bush pilots, however, are obliged to leave for months at a time, year after year, a condition that for most of us was one of the reasons we got into the business in the first place, feather-headed and footloose, thinking it couldn't get much better, packing up your whole life and taking it with you to the next contract at Holman Island or Gladman Point or Victory Bay But when you get older, maybe you marry, say you have a child and for one reason or another you haven't managed the migration to Pearson, then the leaving is never so free and clear again.

I now believe it is too much to expect that living such extremity wouldn't affect those who become caught in it; that, over the years, its features wouldn't bleed into your character and change you, maybe take you like bush flying to

locations where you never could have imagined you would go. Think of it: one day you're in oven mitts and a bib barbecuing ribs in the back yard, summer light slanting over the hedge to warm you; the next, you're seasons and a world away, alone again, the familiar stench of jet fuel hanging on your clothes, snow to your knees. Imagine working that world: a world so searingly white that it will blind you in a morning if you don't hide your eyes. A world so coldly remote that no sun appears during months of night. Imagine winter storms so bent on burying you that you cannot move for days at a time. In its elemental moments bush flying is a severe and solitary occupation. It is conducted in a petulant wilderness, its pauses serene, its tempers extreme. Just read the map: Deception Cove, Dismal Lake, Desolation Point, Mercy Bay; it works on you for sure. And it can cost you a lot.

It is my idea, and I have profiled this all out for the company, that at a certain predictable point the bush pilot becomes high-risk. If after seven or ten years of flying he hasn't migrated to Pearson, his options dry up and squeeze him a little. And then he either quits the business completely to find a job in Scarborough, or he persists and is altered forever. If he persists, the work slowly changes from being his heart's true cheer to just an occupation, a

way to get the money to buy the ribs, something done in a filled-in, absent-minded manner while the vital concerns of his life shift elsewhere, say to home in Scarborough. That which was once liberating now imprisons. And it stays like that until he adapts to it and hardens, enthusiasm for the job just draining away to nothing.

From an underwriter's point of view the implications are critical. The bush pilot upon whose ability the insurer depends, might not sleep so well: he becomes taciturn. After supper he'll head early for his bunk and fall asleep wishing away the next chunk of his life, dreaming himself home. The second his eyelids close he's sitting back in his yard: the smell of fresh-cut grass, the comforting drone of his neighbour's lawnmower a house or two down, his daughter squealing with delight as she leaps through the sprinkler, his wife lingering there beside him and he too staying close, trying to hold this time back, the keen tension of months apart rippling between them through the slick air ... all under sky as clear and blue as you could ever imagine your sky to be.

The phone rings. He jerks awake and in the darkness fumbles for a cigarette before reaching, already aware of snow grains scratching at his window pane. Soon he's as low and as slow as he can get, downwind in whiteout, straining

to glimpse the sight of some earthly reference, something dark, some pinpoint of hope, something he can see before he smacks himself and the nurse beside him flat into snow-buried rock.

The other night I was at one of those improve-your-life symposiums at the Scarborough Community College; afterwards, the teacher said that we all control our lives through our own imagination. She said that we imagine that which we secretly desire and in our imaginings create our very life. Whether we know it or not. I regret I didn't think about it quickly enough to remark, but, driving back to my room at the Blue Star later, I realized that such clear-sky thinking could never occur to a bush pilot. If he was half conscious at all and if he had any bush time, he would sooner or later unavoidably become concerned with the thought of getting caught out some purgatorial night, iced up heavy and low on fuel, with only one crosswind runway within reach. He'd imagine descending, the windscreen full of driving snow; wind shear, as if trying to give him a message shaking him harder into the harness the lower he gets, one caution light or another blinking low in his peripheral vision, yellow and stern, down by that nurse's knees.

Such thinking would, by my model, begin to occur to the bush pilot at about the five thousand hour mark. Then, in

spite of his steadily increasing accumulation of flying experience, he becomes accident-prone. He gradually admits to himself that he's locked into bush flying, and he doesn't like it any more, and the way he goes about it changes. Instead of just taking off and seeing what weather he finds, he'll check and recheck the forecasts, which he already knows are lousy in the north. Or he'll triple check his instruments and verify book limits in a pedantic, Pearson manner, a way he never used to. He starts to think too much; and it grinds him down and grounds him. At about the same time he'll have come to recognize that with bush flying, no matter how much he learns from his close calls or his mishaps, no matter how much he prepares himself for his next flight, there will always remain a fixed percentage of times when his side doors are all used up. Sooner or later, he will be caught out staring into that windscreen full of driving snow. Close over his shoulder, some damaged stranger will be bleeding to death, crying out loud at every lurch of the aircraft -- feeling the minutes, the hours, pass through his body like an endless ribbon of pain. And the tower, buried in cloud below, will advise in an unperturbed voice that it's zero/zero and gusting heavy on the ground. At such a moment, low on fuel with the terrain alarm pealing in his headset, his single thought is a hope.

the hope that no other thing goes wrong; that he doesn't lose an engine as the inner marker flares dully below; that he hasn't over-crabbed as the threshold strobes flicker once only in his side screen. Then, with the nurse as white as a bed sheet, he just lines everything up as best he can, shuts it all down, and waits.

After seven years of bush flying his enthusiasm will be complicated by other realizations. For the first few years every contract, every flight, thrills -- there will not be a time that he feels the undercarriage slip from earth to air without the uncertainty and exhilaration of first born adventure. But by the time he's got five or seven thousand hours under his belt he'll have spent a few seasons stuck in camps with only two or three other men, on a job where the flying soon dulls. On a geological project, for example, where he'll be flying a couple of stakers around the same twenty mile patch for two or three months straight. Out in the early morning, sitting and waiting all day, then back in at nightfall for a grand total of something like twenty minutes airtime. After a month it will seem to him that he's heard every story his contractors can tell two or three times over -- like he's known them all his life. Or worse, it might be a job where it doesn't go so well, for whatever reason, but still he's caught there, with no reprieve, until

It ends.

Other complications may develop. It might happen that things deteriorate on the southern front. That his wife, with plenty of good reason, gets real tired of never having a normal life, never having him around on Saturday night, or when the furnace quits, or when the car gets a flat tire, or when the half-ton breaks down at the health club. By my model, at this stage of the game a turbulent home situation shifts the bush pilot into the highest category of risk. It works like this: the occupation may have lost its shine, most do after all, but as long as he can talk himself into believing that it's necessary, that he has no real choice -- for the mortgage, the kids, the family, that they are with him on this -- he has a way to make sense of it. His debilitating preoccupations are focused externally. And contained. But if he loses serious ground on the inside too, he is a lost man, and so is anybody riding with him. For he's left with nothing at all to dream about. And no real purpose that he can understand. By this time it's impossible for him to convince her that flying is no longer a lark, that it has become for him just a job. The only one he can get. He is left with no port in the storm, so to speak, and it's hard on him.

Such halved living wears anybody down. Particularly in

the north. It has been said that even in its benign aspect the Arctic conveys a warning to its visitors: this land is allowing you a temporary truce. Leave while you can, or stay -- and wait for me to take you. And the truth be told, if they do not quit to try and find work in the south at this point in their career, many bush pilots fracture a little. They have their life in the south, and they grow into a life in the north. They are caught, like solitary nomads, in endless migration between the two. It's easy, you might think, just quit. But ask yourself, what could he possibly do at his age, with his training and a family of responsibilities, in Scarborough? Deliver pizza? Sell shoes in a shopping mall? Would you? Maybe. Would you tomorrow morning?

You see what I mean: he keeps on thinking about it. He perceives that he is caught, so he just persists. And slowly, unawares, he drifts off the intended course. He might lose his family and, like some snow-bound castaway, fade into the north to live out the rest of his time there. Or he might break down a little and wind up out of the business and taking that job in the mall too late. Or he might just persist with no real direction until his caring about it plain runs out, after which he just still keeps on. When he reaches this point, by my model, he becomes the

lowest-risk category of bush pilot there is. He's a bush-pilot for the rest of his days. A type you can hop into a plane with, no matter what the weather, without a second thought. Their skin doesn't get any thicker and they don't come any safer. He's managed to persist through that period of distraction that plagued him with possibilities and he's back to solid flying. But during the interim period, the one that I have profiled out, anything, really, could happen.

For example, say after they've unloaded the patient the nurse comes towards him. Although they don't really know each other, in the space of a few hours alone they have nudged life's very limits. They've been thrown right through the familiar conventions that insulate us from one another, brought together by an extreme experience, a draining relief. It's almost dawn and the nurse, grateful to be back in one piece, invites him for breakfast. Of course he declines, heads back to his bunk, and returns to his thoughts of Scarborough. But, maybe the next time it's too early when they're down and the kitchen is still locked. Up half the night, he's fatigued, he's hungry, and he's lonely. So he accepts. And like that they become friendly.

At first, he doesn't bother telling his wife about it -- it's an inconsequential thing and no harm's done.

Another time they might have supper together, and for one evening out of sixty he's spared the monotonous isolation of his bunk in the staff-house. And it starts like that: they drift into friendship. He can't tell his family about it -- how could he ever explain it to his wife? How could she ever understand, knowing as she does only the Pearson variety of flyer. So he keeps it to himself, believing he is caught with no other choice. How could he ever explain to her, a thousand miles and a season away, that his involvement has nothing to do with the part of his life she shares? That it was accidental, a part of the unanticipated and unbegrudgable percentage of things that remain beyond his control. And really, in a long view of things, who would it finally hurt?



The Hope Chest

When Wilbert, my brother, was still a little thing, Dad used to play him a game that went like this: he would lie on the floor, place the soles of his feet against Wilbert's chest and swing him up into the air. Wilbert, who was amply provided with baby fat, would stretch his arms out like chubby wings and make motor noises with his mouth while Dad gently manoeuvred him fore and aft, port and starboard, nose up, nose down.

"Okay, Willy, it's a pure blue day and you are climbing through the sky like a homesick angel. Oh, look at that little white cloud go by. Oh, look at that robin winging along beside you, what's he saying to you, Willy -- I think he said you're a funny looking bird with no feathers at all."

No matter how many times he'd heard that robin's call, Wilbert would interrupt his motoring to snort or laugh, then, with his short arms still winging out, he'd wait for Dad to carry on.

"Now Wilbert, of all the things you can call this airplane, you can use any word you want, except one. There surely must be enough words in this world to make you forget about this one little word that you better not say, and that word is 'crazy'. You can say fine airplane, pretty airplane, beautiful airplane. You can say dumb airplane,

ugly airplane, rotten airplane. You can even say them all together in a row and still count on a pleasant flight, Wilbert. But you must not say 'crazy' airplane. It's our only rule."

Wilbert, grinning from wing to wing, would start in: "Nice airplane, pretty airplane, beautiful airplane." Dad, keeping up the smooth sailing, would take over the motor noise while Wilbert chattered his way to that one word: "Rotten airplane -- dirty, rotten, ugly airplane." He'd hang there fine, swaying calmly back and forth, until finally out it would come:

"Crazy airplane."

With that word Wilbert's luck would turn sharply for the worse. The motor would sputter and stop. First one of Dad's legs would shake, then the other.

"Oh, Willie, you've gone and said it. And look at that, you've lost one engine already, and now you're heading into rough weather. Oh, poor you, I think you're coming down." Wilbert, trying hard to stay aloft through the heavy weather, would quickly fold his wings tight around Dad's ankles and cling there until finally, all hope lost, he'd tumble awkwardly, squawking like a wounded dove, into Papa's waiting arms. It was a lovely game. Wilbert liked it as much as I had before him, though Dad didn't play it often.

With him so busy at his farm work or worrying about the weather -- the rain, the hail, an early frost -- there seemed precious little time spent playing crazy airplane.

For part of his life Papa was a pilot. He never said as much, but my guess is that it might have been the best part. And though he was never the type to hang on to much, he hung on to an old chest from his flying days for years after he'd returned to the farm. It has since disappeared -- latter day attempts to recover this relic from our early years have proved unfruitful. The chest must have been thrown out or lost, likely in the big travelling after the warring ended, when he and Mom split and went their separate ways.

The chest was sky blue. New, it would have been a striking thing, though by the time we got our hands on it rust tinged its surface scrapes and, when you opened it, a musty odour strained your nostrils. I doubt Dad ever looked into it; I cannot recall him doing so. And I can't say he avoided it either, for I don't believe he did. But he did hang on to it for a long time and that was exceptional for him.

One would have expected that chest to be crammed with wondrous souvenirs from a time Dad no doubt thought of as his lone relief from a life of stultifying farm work. It

was no small reprieve. He swapped a steel wheel tractor for a Hawker Hurricane, a barn of cow shit for the British Isles, and his pungent, sturdy coveralls for aviator sunglasses, a chronometer and a brass band. But the chest's contents were spartan and unremarkable: it held three flying suits; a couple of hats, each bearing a gold-winged crest; a training album of aircraft portraits; and, tucked into the breast pocket of one of the suits, two black-and-white photographs.

The training portraits were simple depictions of enemy aircraft in stark silhouette: featureless forms viewed from various perspectives, black ink on white cardboard. The dramatic contrast of pure black on pure white, coupled with the absence of detail, imposed a vivid clarity. The silhouettes were fascinating to my brother and me, menacing as they vaguely did our Father, who, with us, firmly inhabited the background space of heroic white. During our secret forays through Papa's chest, Wilbert and I studied those silhouettes time and again. And by '51, unless they approached directly out of the brassy Saskatchewan sun, we could have identified by silhouette alone any belated Messerschmidt, Heinkel, or Stuka that happened to be patrolling a Moose Jaw - Gravelburg vector, your choice of angle. Such visitations were infrequent, though, and we

were left to impose our esoteric knowledge on hazy forms discerned in ponderous prairie cumulus or, since we knew nothing else at all about airplanes, on the rare craft that did hazard the dome of prairie sky that contained us, our yard, and our farm.

"It's smaller in the tail than the Stuka," Wilbert would note, the weight of two brimming milk pails causing his neck muscles to bulge as he craned and squinted at a sputtering spray plane stitching low over the flat horizon.

"And the cockpit is farther back on the fuselage," I would rejoin. It was our hope that we would both fly away to be pilots one day; that we would escape our chores to sit high and light among pure white clouds; that we would look down to see, far below, others at our earthy occupations: picking stones, hauling hay, milking cows, cleaning the barn.

Periodically, Wilbert and I would head up to the workshop and haul out Papa's chest. It was the one exotic thing we knew. Every other last thing was local, perpetual and usually associated with work. We would remove the grey blanket draped over the chest and spread it on the cool shop floor. We'd drag the chest out from under the bench, gingerly unload its contents, then lingeringly view, discuss and review, our vintage holdings. Occasionally, we'd wear

the hats as we leafed through the album, pausing randomly to quiz each other on one or another enemy silhouette.

One of the photos was of a young woman, in uniform, sitting on grass in a meadow. A grey blanket was folded beside her feet. Over her shoulder a stone wall led to a castle, miniature in the distance. A shadow stretched behind her and, as she turned her head to smile at the camera a silver necklace bearing a small cross sparkled between the opened lapels of her white blouse. On the back of the photograph, handwritten in a script unlike Papa's, was a cryptic message: "Remember the Torquay."

"Must be the Queen of England," Wilbert surmised, "when she was young."

"I think the Torquay must be a famous battle site. Papa must have been in it," I replied.

"I wonder if he was scared, getting in his plane, taking off and everything," Wilbert mused, himself unnerved at the prospect, the album of enemy silhouettes open at his feet. And it would start like that: we'd discuss pealing alarms, Papa running to his Hurricane, ducking his head a little as he slid the glass canopy forward with one hand, smoke coughing from the exhausts as the prop ticked over then caught, a tight-lipped smile and then the thumbs up. Later, he'd be wobbling back to the field in a shot-up

fuselage, a contrail of thick, black smoke streaming behind him, one wheel only part-way down; a fire truck or two lining the runway as he greases his Hurricane on. A snow white ambulance with a big red cross standing calmly by, its aft doors opened like arms.

The other photograph pictured him, in uniform, by an old car. The driver's door is partly open, one black shoe near-buried in prairie snow, the other placed purposely on the running board as if he'd been caught on the fly . . . Just on his way to somewhere he was anxious to be. It is winter-time. In the driver's window, under the bare hand hanging loosely over the doorframe, a reflected Saskatchewan sun shines cool and white -- to each side, smaller and lower and less bright, sundogs glisten in the pane.

"It must have been the day he went to war," Wilbert deduced, early on.

"Yes," I concurred, "his Mother must have taken the picture the day he was going away to the war. It must have been a very sad day." In the photograph his military waistcoat fit him to a tee, but without the greatcoat, judging by my recollection of Saskatchewan when there are sundogs in the sky and that much snow on the ground, he had to have been freezing cold. You would never tell it from his crisp, vigorous demeanour: the nonchalant stance, the

fine white of teeth smiling confidently towards us, his eyes as sharp and black as the silhouettes. Two small golden wings were stitched over his heart.

"One for each of us," we would tell each other, naively parcelling his affection between us, years before he'd even likely met Mom.

One year -- the summer before Mom, taking Wilbert and me with her, left for Yorkton -- Wilbert and I were working our way through the chest. We were sitting on the floor, the captain hats barrelling our heads, the prairie sun splashing in through the open shop entry. As we studied the photo of Dad, the interior of the shop dimmed. Mom appeared in the doorway -- her familiar silhouette dark against the bright yard light -- holding a basket of freshly washed clothes heavy in her arms. Mom was the curious type, particularly where we were concerned. She stepped towards us, into the cool of the shop.

"What are you two up to ... what do you have in that box?" Without thinking Wilbert showed her the photograph.

"Momma, did you ever see this picture of Papa going to war?" Wilbert held it up to her. I don't know how we expected her to respond, but it surely couldn't have occurred to us that she would be anything but appreciative, most likely infatuated, though Mom didn't swoon much by

then.

She took the photograph from Wilbert, studied it and after a time, remarked: "Looks to me like he's going dancing."

I do not think that if that long-awaited squadron of Messerschmidts had at that very moment opened fire on the chicken coop we would have been more stunned. Wilbert sagged at the thought -- too shocked to speak, he stood there puzzled, his mouth open, furrows running his brow. It wasn't just that her off hand observation put a substantial crack in what we had come to take for granted about that timeless moment -- the moment he stood poised on the threshold of that open door; worse, it compromised the whole series of truths about him that we shared. As quickly as I could, I reached up and recovered the photograph.

"That's crazy, Mom," I said taking it from her. "He's wearing his uniform."

"They all wore their uniforms like that, to dances and bridge parties, after the war; believe me, they wore them threadbare," she said, seemingly bemused. "Just look at the shoes."

My eyes jerked to his footwear, half expecting to see taps on the soles of his shoes, an unnoticed saxophone glinting in the moony rear window of the sedan. "So, what

about his shoes? Look how black and shined up they are."

"Yes, they are shiny and they are black but they are not boots ... they are not clunky military boots for walking long, hard walks with a big military pack on his back. Who in their right mind would wear shoes like that in all that snow ... unless they were going dancing?"

I severely regretted letting her see the photograph and felt a well of animosity towards Wilbert for having offered it up to her in the first place, but it was too late.

"And look at the seat of the car." She would not let be. Just above his leg a portion of a small bag was discernable. Wilbert, his head down, was staring into the chest, the bottom half of his ears flushed crimson below the hat looping roundly off his head.

"That's his pilot's travelling kit," I said impatiently, with granite conviction. By then, Wilbert and I had stuffed that kit with miniature maps of Europe, coded phone numbers, a flare gun, a compass, at Wilbert's insistence a pair of runners and, in case of the worst, stitched into the lining, one suicide pill. Instinctively, I scaled our inventory back: "Probably for his toothbrush and stuff."

"Maybe his toothbrush, maybe a mickey of whisky."

It was a hard thing for her to say to us. We had heard

them battling too many times about whisky for it not to be. For a long minute no one spoke. Out of the blue, Wilbert started to cry. Mom looked to him, startled. I know she must have regretted her words, but there was no calling them back.

"Wilbert," I cut in, one half still mad at him and one half now sorry for him, "I don't think ..."

"Oh what's that now. I hadn't noticed that before." Mom had reached down for the photograph again; she was holding it up closer than she had the first time. Her head began nodding, slowly, deliberately. Wilbert, smelling salvation in the air, half snorted and mopped at his cheek. As he looked up to her with his shiny eyes the hat slipped, falling to the garage floor. I quickly picked it up, brushed it off and handed it back to him. "Hm ... the date on that license plate ... I hadn't noticed that when I first looked That couldn't be after the war. This photograph must have been taken before the war ended." She knelt down and smiled at Wilbert, "I don't recall much dancing with your Daddy in those days. Not much to dance about with a war on." She handed the photo back to me.

Upon this stroke of deliverance our eyes fairly leapt to the licence plate.

"Your Papa the pilot'll be flying in on his John Deere

for supper in an hour or so. Ernest, you pack up that war chest and bring in the cows. Wilbert honey, you could bring me some wood or ... are you listening to me, Wilbert?"

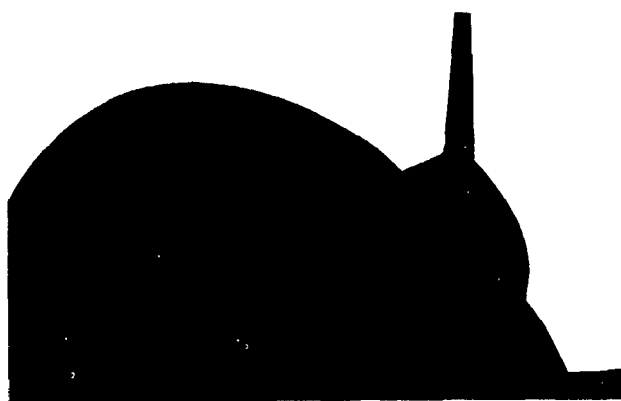
Wilbert, back squarely under the hat, was still examining the new evidence, the date on the license plate: "One, nine, four, six," relief in his whisper, as if he felt he had to memorize those numbers so as to never forget them.

Mom continued, "Or ... maybe I won't be able to bake the chocolate cake with chocolate icing and crushed walnuts sprinkled over it I've been thinking of baking all day." That moved Wilbert. And that moved me. We carefully replaced the items in the chest, buried it back under the bench, covered it with the grey blanket and stepped out into the bright yard with Mom. Away in the distance, I could hear the steady pulse of a tractor, faint as a heartbeat. High overhead, the pristine hull of a lone white cloud rolled slowly over the three of us, and sailed calmly on.

Wilbert was fine. Although I'd still examine the chest with him occasionally, I was too old not to know that the war ended in 1945. In any case it wouldn't have mattered much. We had been breached and it was there between us. Unspoken though it remained, the spectre of that exchange, as surely as an enemy silhouette, haunted our heroic

inventory from then on in. I could never cleanly pretend otherwise again. And it wasn't because of the dance. I knew what I knew. And my truth said Dad wasn't going dancing the moment that picture was taken -- it was taken in broad daylight, the brash Saskatchewan sun beaming down upon him from high overhead, no pair of shadows dogging his heels. Though likely there had been other times when he had gone dancing in just those shoes, just that uniform, just that sedan; a mickey of whisky in a brown bag tossed on the front seat. His saxophone stashed in the trunk.

But it wasn't the day he went to the war either, though there had been that day too. She was as wrong about the going dancing as we were wrong about the going to war. Papa had become a hard man to pin down. For me, the stories Wilbert and I had spun into that Pandora's Box came tumbling out. I never knew him so clearly again. I now see it as just a moment when he was young, some moment around noon on a cold winter day when he unstrapped his smelly coveralls and kicked off his shit-stained boots, when he buttoned up his uniform and went out into the barnyard to stand by a car in slippery city shoes for all the time a snapshot takes, his black eyes still full of hope for himself; two golden wings hovering smartly over his drumming heart.



The Claiming

It was near Coronation Gulf, in the low Arctic. Early fall. The weather was clear, perfect for flying, and it promised to hold. We were suspended between the last of the summer mosquitoes and impending winter. The high coastal hills north of us were already powdered with fall's first flakes; the autumn air was still and dense -- I barely felt the machine as we crept above a land that lay below us like some child's perfect kingdom. To the west, beyond a ridge that edged inland from a stony coast, it was still twilight and darker. To our east, the offshore sun lifted from the quiet sea and reddened the underside of cirrus high overhead; below, it mottled the tundra that stretched softly from the water-edge to the shoulder of a low ridge. As we moved farther out over the bay I saw three white whales, hanging like tears in dark water. The middle whale broke the surface of the mute seapool, to breathe, then the front one broke, and then the smaller one, and then they circled there at the joining of the clear Arctic air and the sea.

"Pilot. Pilot." Beside me the miner gestured vigorously towards the area below.

We'd reached the site. I nodded, checked my map, banked the machine away from the water towards shore, and reduced power. As we began the descent, I thought about being my customer's pilot, the meaning of it, now, and

before now, when pilots were ones who would guide strangers into their harbours. And before that, when a pilot was an oar. An oar. We descended in silence. I imagined these meanings retreating into history outside of me. And I recognized their reverberations within me -- I felt like that miner's oar. And I was guiding him into my country. My country. I knew it was my country because I lived there, and because I felt closer to it than I did to the paying stranger sitting beside me. As we touched down on the ridge, the sun slumped back into the sea; it was darker again, as if we were being given a chance to start over again. Then the cirrus blazed above us and it was day.

We were quiet as we unloaded the chopper. It was still early and chilly, so I paused to zip my coat and put on my gloves.

"Good idea, it's a bit on the cool side." The miner squatted down and unfolded a worn flight jacket from the top of his knapsack. In the distance above his head, stones glistened like polished pearls at the waterline of the bay. "It'll warm up soon, with the sun," he said, rubbing his hands together and looking around: "It's a perfect morning for claiming." He stood up, into my vision, shook out the coat and put it on.

"Umm," I nodded in agreement, and passed him the

survival kit and his handgun, the last bundle of stakes, and our lunch bags. He carried them over and added them to the pieces of equipment that he had piled about fifteen feet from the machine. His body lurched to one side as moved, his right foot turned in unevenly as he stepped -- the heel of the boot was worn at a severe angle. I couldn't help wondering if he'd been a flyer too when he was younger, and if he had hurt himself in an accident; I felt kinder towards him in spite of the project.

"That's it," I said, and closed the hatch.

"Great. Would you mind taking a picture for me before we get started?" He pulled a Polaroid from the knapsack, opened it, and handed it to me: "Here, just aim and push the red button." I positioned myself so as to keep the tundra meadow, the shoreline, and the sea in the picture. "Maybe go and stand over there, I want to get it all in." He pointed in the other direction.

As I moved back to get the equipment in the foreground he walked by me to the front of the helicopter, then he leaned his shoulder against the bubble, crossed his legs nonchalantly, and grinned broadly. I pushed the button. A photograph slipped out of the camera towards me. I placed it on the gear to dry.

"Can I get one of you too?" he asked.

"Sure, why not." We exchanged places. I turned towards him for the photograph. The sun was higher and bright -- I reached into the cockpit for my sunglasses, put them on, then stood there and waited. He took the picture, walked over and placed his photograph beside mine. Then he hung the camera over his neck, and leaned down to the knapsack. When he stood up I noticed that the sunglasses he'd put on were Ray-Bans too. He peeled the photographs in two, and let the unwanted parts drop to the tundra beside his feet. I walked over, picked them up, and returned with them to the helicopter.

"We can just put our garbage in this hatch, and I'll take care of it when we get back," I said. He was busily organizing his gear into two piles. "I'll leave the hatch open."

"Let's go, the site is up there." As he spoke he looked up along the ridge.

"You go on ahead. I'm going to look over the machine, and maybe go for a walk. What time do you want me back here?"

"Hey, Captain, I need some help sinking these stakes. At four and a quarter an hour for you and your whirlybird you shouldn't mind getting your hands a little dirty, should you? We're in this together you know; where do you think

they get the material to build helicopters?" I turned towards him to tell him what he could do with his stakes, when he grinned at me again in that slapstick-photogenic way, and started nodding his head, indicating that he knew he'd gone too far. "Okay, okay, you go picking daisies; I'll do it myself." Then, abruptly, he turned, and started limping up the ridge. Him and his limp; I watched him struggle along with the stakes for a minute, then I picked up the sledge and chain and started after him. He didn't say a word, like he knew I'd follow.

At first, I kept behind him on the caribou path that grooved the ridge line, then I stepped off and walked beside the beaten down path, the tundra soft and thick beneath my feet. There was a blueberry plant, still low to the ground at the end of its brief season, and I stopped to reach for the dark, sturdy berries. As I bent closer down, minute purple blossoms appeared, nestled in the tundra beside the berries. Such fragile petals. The thought of their presence so far away from everything -- futile and unknown -- resounded within me. The berries were cold in my mouth.

I steadied the first stake close to the ground; he didn't look like he did this every day, and if he missed with the sledge I didn't want him to maim me. On his third

swing the stake snapped. Bedrock. As I pulled out the broken shaft I was surprised to see that it was rusty -- the last bit at the pointed end was wet.

"Iron," he explained, "you're standing on an iron mine. As pure as it gets. Let's try over here." He moved over a couple of feet and started spearing a fresh stake into the ground -- watching him trying to stick his wooden stake into stone, like some backwards King Arthur, plunging away, the stake staining rustier and redder the more he heaved, a vision of whaling came to my mind.

We managed to sink the stake. He flagged it with a piece of florescent tape, then I held my end of the steel chain while he took a bearing, and started off away from me. When the chain tightened, he kicked at the tundra until he'd torn away a patch; then, to mark the spot for me, he took a can of black paint out of his jacket pocket and spray-bombed the bedrock. I called to him: "Just kick a couple of stones together, I'll find your mark," and then, irritated, I muttered more to myself, "Jesus Christ, you don't have to paint the whole ridge black."

In the quiet of that still place my voice must have carried. He stopped, turned deliberately to me and called back, "Jesus Christ yourself, Captain. Up there," he gestured skyward, "you make the calls. Down here's my

show."

I just shook my head and waved him to get on with it. We advanced another length, connected together by the chain stretched taut between us, so it wouldn't snag. At the second stake we took turns on the sledgehammer. We continued like that, like two fenceposts wired together, automatically tying in the uncomplaining land.

It was slow work. After a couple of hours I looked back along the spine of the ridge and counted seven orange flags. It was early afternoon by the time we were finished and back at the helicopter.

"Lunch," I offered, "or should we eat in the air?"

"There are a few other sites I'd like to sample on the way back." He checked his watch, "But this is a perfect spot. Why don't we eat here and enjoy this place a little longer. They say man can't live on bread alone, right Captain?" he grinned again. "I'll go get the food. And the gun, there might be polar bears around here."

With the lunch bags in one hand and his handgun in the other he started upslope off the tundra on to a barren, rocky, area that, on the seaward side, jutted out into a small cliff. I followed along as he made his way to a huge boulder, about five feet high, that peaked the ridge. We cleared away some small stones and then sat down and leaned

back against the boulder. After the morning's work I was hungry. I'd just opened my lunch bag when he crumpled his up in disgust: "God damn it. That frigging expediter and his frigging hotel. No sandwiches ... it never fails. I'm allergic to apples." He took an apple out and then worked the bag into a ball. "Here, you want this?" He offered me the apple, and went to throw the bag over the cliff.

"I'll ..." I started to say that I'd take it, but I was too late. The brown bag sailed out of sight. "You shouldn't have done that -- give it to me next time -- I'll take it back with us."

"Ah. it's only paper." He brightened: "Check yours. Maybe they put all the sandwiches in one lunch." I opened my bag -- no sandwiches -- another apple and a carton of juice. I started in on the apple. It was fresh and cold; I thought of the blueberries.

"No sandwiches," I said. "But there are berries around here; I saw some earlier."

"Sure. Thanks a lot, Captain. Maybe we can chew on some of these stones for dessert." We laughed together, for the first time, really. He placed his apple and the camera on the bedrock beside his handgun, got up, and walked over to the lip of the cliff.

"How did you hurt your foot?" I asked him.

"I was a jumper in the Air Force until I got hurt." He looked over the precipice. "Christ, I'd hate to fall from here. It's farther down than it looks from the air."

I went up beside him to see.

"I loved it; especially the free fall. When I was younger I wanted to be a pilot, but I guess my vision wasn't good enough -- I wear contacts now -- that was before they amended the regulations to allow you in with corrected vision. So I figured jumping was the next best thing." He looked at me intently: "You must have done some parachuting. Do you think you could survive a jump from here?"

"I had to parachute once, for my pilot's license, but I haven't done it since." I could see the bag on the tundra below. It was a long way down. "I wouldn't dream of trying it from here," I said, and moved back away from the cliff. He moved back with me, then he pulled himself up on to the big boulder. He put his hands on his hips then moved one hand up over his sunglasses and looked out to the meadow and the water.

"Lovely. Perfect," he said. "Come and have a look from up here."

With no wind, the granite warmed my palms as I climbed up beside him. The dazzling one-piece sea was still:

absolutely still. It seemed as if it would never heave or roll again, solid and heavy as lead, as if at the centre of a huge, momentous, waiting. "Perfect ..." he said again.

From the shoreline a gull wobbled into thin air; then another followed slowly. I agreed: "Yes, it is perfect."

"We're going to ship direct to Japan from right out there. We'll run a conveyor right out into the bay. It's so deep we don't even have to barge."

He turned toward me and lowered his voice, as if he were afraid, away out there, that someone would overhear his revelation: "It's listed on the Toronto exchange as Red Ridge Ore. Get in now. You'll make a fortune." Before I got a chance to thank him he looked out to the water again and went on; "I should take a picture or two before we leave, for the board. Pilot, would you mind passing me up the camera. I want to get a shot of the harbour from here.

I climbed down and handed him the Polaroid. He opened it and pointed it seawards. Click -- puurrtrt. The photograph slipped out of the case towards him; he took it and pulled it in two, let one part go, and began waving the other half back and forth in the air. I picked the discarded part of the photograph up from the tundra and put it in my pocket. He climbed down from the boulder and walked back towards the helicopter, then on past it a bit.

I followed him along the ridge.

"The mine will provide jobs. We're even going to build a gymnasium for the Eskimos." The thought startled me: that the Inuit might want to trade life on the land for the inside of a mine or the inside of a sheet metal building with a basketball court etched, like our claim, on its floor. "Right over there." Click -- puurrtrt. The photograph slipped out of the case towards him; he took it and pulled it in two, let one part go, and began waving the other half back and forth in the air. I leaned down and picked the discarded part of the photograph up and put it in my pocket. He walked again, and again I followed him along the ridge.

"Well I'll be damned. Snow. In August." He handed me the Polaroid: "Here, I'll tell you when I'm ready." As I removed my gloves and put them in my pocket, he slid down a small scarp and on to a patch of snow that was sheltered in the shadow of the ridge. He took a piece of paper out of his breast pocket and spread it out on the snow. Then he went down on one knee beside it. He lifted his arm up and pointed out to sea; he adjusted his sunglasses and gazed, like some boatless Byron, in the same direction. The worn boot heel again. In his leather flight jacket, kneeling on the snow and pointing at who in hell knows what, he made an

easy target.

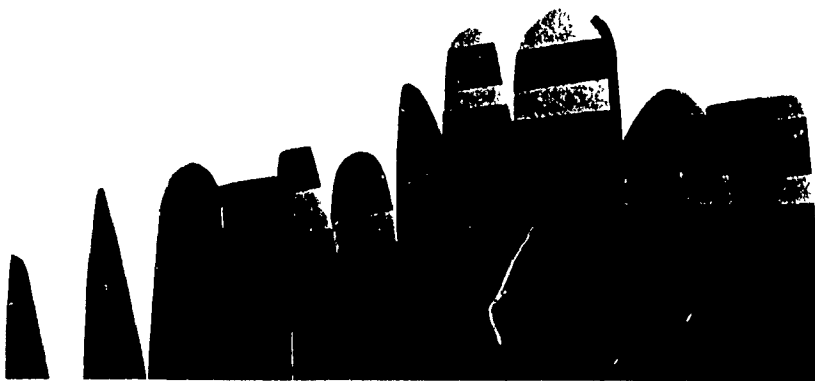
"Okay, how does this look?" he said.

I raised the sight up from the boot heel. I played the cross-hairs back and forth along the thin arm of his Ray-Bans, then along his hairline and settled it over the base of his temple just forward of his ear; I exhaled completely, and waited.

"Okay pilot, shoot."

I squeezed hard.

The photograph slid out of the case towards me. I took it and peeled it in two. I let one part fall to the tundra beneath my feet while, slowly, the other part became clear in the cool air.



The Mutiny

Among senior members of the flight department Juet was known as a competent bush pilot. To you, the assessment "competent" may sound low-key, but to an insider it is not. Although all of us have been fed plenty of prattle about "born pilots" and "the right stuff" -- Jimmy Cagney striding to his floatplane in a steam-cleaned uniform (Garbo leaning on the dock as he touches down) -- such advertisement is misplaced. If not in their green years, seasoned bush pilots, keenly aware of how abruptly things can nose dive, shy away from witless characterizations like "natural." And in their private calculations of the trade, unlike a day-dreaming Cagney, they are more likely to consider the far plainer stories of actual fliers they've heard about, or knew, or had known.

Juet had won both the five-year and seven-year awards for incident-free flying. When things started souring for him he was closing in on the ten-year, which would have won him a week's leave in the off-season and a set of tickets to a motel in Tampa-St Pete for himself and his wife, Gail. By then Juet would have logged seven or eight thousand hours of pilot-in-command time, not an extraordinary amount, but in Juet's case none of it soft time. Though by straight total he would have seemed roughly mid-career, we all knew that seven thousand hours of high Arctic time was worth more than

fifty thousand of pattering around a flying school off Pearson.

From early on Juet had flown the north. And though there was no formal designation within the company for it, the crews generally accepted that Juet had accumulated more Arctic experience than any of the others. Given the risks in bush aviation, when things soured this likely worked against him, although I don't think he would have thought so at the time. If the company received only one or two Arctic contracts in a season, and if Juet had handled things well in the past, he would have likely been asked to return. Personally, I think he preferred it like that. Everyone likes to think that they do their life work well -- and Juet was no exception. If pressed, I'd have to say that, privately, he was proud of his association with the north. During his time in the Arctic, he used his spare moments to read about the early explorers. And one year he came home wearing a flight jacket that he'd lined with Arctic fox. It was an eye-catching piece of work -- certainly more flamboyant than we would have expected a conservative, senior pilot like Juet to sport. This, and his exceptionally fine record of service, earned him the moniker "Arctic Fox". Juet though, despite the jacket, wasn't the nickname type, and the term wasn't much used in his

presence. He was quiet-mannered and not at all boisterous: perhaps overly prone to avoiding unpleasant conversations, a habit which also may have helped bring him down in the end. Season after season he was selected to return to the Barren Lands, so it is certain that he did not complain, and likely even encouraged it in his own subtle way.

In spite of his considerable record of achievement, when Juet quit the business most of us considered it providential. Even if we couldn't excuse the way he did it. If anything, he quit a year too late. The summer before, while Juet was midway through a contract north of Hopedale, his wife, Gail, had thrown in the towel. For a few years prior things had been slipping between them. At one point Juet had even taken a leave of absence for a season; the rumour was that he and Gail were trying for kids. They sold their bungalow near the airport and moved to the country, only a few miles from where I was living at the time. I recall hearing from the owner of the Pearson Petro-Can that Juet was looking for employment in the area. By all signs, the summer south appeared to have manoevered things back on track. But the following season, when Juet was forced to return to his Arctic schedule, things took a hard turn for the worse. Gail loaded what she wanted into Juet's pickup, cast in with a weatherman she'd met at the health club, and

lit out for Golden. The rumour was that once things got a little too sweaty between them, the weatherman had angled a permanent transfer west. Golden was far away and this was just as well, since Juet was a big man, and though quiet in his ways, not the type to fade into the sunset without settling accounts.

To give Gail her due, she'd given Juet plenty of warning. She even stopped in at the office on her way out of town, but there was no way he could be reached, Barren Land phone booths being notoriously scarce. In any case, by that stage of the game one would surmise there was not much left to be said; and, truth be told, Gail appeared to endorse that view of the matter. Word has it that she was more than a little riled when Greene, the chief pilot, told her he couldn't reach Juet just like that, though on this count she knew better. Being as high-strung as she was I suspect she just wanted to shake a few walls on her way out of town. I know she never cared much for Greene so it doesn't surprise me that she picked his. The flight crew secretary told me that Gail leaned over Greene's desk so there was little room for misunderstanding and in plain terms told him to just give Juet his keys the next time he flew by.

"Just tell him his fox jumped fence. What if someone

had died, for Christ's sake?" She tossed the house keys on Greene's desk, and left.

Greene later told me he knew it was coming: he'd seen Juet's half-ton pulling out of Canadian Tire with a new set of all-weathers the week before, a stranger in a ponytail behind the wheel, and Gail sitting tight to him in the middle of the bench seat instead of over by the passenger door where she normally would have been. It wasn't until much later that I realized Greene should have pulled Juet out as soon as he saw Gail honeyed up in the truck like that, before things got too far gone. But then again, Greene probably calculated that it was already too late. Just after he calculated how much it would cost him to switch pilots half-way through a contract in the Arctic.

By that time I suspect Gail was as disgusted with bush aviation in general as she was with Juet in particular. Most of the wives eventually hold to that line and you can not bear it against them: from the family point of view, it's a half-life at best, fraught with the perennial pressures of parting and loss and having no one home. Such a life is a hobbling thing. Gail had likely just hit the end of it. And for her there was no going back. She made sure of that.

At Juet's behest, he and Gail had started a fox farm

toward the end of the summer he was off, the autumn before Gail left for Golden. Juet's plan was the predictable one: raising fox would eventually become profitable and allow him to get out of bush flying, or at the very least allow him to pick and choose his contracts, flying only intermittently: when it suited them, when they were short side money, or when they felt like a couple of fresh tickets to Montego Bay. At the same time, such as the theory generally runs, it would keep Gail busy while he was gone. Although I cannot figure why bush pilots are prone to hatching ludicrously misguided home-front ventures. So prone and so farfetched that I have wondered whether, in their heart of hearts, they genuinely want the project to succeed -- whether they are not just writing off a cut of cash to forestall changing for as long as they can. In cynical moments, after I myself became the chief pilot of a small concern, I used such developments as a measure of the enterprising individual's dedication to his work: the more absurd the commercial venture, the more likely its originator a confirmed bush pilot for life. Likewise, I've applied it to get a line on the state of a pilot's home life. This might sound hard-hearted or calculating to you but I have learned it the hard way: such things should be the company's concern more often, the risks of bush flying

being what they are. Once your pilot moves to a place in the country to start the organic vegetable farm, or the ginseng farm, or the beefalo farm, you can start counting down to one of two things. He will quit flying within two seasons. Or she will leave him and he will stay with it if he can.

Gail was hurting on the way out. Of this there is little doubt, for by everyone's count she left Juet one mean-hearted parting gift. Likely, there had been too many excuses, too many imaginary tickets to places she'd never seen and too many foxes she didn't want in the first place. At some moment too crazy to imagine, wanting to hurt him bad, Gail unclipped Juet's Winchester from the rear window of his pickup and shot all thirty-four foxes dead. She strung the carcasses, one by one, over the chickenwire fence around their compound. With the yard light trained over them it was a horrific sight -- I know, I saw it -- like some surreal trading post from the Barren Lands, thirty-four bloated pelts lining its invisible walls. She left him no note, but a message as rough as a white line squall, so sudden and fierce that even a bush pilot as seasoned as Juet couldn't fly through it. And Juet didn't.

It took a day to get the relief pilot into the Arctic and another one to get Juet south. When I got home for

supper the night Juet was due out, my message unit was flashing red; two calls from out of town had registered. I dialled the number, wondering who it might be. A prerecorded message clicked on and advised me that I was dialling a pay-phone at the Hopedale airport; I thought of Juet right off. Knowing Greene, I was pretty sure that, when he did contact Juet, he wouldn't have given him the whole bad news. Greene would have likely left out the part about the weatherman. And the part about Golden. I checked Juet's southbound itinerary with dispatch and, although to this day I am not sure why, I drove over to Pearson to pick him up.

Juet was wearing his jacket. He was lined up at the cab stand behind an airline crew all decked out in their Cagney uniforms, his dufflebag slung over one shoulder. Most everyone else was milling about in shorts. I spotted him easily in the fur-lined coat -- Juet stuck out at Pearson the way a lifeguard would in the Barren Lands. A horn honked behind me; Juet turned around quickly and looked towards it, like he thought it might be for him, so I honked to get his attention. His eyes widened when he recognized my truck, as if he was surprised to see me there and maybe not Gail. He came over, threw his dufflebag in the box, took off his jacket, and climbed into the cab. He folded

the jacket and set it carefully between us on the seat.

"What're you doing here, Ernest?" He asked me that right away, smelling bad news.

"Thought I'd save you cab fare." I offered him a cigarette. "You know it's not looking good for Gail."

"I know she's fed right up. It's been going on a while, but now" He shook his head then went on, "She wrote me a library of letters last tour. I swear I'm going to have to make a permanent move this time." Juet lit the cigarette, dropping the match on to the floor mat of my truck. I could tell that he was hoping against hope that Gail had bluffed him out of the north for one last talk, that he'd find her sitting in the kitchen just like he always had: sitting at the table holding a cold beer, maybe mad as hell that things were back to the way they'd always been but still ... dolled up a little for his first night home. It struck me that Juet's hope was persisting well beyond reason. And I found it hard to tell him the true score, but felt he should know it before he walked into that empty house.

"I think she might have hit the road, Bob." I left it at that. It was hot and humid for a June night. In the dull glow of the dash light I could see his forehead, shiny with perspiration. He didn't need my insisting on more bad

news. We were almost to his farm anyway.

"We'll see. I'll know soon enough." He tossed the smoke out the window. In my side mirror I could see the ash sparking as it bounced on the pavement. It surprised me that he'd thrown it out just like it had surprised me when he'd dropped the match on my floor mat. That was not like Robert Juet. He was not a messy man. But this was no time for a lecture on the environment. He raised his two hands to his face and began rubbing them against his forehead. We continued on like that, in silence, until I pulled into the lane. The house was dark as a well. But the lights in the backyard had been left on causing the night sky to glow, like a pale and strange halo, around the edge of his home. I think the glow encouraged Juet somehow. He hopped out quick, grabbed his bag out of the box, and made straight for the back door. At the side of the house he tossed the dufflebag on to the barbecue without missing a stride. Then he seemed to slow up, and then speed up a little as he rounded the corner into the backyard. Coming behind him, as I was passing the barbecue, the stench caught me as it must have him, and I knew something was way off base.

Juet was standing there, pulled up short. His jacket on the patio by his feet. He was staring dumbstruck at his fool's dream of Montego Bay hanging putrid and thirty-four

fold in the rank summer air. Gail was long gone. And I know it struck him hard as he stood there, counting his losses: a house dark as a grave, his fox dead in mid-air, strung up on fencing that we barely could see. It was the first time I heard him curse, and, like most everything else that night, it struck me as odd, wildly off the mark, and unlike him.

"Rotten. Rotten, bloody helicopters, just ... god-damned ... crazy." He stood there shaking, spitting it out. Knowing him like I did I turned right around and left without saying a word. There are some things that you just can't make a right comment about and that moment was one of them. Of that I have no doubt. A couple of days later I was driving down my lane when I noticed a plume of heavy smoke towards the airport. For a split second I thought some thirty-hour wonder had piled in at Pearson. Then I thought of Juet, cleaning out his yard.

2.

It was in the Barren Lands, three months later. Four of us were camped, mired is more like it, on the coast of Hudson Bay: Franklin and his son, Staffe, Juet and myself. We were a couple of hundred miles north of Joy Inlet. Late September. Frozen but no real snow yet. Bolter, Parish &

Trimble, an overseas firm, were looking for gold. Franklin was their point man. Juet and I, with two machines, were there for the air work.

The project had soured early, though we'd gotten off to a good enough start. The first ten days were solid blue. We put in long hours and jumped way ahead of schedule. Everyone's spirits were up, especially Franklin's, who was predicting that we'd finish the project in six weeks. Everyone except of course for Juet, who was keeping pretty much to himself. Knowing what I knew I didn't expect otherwise but I think Franklin took it personal, took it to mean that Juet wasn't involved in the project one way or the other, and, looking back, I now believe I should have said something to Franklin right away.

We were loaded up for the day's work and just heading out when our luck turned. It was early morning, dead calm, and as I was walking to my machine I noticed the quiet. How it was different in the Arctic -- bigger somehow. So silent that you can't but notice it, as if it were something substantial. In that moment I heard the solenoid click as Juet hit his starter. I heard the turbine wind up easy. And I heard the crisp snap of the arcing igniters. But too early, at least three or four seconds too early, the engine fired up. I stopped in my tracks. From the sound I knew

that Juet had cracked the fuel on way too low. When I turned towards his machine the exhausts were cherry red. Bits of turbine blades were smoking on the tundra. There wasn't a damned thing to do about it. That fast, it was all over for the engine. I walked to his machine and opened his door.

"What happened?" I asked him. The console was flashing red and yellow like the proverbial Christmas tree. Juet looked a little dazed. Like he didn't quite yet know what had happened. Right then, it flashed through my mind that his reaction to a critical malfunction was way too slow. I looked at the turbine outlet temp indicator. It was off the clock, pegged solid at the out-of-work end of the red arc. I pointed to it -- I don't know how he didn't see it. His face flushed, red as those exhausts. He swung his head out of the cockpit and looked aft.

"What's the burning?" he asked, jerking his head toward the smoking blades.

"I think its about a hundred thousand dollars, Juet. And that trip to Tampa Bay for you and Gail." I said it without thinking. But there it was. He looked at me in a way I knew was angry. Before I could explain that my words had caught me as much by surprise as they had him, he jumped out of the cockpit, slammed the door hard, and made straight

for his tent. The worst was that Franklin had come up behind me and was taking it all in.

"For God's sake." Franklin was shaking his head.

Juet's machine was down for eight days. Grounded. We waited for mechanics and parts under a blue sky as tranquil as the sweeping stretch of Hudson Bay holding below the camp. And it was right then, with that severe bad luck coming from the flying side of things, that the tone reset for the run. That bad luck, the ensuing wet weather, and Staffe.

Juet and I had met them at Pearson on a Sunday morning before dawn. We drove to the airport through empty streets. Juet was quiet; I was preoccupied with speculations about our customers and how we might manage together. However it goes, there is one thing you can count on: once you're out there, you're there to the end.

The airport, like the city, was quiet at that early hour. With no travellers pacing from one port to another, the cavernous terminal was as raw as the Arctic in the harsh fluorescent light. At the entry to the waiting area, two porters in red caps, a pile of change splayed on the bench between them, played cards. Leaning on a mop beside them, an older man in white coveralls eyed the game. As we passed, he shifted and moved the mop in small circles over

the floor. I could see two sitting figures and a stack of luggage about eight rows down. Right off, Franklin's chesty exuberance put me on edge.

"John Franklin, London, England." He said it loud though we weren't six feet away. "You would be Captaine" He withdrew a piece of paper from the inside pocket of his tweed jacket, studied it for a moment, then went on, "Juet and Propert, I presume." He was older than I'd expected, fiftyish, with thick grey hair and a bushy moustache. He propped a cane -- an antique, I'm sure, with an elaborate brass handle -- against a steamer trunk and walked over to shake first Juet's hand and then mine.

A couple of seats down the row, a thin young man wearing gold-rimmed glasses was writing on a pad. Crumpled up sheets of paper were scattered on the floor by his feet. His leather hiking boots were brand new. With an expansive flourish, Franklin swept an arm towards the young man: "Meet my son, Staffe." I made the move to shake Staffe's hand as well, but the young man hadn't heard his father's introduction. He kept writing. Franklin raised his voice: "Staffe, our pilots." The pen stopped as the young man looked up. Behind the glasses his eyes were flushed, as if he was asthmatic, or had a hard flight over. He stood up, stretched his arms out, then lifted one boot off the floor

and shook it a little:

"Cramps," he said. More to himself than any of us. He was cramped up after the long haul from Heathrow. Standing up, Staffe looked frailer. He was slight, with lanky arms and a long neck. Seeing him standing like that, balancing on one leg, I thought of a crane, the ones you see near the edge of ponds in city parks -- the ones that can't fly. "How do you do. I'm Staffe Franklin." I could feel his hand lump awkwardly in mine. He'd suffered an accident or an illness I'm sure: the last two fingers were crooked under, into his palm. "I was just writing home."

Franklin summoned the tired-eyed porters. They loaded the baggage on to a trolley and we headed out of the terminal. The cleaner stopped with the mop. He straightened up and, with a wry grin, eyed our procession as we shuffled by. I was relieved that there weren't many people about as we wound our way to the entrance: Juet in front, then the two porters leaning into the over-loaded trolley, Franklin trooping smartly behind them with the cane; Staffe, clutching the writing pad to his chest with his bent hand; and me, in a flight suit with twenty zippers, bringing up the rear. And it was only then, with that thought, that I noticed Juet wasn't wearing his jacket.

We drove over to the base. Morning was just hinting

in. I could make out the shadowy forms of two choppers poised on the flight line and I expected then that Franklin and Staffe would start asking questions about the machines. But they were too tired, I suppose, and remained silent. It is one sight that I will surely never tire of: the fresh out of dawn air, early morning dew pebbling the bubble of a chopper sitting fueled under still blades, six hundred and eighty horsepower ready and waiting to spire you, easy and light, up and away from the surface-worried earth -- to fly you to some new place you've never been before. It is the one thrill, I still believe, that does not water down over time and I recall feeling that morning, as the van stopped beside those two machines, the familiar rush to be airborne.

Juet let himself into the office to file our flight note. Franklin and Staffe sat in the van while I loaded the helicopters. We were about ready to leave when Franklin opened his travelling case and withdrew four small glasses and a silver flask.

"Beginnings are crucial." He held out a glass to Juet. "They deserve a certain dedication." Right away, I thought of endings.

"Can't drink and fly," Juet pointed out brusquely. I could tell he was as anxious to get airborne as I was. "It's a regulation."

Franklin's eyes narrowed slightly, then without a word he wheeled around and handed two glasses to Staffe. He filled them from the flask and made his dedication: "To Discovery. In the immortal memory of Henry Hudson, I christen this ship 'Discovery'." With his cane he pointed in the direction of Juet's machine. Franklin and Staffe toasted and drank. Juet nodded, already moving towards his chopper. I raised an imaginary glass.

"Cheers," I said, a little uneasy with all the premature celebration.

We loaded them in. And we headed north. Franklin in Juet's machine, leaning forward with both hands folded over the top of his antique cane, and Staffe riding with me.

Just clearing the control zone, climbing through five thousand feet on our way to seven, Staffe pulled out his pad. It occurred to me he'd have trouble writing with his hand damaged like that, but the way it crooked under fit the pen just fine; he was writing up a storm. A regular writing fool. His disinterest in the countryside, in the helicopter itself and all Ontario scrolling slowly below us, struck me as odd. It was a perfect morning: clear as a bell, the sun burning off the horizon right on time. A pale half moon hung high in the sky. In the distance dead ahead, the south reach of Simcoe glimmered like gold. You could see for

twenty miles.

Staffe reached for his headset to talk. He was coming around, I thought. "What is your favourite colour?" he asked. His odd question caught me by surprise. It was the first thing he'd said since we left the terminal. I looked to the sky stretching milk-blue to the horizon.

"Blue," I replied.

"How did you pick blue?" Two in a row. And this one I hadn't thought about before. A vision of Papa came to mind: sitting on his John Deere, gazing up at a hawk hanging high overhead.

"Now that you mention it, my Dad and I were picking stones one spring. We'd shut down the tractor for a breather and I asked him what his favourite colour was and quick as a cat he said, 'Blue. Robin blue'. I remember it well, I think, because at first I thought he had the wrong bird. I told him that Robins weren't blue, they were red, and he said 'Robin-egg blue, like the sky'." I never thought to ask him how he'd come to pick it out.

"Are you married?"

"Not yet, but I'm circling low."

"How about Mr. Juet?" I was starting to wish Staffe had just kept on with the encyclopedia he'd been working on. So soon after Gail's leaving, I felt uncomfortable telling a

stranger about Juet's home troubles. But I didn't want to lie outright. It occurred to me that Juet was still married -- they wouldn't have had time to stamp all the paperwork yet. Far below, a light wind had come up. We were almost over Simcoe, its leaden surface as still as a slab of stone but crinkled like elephant's skin. Minute cottage roofs bordered the water edge and separated the lake from a four-square grid of grain fields. In a farmyard directly down I could make out two tiny figures heading for their chores. They stopped in their tracks to look up. I reached forward and flashed my position lights. They waved back.

"Yep, he surely is." In spite of the day, for no good reason, Staffe's line of questioning was throwing me off. We were well north of controlled airspace so I reached overhead and tuned the automatic direction finder to an all night CW station I knew. Staffe did not take the bait.

"I'm looking forward to the north. The space, the tranquillity, the sense of freedom it must express." He looked towards me, as if for confirmation. When I didn't say anything he looked down at the pad. "My fiance suggested, at the airport just this morning, it would be yesterday morning now, that we suspend our engagement for the summer. She feels we should take advantage of this golden opportunity to think things over, meet some other

people even, before we actually get --"

Hank Williams cut him off. I'd locked on to the frequency I'd been looking for. Staffe's voice was drowned out by the fine sound of Hank Williams in our headsets:

Did you ever live a night so long
The time just crawling by.

I hear the lonesome robin sing
He sounds too blue to fly,

And I wonder where you are tonight
I'm so lonesome I could cry.

Things were back on track. It was a favourite of mine. And Staffe even perked up. He stopped talking and looked starboard, to Port Hope inching slowly aft. I kicked in the autopilot and settled back to hear Hank. I remember thinking it couldn't get much better: airborne at the crack of dawn, the machine running like a Swiss watch, all of Ontario below, the only cloud one wisp of cirrus curling ten thousand feet overhead, and the voice of Hank Williams groaning through the cockpit. Staffe took off his headset. He was looking worse, haggard and in need of sleep. He removed his glasses, drew a large handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his eyes. Then he picked up the pen and went back to his writing while I mulled over what his sweetheart had told him as he boarded the plane.

And I came to the idea that there are some things in life that you are plain better off not hearing or saying a word about. Like when you're twenty, straddling a loading dock at Heathrow, and your fiance tells you she thinks it best, for both of you really, that you meet some other people before nailing things down too tight. I wondered exactly which rock on the edge of Hudson Bay she thought Staffe could strike up a conversation with. And I wondered why she picked such a keen moment to brief him on her change of heart. And I wondered why she just wouldn't have Sometimes, you can wonder too much. You're are better off just leaving it there, putting it all out of your mind and just getting on with things.

I settled back to concentrating on my flying. Hank ended his song. High up and far away, a faint half-moon was fading fast. Staffe kept writing, clenching that pen tight as a lifeline in his bent hand. He barely let up the whole three days it took us to get north. In fact, he wrote that whole summer long.

3.

By late September the flying had ground to a halt. With fall setting in, cloud hung wet and dismal off Hudson Bay. Solid overcast, no visibility, precipitation varied

only by a temperature shift of a point or two: fog, drizzle, freezing rain, snow. It became apparent that we could not finish the work. But Franklin, like a terrier locked to an insurmountable foe, would not let go. Finding a gold mine on the edge of Hudson Bay was his first overseas project. Gone awry, too far to salvage, it was plain to him that this was the one he would be remembered for. And Franklin was not taking the Arctic's leisurely dismemberment of his career well. As we fell hopelessly behind schedule, the puffy enthusiasm he'd displayed at Pearson was displaced by a rancorous ill-will bent on avoiding responsibility for his impending catastrophe. He blamed it on the country, the weather, and particularly, Juet's turbine delay. After all, neither Juet nor I would be there when he finally faced his underwriters. As winter inched upon us, Franklin's rancour deepened. And if that were not enough, he had come to the bizarre belief that we were within sight of where Henry Hudson had been mutinied by his crew, that we were on cursed land. Caught together, we waited for a break in the weather. Franklin's voice drifted through the canvas tent walls to whisper bleakly in the damp air:

"... curse this hopeless weather ... a damned place for the English ... bloody skeleton country ... camped on Hudson's grave." At other times, when Franklin was off on

one of his sojourns on the shore of Hudson Bay, Staffe's thin voice would replace Franklin's harsh eruptions:

"Autumn has come to embarrass the leaves, it is soon time for the assessments of summer. Time, in the frost-laut fall, for uncramping the arms of our souls."

From the beginning, Juet was morose and untalkative. Aside from work he'd only spoken to me once since the turbine incident and that occasion itself was odd. I woke up early; it was still night, and I heard Juet cough. A dull red glow rose weakly in the dark and then fell again, lighting the interior of the tent. Juet was sitting on the edge of his cot, smoking a cigarette.

"It's hard to get out of your mind," he said, "here." I saw the tip of the cigarette, red and round like a caution light, move through the dark. He put out the cigarette, pressed his earplugs into his ears, and went back to sleep.

Without Juet's companionship, it did not take me long to begin to find the sporadic transmissions of Franklin and Staffe wearily oppressive. Spoken to only themselves, their muffled words would filter through the canvas at the oddest times. I began to feel lethered to despair by these outbursts, to fear that they would be the only voices to ever reach my ears again. We lay on the cots in our dank tent, waiting for the sky to lift, Juet silent and reading,

or just staring, the pale grey light, like the voices muted by sodden canvas, refusing to brighten.

Whenever that leaden sky did briefly break -- tormenting us with a few workable hours -- Franklin's sniping about Juet's flying skills, or Juet's turbine, or just plain Juet, would fade away as though evaporated by the thin rays of the cool Arctic sun. But by late afternoon, when the temperature dropped and the day returned grey and wet or white again, Franklin would strike out on a long march to the shoreline, the brass-handled cane fisted tightly at his side. He was looking to come across some artifact from the Hudson expedition. Or a gold mine, I suppose. I would see his minute figure scratching the cane on the endless white beach that curved away between tundra and water like an icy tusk -- the hunched figure prodding, here and there, then straightening up to gaze about in the silent gloom as Henry Hudson himself likely had, hoping to catch some glimpse of England through the chilly murk: the white of a sail, the buckle of a boot, some passport to home.

By the time he trudged, dripping and spent, back into the camp, the irritating sight of our stilled machines before him on the fog-bound slope, Franklin's suspicions would have malignantly rebloomed as if invigorated by the

slow mist that drenched those forlorn days. From inside his tent, the mutterings would soon recloud our uneasy alliance:

"... this hopeless weather ... God-awful turbine ... Damned faulty ... pilots."

Like Staffe, left hoping that she would still be there when he got out, Franklin was quarantined in disquieting thought: his grand project undone, as for Hudson before him, by subordinates who didn't measure up. And as it goes when imprisoned in that mute terrain, thinking became believing. And believing became knowing. To such errant prospection the Arctic offers no response. It lies there and waits, letting you spin whatever fool delusions you will, until you are so far gone you're lost.

By the last days it was hourly I am sure: the front of Franklin's tent would rustle; the grey head, like a small nimbus cloud, would protrude to squint first into the misty drizzle and then to our motionless machines mired on the ridge. Then a shudder, and the head retreating back into the tent to resume the weary mutterings. But for these rumblings Franklin would not speak. We became bad neighbours, warily avoiding each other, isled on our rocky suburb, cocooned in silent animosity and the unrelenting brume below which tundra stretched taut to one horizon, the slow-heaving Bay to the other. Late into the night, the

staccato of iced rain on canvas pattered Staffe's muffled soliloquy:

"... our intimacy serves a need to be relieved from the crushing weight of solitude, our common condition... when we reach out to the other human we most want to be embraced by, we reach in an attempt to overcome gravity... to take flight. And all winged creatures grace the planet."

"For the love of God, Staffe, get a grip on yourself. Turn out the lantern and sleep." Franklin's gruff chorus would inevitably follow.

Whenever we prepared for a supply flight to Baker, Staffe, a packet of thick envelopes in his hand, would join Juet and me by the choppers. Upon our return he would invariably be standing alone on the ridge, holding for his mail.

As those weeks dragged by, the outbound letters became heavier, the inbound fewer. Juet, though he never said, seemed disgusted by not only the writing but Staffe's very person. In the spirit of John Franklin himself, he kept away from us all, his earplugs installed nearly all of the time.

4.

The ceiling was a hundred feet. Too low to get up to

the work area but high enough to make a food run to Baker along the coast. I was fueling Juet's chopper, and wondering when Franklin was going to throw in the towel, when Staffe walked up. Without speaking, he handed Juet his packet and turned to leave. Then he stopped, looked directly back to Juet, and asked the question:

"Ernest told me that you were married, Mr. Juet. Do you think she'll be there when I get back?" With an annoyed look, Juet removed an earplug and cocked his head towards Staffe. Staffe repeated the question that plagued him: "Ernest told me that you were married, Mr. Juet. Do you think she'll wait for me to get back?"

Juet looked at him hard. Then he glared angrily towards me, grabbed the letters out of Staffe's hand and was about to throw them into the chopper when a strange thing happened. A fox, from who knows where, appeared on the tundra beside Juet's machine. It just stood there, with its head cocked to one side, staring at us. With a wild swing of his arm, Juet threw the packet at the fox. The packet flew apart in mid-air, scattering the letters, which fell in a blizzard to the tundra in front of the fox.

"No," Staffe cried.

The fox snapped once, its ears flat back, and loped away. With a peculiar haggard isolation in his eye, and as

menacing as the snarl of that fox, Juet turned and whispered his reply to Staffe.

"Stay away from me with that. You keep right away from me. Stop your Christly crying." It was the second time I'd heard Juet swear. Staffe looked as if he'd been struck. He turned and went to his letters, scooping them up and brushing them against his tweed jacket. Without looking at Juet he handed them to me, and trudged, head bent, towards his tent. Franklin, his face protruding from the entry, was staring hard towards Juet.

I do not know if it was related to Juet's mean behaviour that bitter day, but a few nights earlier I'd mentioned Gail. It had been on my mind since the night I picked him up at Pearson. I didn't like the way it had all remained unspoken between us. It needed an end. And I thought it might fix things. We were in the tent, Juet reading.

"How are you making out, Bob, with Gail and all." As I finished speaking, Staffe's voice filtered to us through the yellowed canvas:

"It is too heartless when intimacy is replaced by solitude, when our wings fail and our flights from solitude tumble to an end. Love is the solution to all dilemmas."

Hearing Staffe like that, I'd have bit on my question

if I could have. But there was no calling the words back. With the same harried look he'd given Staffe, Just stared sharply in my direction. He set the book down, took his earplugs out of his flight bag, pressed them in his ears and went back to reading. All without a word to me.

I knew then, deep down, that real trouble was on its way.

5.

I'd made the run to Baker, picking my way through fog and rain, hugging close to the shoreline so as to not get lost. Darkness was crowding round by the time I neared the camp. Up the rise from the water's edge the tents, like limp sails, gleamed weakly in the sullen twilight. As I approached to land a figure appeared off to one side: still and waiting. I set down, slid back my side window, and passed Staffe the mail. He fingered through it quickly. Then he withdrew an envelope and put it in the pocket of his coat. Then he paused. And then he leafed through the package once again, with more deliberation. He passed the package back to me. Without glancing up, Staffe slouched away, fading quickly, like a dismissed apparition into the thick fog that was drifting over us from the Bay. I shut down the machine and climbed out. The night was dark: the

fog, rolling fresh off the Bay, cold and damp. I was about to unload the food when a voice, loud and near, startled me:

"What did that bastard say to Staffe this morning? Before you left. I want to know." Franklin appeared beside me. I searched my mind to offer up some response, some response to defuse him, when a moan, a loud wail of infinite desolation soared slowly in the opaque air. The sheer unexpectedness of it shivered my spine. It stopped -- cut short, leaving me stiffened and peering into the grey surround. Not the faintest sound could be heard. In the hush into which I listened, a lantern sputtered, eerily loud. A tent flared sickly yellow over Franklin's shoulder. Just, I thought. With his earplugs. I don't know how it struck Franklin; to me it seemed the air, the land itself had wailed, so suddenly did that mournful cry arise.

"Good God. What is the meaning ..." stammered Franklin at my elbow. I held a hand up to quiet him. From the darkened fog a low sobbing ebbed to us. Towards the source of this grim lament I started, cautiously, Franklin at my side, like a blind man shuffling forward, tapping his cane ahead, into the moist night hung like a sodden and funereal curtain about us. We all but stepped on Staffe when we came upon him -- face down on the tundra, shaking inconsolably. As though life itself were lost. I thought

of the fox. And I crouched down beside him to look for blood. Franklin leaned over us to speak:

"For the love of God, Staffe, get on your feet" He prodded the shoulder of Staffe's tweed coat with the tip of his cane. A vision of Franklin, scratching for gold at the edge of the Bay, crowded my thought. Then Franklin turned abruptly on his heel and lumbered back, towards where we'd come from. He disappeared quickly, swallowed by dark. I was surprised, shocked really, at Franklin. It was a hard response from a father to a son. Even for Franklin. Even for there and then. Faintly, Franklin's whisper carried back to us from the night.

"The bastard."

I helped Staffe to his feet. He reached up to remove his glasses, his bent hand tightly clenching the letter.

"She's left me," he said. "I cannot believe she's left me here."

I couldn't make him out clearly. His voice was anguished. It bespoke felled hope.

"After all this," he said it again, "she's left me here. Here." He raised his hand and with the glasses made a small gesture to -- to nothing really -- absolutely nothing. Just the immeasurable well of darkness in which we stood. And the Barren Land below, lifeless, vast and

cold. As though all the world had been swept to its edge and off.

He was right about that. It would have been far better for him, possessed as he was, if she hadn't left him there -- if she hadn't cut him adrift there, where there was absolutely no chance of distraction, the inescapable company of her loss his one searing thought. Far better she'd kept him in the dark a little longer. Until he got out.

I opened my mouth to say him a kindness. But try as I might I could not think of one right word to speak to him that would make it better. I thought of London, and city lights. I thought of Staffe crumpled up on the tundra. I thought of his line about flights from solitude tumbling to an end, about gracing the planet. And I thought of Hank Williams.

6.

I stepped forward, toward the yellow glow that brightened and grew larger as I approached the camp. In a few steps, I don't know how many, I could make out the bulky form of Franklin, swaying against the lit tent, his silhouette dark as the villain in a silent movie. Silent, but for a strange snapping. And then his bellow:

"You mutinous bastard. Get out. Get out." Franklin

heaved forward, one arm waving up and down -- the cane ripping into the canvas as he struck. A wave of mild panic rippled over me. And then a second shadow, Juet's, equal in size to Franklin's own, leapt from the darkness to the back of the first making a new form, grotesque and unfamiliar, struggling as one, grunting like a prehistoric beast risen from that ancient turf. It swayed. And toppled heavily to the ground, the tent collapsing beneath its bulk. Dark plunged in. I stood there, immobile. A small flame licked in the night. And I moved then, quickly towards it. The smell of fuel stenchd the air.

"Fire." I called. The flame wallowed on the surface of a wet pool at the tent's corner. They didn't hear. Or they didn't care, Franklin gasping heavily as he kicked at Juet. The canvas caught and the flame flared. I reached for a boot, and pulled on it. It kicked free. I pounded on a shoulder, a back, I don't know whose.

"Stop." Why, I do not know -- the very flames beside them had failed to interrupt them -- but at the sound of Staffe's voice, all struggle ceased.

Something sizzled. Beads of moisture danced on the burning canvas not a foot away. Juet staggered up. Franklin rolled away from the flames, panting for breath.

"Just stop," Staffe said again. "Just stop

everything." He was backing away as he spoke, his face receding. In a moment I could no longer see him.

The canvas burned quickly. Flames, and sparks above them, leapt overhead into fog-grey night. We stood there, awkward and silent, unable to look at each other in the sudden brightness. Like foolish rabbits we stood there, vacant-eyed and uncomprehending -- reluctant or unable to speak. No one moved to put the fire out. Then Just stepped forward, to the edge of the burning canvas. He bent down, to quickly straighten up again and raise both arms above his head then swing them down over his knee. In each of his hands he held a piece of Franklin's cane. One by one he tossed them to the flames. He glared towards Franklin. And left.

"The bastard," Franklin whispered.

His utterance, the familiar unpleasant tone, was strangely reassuring to me. I was relieved to hear it, as if it signalled some return to normalcy, to a familiar state of restrained animosity. I felt suddenly and utterly tired. I walked to my helicopter. In the dark, I unloaded the boxes of food and piled them on the soggy tundra. I climbed into the aircraft to sleep.

To dream of south. Of a treed place, green and grassy, the luscious sound of automobiles and city buses under city

lights, cement sidewalks hard underfoot and the jostle of a Saturday crowd, legs and arms and faces I couldn't recognize crowding me by. A sky of warm air swelling over the city, full of roaring airplanes with flashing lights bringing more and more people to the south. A helicopter settling into a city park and I was in it, the whine of its turbine loud and close.

The close sound of a turbine woke me up. It was still early -- first light, and cold in the helicopter. I leaned up quickly to get my bearings. Juet's machine climbed away from the ridge, into a twilight vault littered with faint stars. I scrambled out of my machine. Franklin stumbled from his tent, staring up, as was I, after Juet's machine, already minute.

"Good God." Franklin's eyes narrowed as he spoke. "That mutinous bastard. He's abandoned the project. And left us here. He's ruined this project," he said, relief in his voice.

Staffe walked up and stood beside Franklin. Franklin turned to him, to repeat his discovery.

"He's right," Staffe said, before he could speak. "It's time to go."

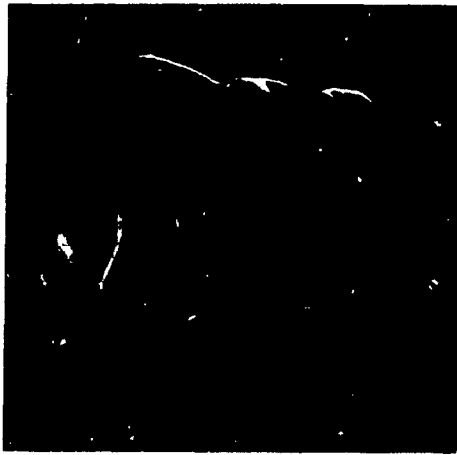
7.

We shuffled about the ridge like silent strangers. Sunglasses masked our eyes. The mists of our breath were the only clouds in sight. The helicopter was loaded with the remains of the camp. A night's snow blanketed the tundra, fresh and white. The grey water of Hudson Bay tilted below us like a shield, iron-heavy, as if the overnight snow had thickened its languorous swell -- as if at any moment and at any angle it would suddenly catch and hold, stilled for an eight month winter.

The faint stench of burned canvas traced the air. I walked to the edge of the blackened pool where the tent had stood. I kicked at a lumpy edge of the burnt rubble. The brass handle of Franklin's cane appeared, bright against the dark ash.

We lifted up. And hovered there for a moment. The cockpit dimmed as the rotor wash lifted a great cloud of fresh snow around us and then drove it, with blizzard force, back down over the machine. I could glimpse, only intermittently, patches of tundra between my feet as we edged slowly forward, through that furious grey wash, to pick up speed. And then, as if through a parting curtain, we moved out and ahead of the vortex, into the bright day.

We stayed low. At a hundred knots, the ridge blurred by below us. I banked sharply to the Bay and then banked once more, to circle the camp a last time. The camp. It wasn't a camp any more. Just a small, dark stain on a snow-covered slope that ribbed Hudson Bay for a thousand miles or so. By next snow, in a day, maybe three, you wouldn't see the site if you stepped on it. As we flew by a bright glint, yellow as gold, flashed at the edge of the burn.



The Weatherman

I first met McAlpine at Resolution Island. Though ostensibly established to assist snipping through the Northwest Passage, it was to advance the Canadian claim above the fifty-fifth parallel that, at mid-century, the Ministry of Communications scattered weather stations across the Arctic archipelago. To these outposts were consigned a few souls: to raise the maple leaf and to transmit south, by Morse Code, periodic weather reports. That they were placed there less for weather information than symbolic reasons became evident in the sixties when satellites rendered Morse equipment obsolete. The Ministry did not modernize these stations; a decade after satellite equipment was in common use, the weather was still transmitted in code from the high Arctic sites. Resolution Island, a forlorn outcrop awash in the frigid water of Harrow Strait, was one. McAlpine was its weatherman.

I do not know how the Ministry decided who would inhabit these esoteric sites. I suspect they must have asked for volunteers, or failing this just assigned new recruits a tour of Arctic duty at the outset of their careers. In this regard, working for the Ministry would not be unlike many professions, where the better jobs go to senior people who have worked their way up. In the case of the Arctic weathermen, though, it would be working one's way

back down. Back down to the south they came from, to normal postings at large offices with lights and other people, jobs with coffee breaks during which they could converse collegially about the weather, or tell and re-tell stories of their apprenticeships at places like Hopes Advance Bay, Resolution Island, Mould Bay or Winter Harbour.

Working at one of the weather stations was not physically demanding. In some ways, the Ministry did all they could to make northern assignments as comfortable as possible. The sites were uniformly equipped with good quality carpets, running water, modern kitchens with cold storage rooms and large walk-in freezers for the year's provisions. Supplies were abundant -- certainly the best in that spare landscape. All of the stations I have visited had a dart board hanging on a living room wall, playing cards and government issue checker equipment tucked into a drawer, or stacked neatly on a shelf, not far from the coffee table. At Hall Beach there was even a pool table in the basement. Were it not for the absence of a radio sounding in the background or the occasional ring of a telephone, from the inside of an Arctic weather station you could have thought you were in Kelowna or Brandon or Dartmouth. You could have thought so, until you glanced out the windows and saw in every direction that empty land reach

away from you, unchanging but for the weather, as vacant as walls.

The Ministry also provided fishing and hunting gear with which their employees could occupy their time. And in the low Arctic, where it was possible, the sites were built near native communities. The villages, though small and culturally foreign, offered to the weatherman a society that had successfully come to terms with the punishing Arctic environment, and an echo of his community left behind -- relief from the steely isolation of a three-man crew. A posting near a village in the low Arctic provided a reprieve from exile even farther north, to a station like Mould Bay, where a couple of men passed months in isolation like the lone inhabitants of some secluded Darwinian island.

McAlpine had started out at one of the lower sites -- Cambridge Bay, just off continental Canada on the north side of Coronation Gulf. As I heard the story, his was not an auspicious debut. Though McAlpine liked the outdoors -- he exercised daily by taking long walks on the Barren Lands -- he was not the hunting or fishing type. Though he was friendly with me, in a distant, professional way, he was, I thought, less inclined to the social than the private life. McAlpine was not a demonstrative man; rather, as I recall him, striding across the tundra with his fists pushed deep

Into the pockets of his grey issue parka, he projected an air of edgy confidence and a quiet sense of purpose.

At some of the southern sites, the weathermen mixed well with the neighbouring village: they went on hunting expeditions with the men, they shot darts with the people on Saturday nights, loaned out the Ministry's tools when they were required and even shared their provisions with the local population during lean times. This, apparently, was not the way McAlpine ran the Cambridge site, though he did make a gesture, marked as it was by his particular stiffness. Under McAlpine's direction, on Sunday afternoons, between 15:00 and 17:00 hours, people from the village were invited to the station for tea. This was his standing rule and from it he would not bend -- even when, during his second Cambridge winter, a particularly severe one I understand, the village elders came to McAlpine for food. The third Sunday they asked, he gave up two sacks of carrots from the cold storage room, announced an end to the Sunday visits, and closed the station door. I'm not sure how accurate the story is -- I got it second or third hand from the manager they sent in with me to Mould Bay -- like stories in the south, the northern varieties are not immune to stretching. But there must have been something to it. McAlpine was airlifted out of Cambridge that very month, a

move the Ministry very seldom made in those early years. The Ministry preferred to keep their costs down by shipping their staff during late summer, on the Sir John A. McDonald, as it methodically laced its way from site to site with provisions and fresh recruits for the coming year. From Cambridge on, McAlpine, at his own request, only worked the high Arctic sites, none of which was near a village.

Although the Ministry invested heavily in their northern fixed assets, they were, until recent years, miserly to their men and the families they'd left in the south. In this regard the government was a throwback to the eighteenth century, when Bay men would sign up for five-year hitches at a time. During the entire period I flew the Arctic, long after even the mining companies started getting their employees home every few months, the weathermen were obliged to a minimum one-year stay. As any bush pilot can tell you, it is difficult to manage a successful southern family life when you are gone all the time. I suspect that many of the weathermen who were not bachelors on the way in were when they got out, particularly if they opted for a second tour of duty.

You might ask yourself why a weatherman would volunteer for a second year of self-exile at one of these icy sites. The answer to that has much to do with the Ministry's

parsimonious policy towards its men. I think it fair to say that many are drawn to federal employment for the sense of security the government offers. I have never been completely convinced by those in the service who speak of their desire, or duty, to serve the public and am ever less so when I try to imagine, in this philanthropic vein, a young man dreaming of being a weatherman. Or throwing a couple of sacks of mouldy carrots to a village of hungry compatriots. Of course it isn't as simple as that. That the salary is low makes it difficult for someone like a weatherman to get a mortgage together. While stationed north the weatherman has a chance to accumulate capital. He can get a jump on things and wind up with a house a year or two sooner, or a room or two larger, than he would normally expect to realize. While at an Arctic station, the Ministry charges him a nominal amount for room and board. The rest goes straight into the bank.

It surprises me that the Ministry didn't recognize sooner the toll that extended tours extracted from their weathermen. If they had, they would have loosened up with the salaries a little earlier than they were eventually forced to. Although every penny was counted when it came to their men, in the early years the Ministry wasted plenty on ill-thought projects -- perhaps until they got a feel for

the Arctic and revised their aspirations sharply downward, restricting themselves to reporting the weather. At some stations, I have seen the remains of the most hare-brained schemes to ever grace that chilly land. At their southernmost site, they once had the weatherman trying to grow wheat in his spare time. At Hopes Advance Bay one August, much to the delight of the Arctic fox population, a pre-fabricated chicken coop and a hundred seasick hens arrived on the Sir John A.

I think the financial aspect may have appealed to McAlpine. He was of the generation born during the Great Depression and he was very possibly marked hard and early by those pinched years. Although I don't know the circumstances of his first trips north or even how he first came to be a weatherman, at some early point McAlpine must have twigged to the place -- and this is often said of the Arctic: you either hate it from your first glance and leave as soon as you can, or it captures you and you stay, waiting until it finishes you off. Though such cliches are often too facile to be borne out, such clear-cut extremity is emblematic of that austere landscape. I do know that it was McAlpine's case that eventually spurred the Ministry to invoke a rule concerning time off for Arctic employees. While he was stationed at Hope's Advance, he decided to stay

through the summer and take his annual leave in cash. He did this two years in a row; then, during his third straight winter, he moved into the abandoned henhouse, wrote the Ministry explaining his new circumstances, and advised them to stop deducting the room portion of his room and board from his cheques. It was after receiving McAlpine's letter that the Ministry imposed a regulation that their men come out at least every second summer, a rule that was only required, I am sure, for McAlpine. I don't mean to depict McAlpine as a bizarre stand-out northern character in the pattern of Sam McGee or the Mad Trapper of Rat River. Southern imaginations have over-storied the north with eccentric personalities. And the claim is exaggerated. In the north, everyone stands out. The Arctic imposes a muted backdrop against which the particular contrasts sharply -- its moony landscape isolates and exposes the foreign in all its misplaced awkwardness. And indeed, this is so even in death: more gravestones cover southern bones in the Arctic than one would suspect, and even these forgotten markers are immediately heaved to awkward angles by permafrost, as if the very bedrock below was refusing such mislaid intrusions.

When I met him at Resolution, I was immediately impressed by McAlpine's unexcited air, and the spryness of his pace, as we walked from the helicopter to his station.

He was clean-shaven. And his thin grey hair was combed neatly straight back, unusually trim for such a site, where haircuts, self-administered, soon lose importance. It was mid-winter. Light snow was falling. The weather had been deteriorating all morning as I pushed north; two hours out of Frobisher, I had decided to divert to Resolution Island for extra fuel and the latest forecasts.

"It should be good north of here," he advised as I followed him in to the station, "it generally is." Once inside, he removed his boots and placed them on a rack next to the door. Just above them, "McAlpine" was stencilled on the wall in square black letters. Beside this inscription, in the same heavy script, was stencilled "visitors." I was impressed by this proprietary attention and curiously comforted by the orderliness of his office -- the floor was spotless and every item was stowed neatly in its place. I removed my boots and placed them in the designated location on the rack. McAlpine walked around the counter and handed me the latest actual, and the forecast, for Frobisher Bay. He'd been working at something when I'd arrived: a calculator lay on a large blueprint that was spread over his desk; beside it there were paper clips that he had neatly arranged into parallel rows according to size. While I read through the weather reports he opened a cupboard door above

his desk, took out a kettle, and plugged it in at the end of the counter.

"Tea?" he inquired. I was a little surprised at the offer. It was after noon and I'd half assumed that I'd get an invitation for a hot lunch -- the weathermen usually appreciated unfamiliar company and were not averse to serving a three-course meal to an itinerant pilot in exchange for an hour or so of conversation. McAlpine's offer, as sociable as it might at first appear, bore no trace of such desire, and, in fact, I don't recall him questioning me at all while we drank the tea and chatted. He responded congenially to my small-talk, however, mentioning that he'd been in the north for a number of years, at Cambridge and Hopes Advance prior to the Resolution posting. I finished my tea and went to the window.

It had stopped snowing. The overcast had lifted somewhat and the visibility was improving. Through the pewter sky I could make out a dull sun hugging the horizon. Northward, grey blades of light sliced through the cloud. A shredded flag, wound tightly around its mast, caught my eye at the far end of the airstrip; it was at least a mile away so I decided to head on.

"Your flag's a little worse for wear." I remarked.

McAlpine tapped the top of the counter sharply.

"It's the one thing I'm missing. They just don't know what it's like here." By his concern and the intensity of his response I saw that he was put off by my observation. It struck me strange that he thought the only thing he was missing at Resolution Island was a good flag. As grateful as I was for his assistance, I regretted bringing up what was evidently a sore point with him.

"I didn't mean it as a complaint at all," I said.

"I've specified a material change for this year's issue," he replied. McAlpine walked around the counter and reached down for his boots, as if he'd come to the conclusion that it was time to move on. "I've ordered three for the coming year. I can only wait."

"Certainly so," I agreed, half-wishing I had a new flag in the chopper I could give him. I thanked McAlpine, said that it was nice meeting him, put on my boots and walked outside. He came out behind me. We stood there for a moment. I've always felt it daunting to stand on a step and see snow-covered tundra undulate away from me to every horizon -- to realize that if I started walking, a trifle on that cryptic offing, I wouldn't find another porch or soul for hundreds of miles, that I was standing on the very curb of habitation. These thoughts came to me as I stood there

with McAlpine and I was about to share them with him when a sharp gust of wind licked around the corner of the station and blew the hood of his parka up over his head. He pulled it back down, smoothed his hair back in place, shook my hand again and wished me a safe journey. Realizing that it was not his intention to accompany me back down to the airstrip, I wished him goodbye. McAlpine turned, locked the door of the station -- to secure it against what imaginary intruders I could not imagine -- pushed his hands deep into the pockets of his grey issue parka, and walked briskly away from me, straight out in to the wind, out on to that barren land.

I was waiting for the machine to warm up, arranging my maps for the leg to Frobisher, when I saw McAlpine waving a white flag in front of his body and running awkwardly down the hill towards me. Snow sprayed up from his unlaced boots as he stumbled on to the airstrip. As he neared I could see my error -- a white apron flapped below his parka as he hurried along. I opened my door and signalled him towards the machine.

"Mail this for me please." He was panting as he handed me a letter. "I've made sandwiches for you -- I should have invited you for lunch" He passed me a brown lunch bag which I placed with his letter on the seat across from me.

The drone of the turbine made belated conversation impossible so I just thanked him, held the letters up, and nodded. He backed slowly to the edge of the strip. As I lifted off, the rotor wash caught the apron and again it started flapping, though this time more furiously. He waved to me, and I flashed the landing lights in kind. As I picked up speed I stayed low and circled once, to make a similar parting gesture towards him. I spotted him easily, walking briskly out on to the tundra, straight away from the station. He stopped and raised one hand straight up. The hood of his parka was drawn up tightly about his head. His back remained resolutely turned towards me, as if he were too busy to turn and wave. As I flew over him he just stood there with his back turned and one arm up, circumscribed by that white expanse, looking directly ahead to the snowy void before him as if he were signalling in or warding off some presence that only he could see.

2.

About four years later, ferrying south to Holman after two months with Exxon on Mackenzie King Island, I was forced into Mould Bay by weather. It was late fall. The tail end of a low over the Beaufort was lacing the windward coastline with ice-fog and low ceilings; even where I was, just by

Hazen Strait and picking my way along the lee-shore of Prince Patrick island, visibility was down to a quarter-mile in blowing snow. Anxious for home, I was pushing it a little. Were it not already mid-afternoon when I came abeam Mould Bay, and my chances of crossing McClure Strait pretty much nil in that weather, I likely would have tried to press on to Holman Island. And I might have spent a night or two sitting on a rock waiting for the weather to clear. As it was, I landed at Mould Bay just before dark. As I shut down, a weatherman walked up to the machine.

Considered from another location, from an armchair imbedded among thousands of others in suburban Toronto for example, an isolated post in the Arctic evokes an estranged, inhospitable aspect. But for a bush pilot who is caught out, a weather station half-buried in snow is as welcome a sight as you might wish for: caught hovering along some ice-bound coastline, twisting and turning through blowing snow in the gloomy half-light of late afternoon, you are not sure exactly where you are or if you will make it in before running out of daylight or fuel; curtains of swirling snow smoke off the ridges around you, the machine shudders through downdrafts ... then, you glimpse some human mark in the long white below. Or you think you see a light flicker in the blustery haze ahead. Such meagre tokens are as

consoling to you as the sight of Pearson International after a season away. The stations are safe -- there are people there, offering asylum from the chaotic indifference of an Arctic winter storm. The north exaggerates acquaintances in a similar way. At Mould Bay, after more than four years, I immediately recognized the waiting figure in front of my helicopter. And it was good to see him.

The wind was stronger than I'd thought. It blew from the left -- McAlpine's hood pressed close to his cheek and nose. Behind him, snow whirled over the tundra, and the line where sky and earth meet could not be seen. The weather station, not far away, only loomed up occasionally and dimly through the driving snow. We hollered a few words of salutation, lost in that storm, then struggled an empty drum to the machine. McAlpine steadied it while I climbed up to attach tiedowns to the blades. It was slow going. Grains of dry snow rose from below and drove at us from every direction. The wind gullied about the chopper in blasts, buffeting the barrel and shaking it beneath my feet. It was dark when we finished the work. The machine secure, McAlpine immediately struck off towards the station. He was walking quickly and I had difficulty staying with him. I caught up at the station door and we went inside. McAlpine placed his keys on the counter and took off his parka. He

hung it over the boot rack then drew a comb out of his pocket and combed his hair into place. Snow grains clattered on the window pane. He put the light on and turned to me. He appeared much unchanged, though paler than I remembered him, a natural effect of long hours indoors and short winter days.

"What can I do for you?" he asked. He voiced this unexpected question almost crisply, as would a clerk at the Scarborough Canadian Tire on a busy Saturday morning. Although I hadn't seen him in four years, I had the vague sense that I was becoming a nuisance.

"I'm afraid you're stuck with me for the night," I replied. He looked to the window, a coal-black rectangle framed on the wall, then he looked back to me.

"Of course," he said, in his professional manner, "there's a spare room in the quarters." Lightly, with his left hand, he tapped the counter top as he finished speaking. It was an unconscious gesture, made sharply and matter-of-factly, as if an internal switch within him had turned and eliminated all indecision. Immersed as we were in those leagues of broiling snow, his hospitable response, voiced calmly within that sole, bright room, warmed me through.

"Please fill out this requisition form." He reached

underneath the counter and placed a Ministry form, and a pen, in front of me. I wondered who, besides McAlpine, might ever read it. While I completed the application for emergency lodging McAlpine went to his desk, picked up a handset and spoke into it:

"Mr. White. Prepare an extra place for supper, to be tabled 30 minutes later than the usual hour; that is, at 17:30 hours." McAlpine ran a tight ship. I completed the form. McAlpine read it over, endorsed it and then took a stamp out of his drawer and, after winding it for some time to the correct date, stamped the form and placed it on his desk. He withdrew a paperweight from a bottom drawer and positioned it, squarely over the paper, on his otherwise barren desk. We made our way down a long hall to the living quarters where he showed me directly to a small room, spartanly furnished with a cot, a table and a wooden chair.

"The facilities are down the hall to your right. Continue on and you'll find the dining room. Supper will be tabled at 17:30 hours." His bizarre use of the word "tabled" made the occasion of supper sound perfunctory, more an idea to be addressed than an opportunity for sustenance or company. McAlpine turned to leave.

"I appreciate your accommodation," I replied, imitating the formality that characterized his manner. He

nodded and retreated down the hall.

I was surprised to see McAlpine already eating when I arrived in the dining room. And though he didn't say anything -- it was because he didn't say anything at all when I entered -- I immediately sensed that I should have made it a point to be there early rather than a few minutes late. In the interval he had changed for the meal. Above a fresh white shirt and a serge necktie, his thin, grey hair was wet and brushed neatly back. The shirt was stiff-collared and without a wrinkle. A thin gold bar clasped the dark tie tight against his chest. He struck an elaborate figure, aristocratic for such parts -- a grand doyen, a high priest of the north, I recall thinking. By the look of him, were it not for the steady moan of the wind and the occasional clanging or shudder of one or another piece of the station, I could have imagined us about to dine at the Royal York. He neither interrupted his meal nor asked me to sit down as I took a place at the table. I recall thinking that the character of the landscape, its muteness and absolute indifference, must have somehow rubbed off on him. As soon as I'd sat down, a heavy-set man in a full length apron appeared at my side. Despite his imposing bulk, I was immediately struck by how beleaguered he looked, his eyes large and liquid, the skin of his face pasty and

pallid. Without a word he placed a bowl of soup in front of me.

"Thank you," I said, my voice sounding overly loud in the quiet room.

"I expect this weather will blow through overnight," McAlpine observed. Though the cook had given no sign that he was inclined to, McAlpine spoke before the cook could introduce himself. McAlpine looked towards me for a response. His eyes were blue but remarkably cold, and I had the strong sense that in a moment of anger, his glance could fall as hard as a blow. Otherwise, there was only a faint expression on his lips, one difficult to describe. Certainly not a smile. But not clearly mean either, something unnerving, almost stealthy, as if intimating a danger about him. It was most noticeable at the end of his brief pronouncements -- like a seal applied to his words, it made me think that his bland phrases were voiced not to communicate, but to ensure that any substantial query was stifled.

"That's good news to me," I replied in the same vein. "I hope to make Coppermine tomorrow night." McAlpine continued:

"I see by your application for lodging that you're southbound from Mackenzie King Island. How was the weather

there?" It was an unusual question. I'd expected him to ask me about where I was heading rather than where I was coming from. Normally, conversations quickly run to southern things in such outposts and it struck me that if there was one thing McAlpine already knew about, it was the weather in that part of the world. He knew it like no one else. And what could the weather be anyway? Good or bad, finally.

"Good, this morning. Then I flew into the trailing: of that low over the Beaufort. It was moving slower than I'd hoped and blowing hard." The hot soup was good. I hadn't eaten since morning. "How long have you been here?"

"I've just completed my third year." He looked towards the large window in the living room. There was nothing there to see. Just darkness pressing against it. And an indistinct reflection of McAlpine at the table, blurred as gusts quivered the pane. He continued solemnly: "There isn't anywhere else for me to go now. With the exception of Alert, which is exclusively military, this, Mould Bay -- my base," he glanced up, "is our most northern station." At the time, I perceived that he spoke these words with an air of immodest accomplishment. Stressing as he did that the station was "his" with the cook within easy earshot, and dressed so inappropriately for the place, McAlpine suddenly

struck me as fatally proud. Or maybe blessed with memory too short to be fatal, I don't know which. He spoke as if he expected me to believe that the Mould Bay weather station was not a snow-buried outpost three thousand miles north of Ottawa, but the very pinnacle of success for careerists within the Ministry of Communications. As if he had calculated exactly his trajectory through the bureaucracy, struggling his way to the snow-banked and forgotten grey metal station hung about us through long years of unerring strategy and stellar performance. He knew, all of us there would have known really, that as often as not the Arctic becomes home for southern misfits -- a repository at the outermost fringes, for those of us who can't manage the south for whatever obscure reasons. I looked towards him. He had been quietly observing me as I'd pondered his comments and I had the unpleasant feeling of being somehow caught out.

"We all must cling to some delusions about ourselves, you know. It is these dedications that allow us to continue ... Commander." His candour caught me by surprise. With his piercing blue eyes fixed intently upon me as he spoke, I felt as if he'd read my very thoughts. "Otherwise," he concluded, "why wait?"

A fierce gust rattled the station. Wait for what, I

wondered. I thought of the chopper and wondered how it was weathering the storm. McAlpine raised his arm and looked at his wristwatch. For the first time I noticed that he wore a wedding band. He rose from the table: "I must record the weather."

"I don't really think it's changed much," I replied, curiously relieved to respond with talk of weather. If anything, the wind had picked up a bit.

"Dedication, Commander. It is our best sustainable hope." As he slid his chair back into place against the table, a smile froze over his mouth, closing our conversation, sealing his utterance as though it had been a door opening briefly into some cryptic knowledge held in his keeping.

"I'm just a bush pilot, not a Commander." I spoke to his retreating figure. "A driver ... not a lot to command."

McAlpine's obscure comments had thrown me off and, however vaguely, I felt that they had been made to some extent at my expense. I listened to his footsteps recede down the hall to the station. I finished the soup. The cook reappeared at my elbow and placed a plate served with roast beef, potatoes and carrots on the table beside me. Then he held a pale hand towards me. We shook hands to introduce ourselves. He cleared his throat and began to

speak:

"Horace White, Cape Breton, do you have news of the south?" His voice was low and scratchy, maritime in its accent. At the sound of it an odd thought -- that he didn't have much chance to speak -- came to me. I told him I was coming from north. And just heading south myself after the season on Mackenzie King Island,

"I'm heading home," I replied, "hoping to see Pearson by the weekend."

"That's a long way from Mould Bay."

"I should make it if this weather blows through tonight." I asked Horace how he liked the north.

"I don't like the north. I never have. I'm here for a living. With the Sydney mine down and the fishing gone, you take what you get." He cleared his throat again and then he continued almost wistfully, like he was speaking more to himself than to me. "People forget, you know. It's easy for a whole group of people to forget just one, but if you're in a place like this for very long, you remember everyone you ever met. You even think about people you never liked. You get homesick about your bloody enemies, would you believe it? It's all something to think about and it all helps. You know, I think I'd give a month's salary to see green grass." Horace paused for a moment. I knew

what he meant. But the only response I could offer was that I believed it better not to dwell on it, to put it out of your mind at any cost and not think about it at all. If you must leave a place you like, leave it any way except slowly. Don't let yourself think about it; otherwise, each day can seem a week long. I didn't say anything to Horace. He spoke again: "He's a quiet man, McAlpine. And he likes things exact ... says there's no external checks in a place like this and you need to be exact."

"I noticed that he runs a tight ship," I replied. "Probably a good thing." Horace leaned towards me.

"He's killed a man, you know. How's that for a tight ship?" A gleam flickered in Horace's eyes. He said it calmly, as if he were asking me if I wanted another serving of supper.

"What?" I wasn't entirely sure I'd heard him right.

"McAlpine. At Resolution Island. He killed the cook."

"I didn't hear that story." In one respect, the north is a small place. Dramatic news travel far and fast. Though they stay in the north, stories of death and hardship are not infrequent -- they're part and parcel of the territory.

"Nobody heard about it but us, of course. He claimed it was self-defense. He claimed the cook attacked him.

Claimed it was all he could do to defend himself. No witnesses. What could they do? He killed him with a Ministry issue #4 butcher knife, planted it in his chest then dragged him outside and hauled him on the roof where he'd freeze and nothing'd get at him. Covered him with snow and poured water over top to freeze him in. You want more soup?"

"No, no, thank you. Well, what happened?' It was hard for me to believe that a weatherman could kill a cook and that things would just carry on as they had before.

"Nothing happened. He stayed there. Spent the rest of the winter by himself. It happened in December, it's the hardest time up here Christmas is. Some, in the Ministry, they think McAlpine's flat crazy ... they're dead afraid of him. With the weather, it took ten days to get the cook out." Horace paused to clear his throat. "You must be looking forward to getting home."

"I am that." And I was, particularly just then. By the look of him, and the sound of him, I'd have wagered heavy that Horace was the one on the verge.

"Imagine. Him sitting in the kitchen eating supper in his white shirt and tie for ten days with the cook buried six feet above him, iced in on the roof just over his head." Horace leaned back in his chair and shook his head. "I can

tell you," he rasped, "this is one cook that won't be caught sleeping on no roof." He stood up and leaned towards me, his hands palm down on the table. "I better finish up in the kitchen, I have a schedule to keep to. Pilot, you wouldn't have a bottle you could leave me?"

As it happened, the Exxon Party Chief had given me a forty of Canadian Club before I'd left camp. I had been looking forward to opening it when I got home. But Horace looked like he could use it. "I do have, Horace, and I know the rule of north."

"What's that?"

"Stay on the good side of the cook." If he was pleased, he didn't show it. He turned away from me, abruptly, and walked into the kitchen.

"Thanks for supper, Horace," I said. "Do you need help with the dishes?" I stood up and waited for his reply.

"I'll be alright. One thing I've plenty of is time to kill." I thought of the body on the roof. And I'd heard that word enough for one night. I went down to the room and got the bottle for Horace. He was still in the kitchen when I got back so I put it on the table.

"Here it is, Horace. Thank you again for supper. I think I'll go down to the station and check the forecast for the morning." I heard him clear his throat. And I heard

the dishes knocking as he loaded them into the sink; with that noise so close up he must not have heard me for he offered no response.

McAlpine was seated at his desk. A large blueprint was spread over its surface. He'd changed back into his khaki uniform; as I walked into the station he spoke without looking up.

"This system should begin to blow itself out by midnight. There's a high pushing up from the Bering Strait. Dawn will be clear. By my calculations, the upper level winds should provide you with an eighteen knot southerly tailwind. How's Horace?"

"Horace? Fine enough. A little thirsty, I think. He cooks a good roast." I gestured to the blueprint. "What are you building?" I wasn't anxious to continue the discussion of Horace.

"A home in the south," he said. "Long over with." By his reply I didn't know if he meant it was long over being built or just long over with as far as he was concerned. Or both. I had an urge to ask him about the cook.

"Do you have any pictures of it?"

"This one. And the other blueprints. I don't place much stock in photographs; they strand you on the surface of things."

"I noticed you wear a wedding ring."

"I do," he replied. He looked up at me with that smile. I wondered how he'd managed to stay married after so many years as a weatherman.

"I find it hard, away from my family for weeks at a time. It's hard on the ... it's hard on people," I said. "I've often wondered why they don't send married couples to stations like this. It would make more sense. It would be more of an adventure than a ... a prison sentence." At this suggestion he moved in his chair.

"In their infinite wisdom ..." he murmured, more to himself than to me. And then he looked up as if, in light of my suggestion, he were making some new calculation. "Is that what you have discovered?" he asked, quizzically. It was an odd question. I readied myself for another of his offbeat pronouncements while answering.

"It would seem to me yes, yes it is. What about you? Don't you think that would be preferable?"

"My discovery has been that whole lives are lived in a few months. Or weeks, even. The balance being filler, more or less. Usually less. There are hard limits to the amount of intimacy one can endure." That smile again. Like he knew more than I did like he even knew more about me than I did myself.

"You don't find it difficult, then, together yet apart."

"I find it normal. The distance is a detail, a relieving one at that. It shortcuts the deteriorating process, it allows one to sidle about it all, rather than plow through it so steadfastly. Were the government more considerate of its citizens it would require the Ministry to build weather stations every fifty miles north of the sixtieth parallel." He paused. "And man them."

I'd never heard him say so much at one time. He'd clearly thought about it a lot. He tapped again, as if tapping an end to that particular line of inquiry, as if he'd said, with his irritating authority, all that there was to say about it. I could tell that he was serious. There was no note of resignation in his voice, not a hint of the longing common to most southern men who are forced into the north for long periods, longing in their voices, their talk, lined into their very faces. McAlpine was a sure man. And he spoke with such curious authority that it took me a moment to consider that he was telling me with absolute conviction that his was a model marriage. With him perched on a rock in that sea of snow, still lost in the blueprints of a home long after it was built. It was an argument coming from someone who had cached his life high in the

Arctic. Someone who'd tried to move into an abandoned chicken coop at Hope's Advance Bay. It was annoying that I had taken him seriously. I had an urge to jar him, to shake some frozen story out of him, to hear what he really knew. Not some immaculate little fabrication of ideal relations from a middle-aged ghost gulaged in Mould Bay.

"Perhaps you no longer know. Perhaps you've forgotten what you're missing, frozen away up here for so many years. Do you have any pictures of your family?" McAlpine ignored my reference to his family. His eyes hardened and fixed upon me as he replied:

"Once you've lived in the Arctic -- I'm not talking about the tourists who come up here with their seasonal projects, or even the bush pilots who fly through -- I mean once you've lived in the high Arctic without moving for a winter or two, it is in your bones. It imprisons your soul. It is not a place to seek or find tranquillity, you know, in this silence. Then, you are never south again without the sense that you're missing something, that you are not where you should be." He had begun to speak rapidly and suddenly he stopped. As if he'd said too much. He nodded towards the door, as if looking for a way out of the conversation. "Consider just this storm. The south's are not comparable."

I was looking at a born weatherman, of that I was sure.

Anyone who lived out their life in the Arctic because southern storms couldn't measure up had to be. The blue eyes flared as he continued:

"There is a point -- I would speculate that most of us come to it, here or there -- a point at which one calls the fidelities of a lifetime into question. And after that, you just settle in. You grow tired."

"Well that's it, that's what I mean," I replied. "You're tired of nothing. You don't have anything."

"It isn't a question of things. It isn't even a question of faith or despair. One simply tires."

"Tires of what?" I was having trouble understanding what he meant. As with Horace, our conversation seemed disconnected, not really a conversation at all.

"Of ... news, of eating an egg every morning, the smell of that which was once a favourite food, books, values, the way we all parrot each other, the drone of one's own voice; and yes, one even tires of ..." He stopped speaking. Absently, he tapped at the blueprint with his ringed hand. Though there was likely nothing more to it, I later wished that I had asked him what it was he was about to say. With what item was he going to conclude his dreary life list of tiresome things? I would have liked to know exactly.

"Tell me," he concluded, "of something that doesn't

grow familiar." I could have answered a thousand things. Quickly, automatically, I replied:

"Flying."

"Flying to where? Holman Island? Winter Harbour?"

"It doesn't matter."

"Because you aren't going anywhere. You're just going. As if the present were only a preparation for the future."

"To Pearson," I replied.

That smile again. Like I'd proven his point.

"To home," I corrected.

And that was it. He returned his attention to his blueprints as if he'd said his piece and was talked right out. Outside, for miles around and to twenty thousand feet above us, the storm continued. I too was tired, for the moment at least. Tired of the north, of Mould Bay conversations as ominous and obscure as its foul weather. I wished McAlpine good night and thanked him for the food and lodging.

"I'll be taking off before dawn if it's clear, if you've anything you'd like me to take south and mail."

"No. I'm retiring soon. Horace doesn't write." His earlier comments, about Mould Bay being his final station, took on a new meaning -- he was retiring. He would be forced out of the north.

"We'll see you next trip," I said. "Or maybe in the south, my phone number's on the form." Again the smile. He got up, went over and put on his boots, and reached for his parka. He nodded towards me and wished me a safe journey.

On the way to the room I stopped in the kitchen to make sandwiches for the morning. Horace had retired. His kitchen was clean and well organized and I wondered if it was his way of keeping it or if it was like that at McAlpine's insistence. The bottle was put away. Once back in the room I took out my maps and went over my routing for the flight. With any luck at all there'd be a few weeks of summer left when I got home. At Coppermine there were phones; I could call and talk to them. I packed my gear to be ready for an early start. I turned out the light and I crawled into the cot.

Drifting into sleep, I heard the storm subsiding. Between gusts the lulls were longer and the wind itself was less furious at its peak than it had been earlier. The change in the weather was encouraging; I was anxious to go. At quiet moments, when the wind carried lightly from a particular direction, I could make out the faint pulse of a diesel generator. Then I heard Horace's voice and for a moment I thought I'd fallen into some unhappy dream of Mould Bay and its citizens. In the darkness I opened my

eyes. I heard Horace again, though I couldn't make out his words. I waited for McAlpine to reply. But he did not. It was just Horace in his room, talking to himself. His sporadic low mummings intermingled with the wind as it burbled about my window. Periodically, and laced with anger, an outburst that I could not make out clearly rose louder in the hall to draw me briefly back from sleep -- only to stop abruptly and subside again, into hoarse mumbles, and quiet.

3.

McAlpine had been right about the weather. The morning shone clear and cold, with a brisk wind blowing from the north. I recall whitecaps flecking the burnished surface of Amundsen Gulf. And Victoria Island, a white plain nicked by dark outcrops, expanding oceanically to a thin line above which solid blue walled the horizon. Holman Island was behind me, and behind Holman, Winter Harbour. And far behind that the thought of Mould Bay: forlorn, remote, and buried in snow. It seemed years away, as if flight allowed the escape of time itself.

I refuelled at Coppermine. With the clear weather, the full moon, and the north wind holding, I was contemplating a night leg to Hay River. It would have gained me half a day

southbound. When I went to the tower to double check the forecast, the weatherman told me that they'd received a call from Mould Bay:

"Someone is dead. We'll likely need your chopper. It's the only one around." I thought of Horace.

"Horace is dead?"

"What?" He looked at me, alarmed. I told him I'd been there before, and that I knew both McAlpine and Horace.

"McAlpine. Did he kill the cook?" I asked him. The weatherman told me that he had no details of the circumstances. He told me that the night before they'd received one message in Morse Code requesting assistance, that they had been unable to re-establish contact with Mould Bay, that the Coppermine station manager was planning to go in with me in the morning. And that Mould Bay station had, since sending the one message, failed to transmit the weather.

We were airborne shortly before 07:00 hours. The weather held clear all the way but with the headwind it was slow going. By the time we crossed Crozier channel it was late afternoon. A thin smudge of smoke stained the horizon at the end of the Bay, and then the station: small and dark against the white surround. I reduced power, descended to a hundred feet, and circled the station before landing. I

could see McAlpine with his parka on, sitting in a chair by the door of the station. The roof was clean. We landed and I shut down quick.

We hurried up the path, up my very tracks from the morning before. McAlpine, looking in our direction, waited for us in the chair. The door to the station opened and from it Horace emerged to stand there -- to stand there beside McAlpine. For a moment I thought there'd been a huge mistake, or a terrible joke. It was then, as we reached the station, that I realized McAlpine hadn't moved.

"Horace," I said.

"He's dead," Horace said, unconcernedly. McAlpine was dead. I removed a glove and touched his cheek. He was dead. As we stood there, looking at him, a bizarre thought came to me -- that his last migration had not been arduous. That he hadn't changed much: a little paler, slightly more taciturn, the same grey issue parka; and the same cold, blue eyes gazing out to the tundra. Equally solitary.

"How did he die, Horace?" I asked. Horace cleared his throat and shrugged.

"Don't know. He didn't show up for breakfast. I found him out here. Sitting there. Dead." There wasn't much else to say. McAlpine was dead. Horace cleared his throat

again. "He'd been looking at his blueprints. They're on his desk."

"Let's get out of here. Can we get him back to Coppermine tonight?" The station manager looked to me as he spoke. I checked the time. It would be a night flight but the weather was holding and the wind was good.

"Let's go," I said. The manager and I lifted McAlpine off the chair. Horace picked up the chair and moved inside to collect his things. He was much lighter than I expected him to be. We moved with him back down the path, setting him on a wind-riven snow bank near the machine. I took a net from the cargo hatch and spread it open in front of the helicopter.

"What's the net for?" the manager asked.

"With the three of us and the gear, there isn't enough room inside," I said. "We have to take him external, on the hook. There's no other way." I don't know what the manager had expected. There was nothing else to do. I know I wasn't keen on sitting shoulder to shoulder with a dead man on the long flight south. I set McAlpine in the net. And took a last look at him. The smile sealed his lips. I pulled the hood of his parka up over his head and tied it beneath his chin. Then I raised the net over him and attached one end of the lanyard to the grip. I crawled

under the machine and attached the other end of the lanyard to the cargo hook. By the time I'd finished, Horace had arrived at the helicopter. We loaded the machine, fired up, and lifted off. We gained speed and climbed heavily out of Mould Bay. Horace didn't once look back.

One might imagine that there is little to be seen from a plane at night. In the Arctic, a full moon lights the planet freshly. In ways not visible in day. Just north of Winter Harbour, eight thousand feet in the sky, Horace and the manager slept. I leaned my head back to look up. And held the upper edge of the slanted canopy against a black vault glittering with stars. The Milky Way was a dense, blazing arch; the sky, clear as a window. The world, and the helicopter itself, seemed utterly still. I peered down between my feet. In the load mirror below, the net hung gracefully in the downwash. And far below that: the snow-covered tundra, seamless and vast. Moonlight shimmered wanly on the surface of the white land; banks of ice-fog, crystalline and ricepaper thin, diffused the pale sheen. The Arctic, at times, can be something more than lonely -- the earth appeared no more my planet than the distant stars. I armed the cargo release; a small green light blinked silently overhead. I thought of McAlpine. How he thought flying was not going anywhere, but just going. How the

north had captured his soul. In the still air the machine quivered, just slightly, as the hook released. I banked gently, careful not to stir them from their sleep, and for an instant I saw McAlpine as the net fluttered open and he tumbled free. Like wings, his arms flew out in a wide embrace. And then he was gone, indiscernible in the long white below.



Solo

I should tell you about the Blue Star. Well, before that, I should tell you about my last flight as a bush pilot.

For a year or two, things had been building between Beth and myself. The truth be told, our situation was testier than I was able to realize, though I can now look back and clearly see that we were well into a stall when, by my calculation, we were holding straight and level. At the time, I'd have wagered my bottom dollar that we'd managed all the right manoeuvres, that Beth and I had made all the critical turns together and that we'd broken through the heavy weather, that we were well on our way to blue-sky flying. I'd cashed in some Red Ridge shares I'd been holding on to for dry times, and made a more permanent deal for the farm we'd been renting down the road from Juet's old place. There was enough left over to finance a brood of imported hens, which I was sure would be a popular, big-dollar sale at the bistros that were cropping up all over Young street in those heady years. I threw up a few rolls of chicken wire, built a coop against the back fence line, and brought in two hundred chicks the first spring of our big change. I knew it wouldn't be enough to live on, but calculated that it would at least cover the taxes and, with good luck, throw a substantial

brake on the drain of our savings while I looked around for something else. Grace was three and thrilled to her toes. Having me around all the time was as good for her as it was for me, simple things making the difference, like driving back to the farm with the first three crates of chicks on the bench seat between us, their steady peeping and minute scratching causing her to lean over and peer through an air hole every ten or fifteen seconds the whole drive home. Or driving out to the Blue Star Motel, south of the airport on old Route #1, for a visit with Juet, who had taken a permanent room there, and who had finally settled down after his bad luck year with Gail. Juet never failed to have a treat or two for Grace, and a good plane story for me. Like his latest one, the theory that flying is so safe, with so much inherent redundancy, that you have to miscue three times in a row before you'll actually crash. And of course, overall, the sure knowledge that I wasn't going away flying any more. It had been an oppressive thought that had hung over even the best of our times, like heavy cloud, for far too long.

Right off, I signed up for a self-improvement course at the Scarborough Community College. I expected then that Beth would become more relaxed. But right from the beginning I had a feeling that she wasn't completely

convinced that the new me was really me, that she was biding her time with a fair measure of her steady good faith, but keeping a card close to her chest at least for the time being. That she wasn't counting her chickens before they hatched, so to speak. We didn't talk about it much. There wasn't a lot to say. She'd made it plain that she needed a change, and for me, there it was. I'd delivered. By my count, if we kept things tight, we had a solid safe year to make it all work, to get things up so I wouldn't have to fly the Arctic ever again.

Periodically, I'd stop by the hangar to touch base with my old associates. On one of these visits, Greene, the chief pilot, suggested I do an hour or two of air time a month -- to stay current -- which I admit I did agree to, but only under the clear understanding that I would not go north, that I might do a flight test or two around Pearson if they were stuck, or that I might ferry a replacement machine to one place or another when all the crews were off on contracts and something serious broke down. But only if the company was in a severe pinch. And nothing long-term.

My big error was neglecting to discuss with Beth this informal arrangement I'd made with Greene. Not because it meant much, but because an ounce of thought on my behalf

would have foreseen that Beth would take it for far more than it was when she eventually found out, that she would take it as something sly that I'd done dead against the grain of our new way of living, as some sure sign of my real intention, a sign that I'd never really meant to stick with the new way of life for long. It was bound to reinforce her oft-voiced suspicion that I had not made my big change because I genuinely wanted it for myself, but because she'd crow-barred me to it, Grace being the fulcrum upon which she'd pried. For myself, such considerations are indivisible, the family group being what it is. And what it should be. Cutting off and following one part of that idea is, in my mind, blind-canyon thinking, bound to get you nowhere you want to go.

My other error was not to see until too late that the reason we didn't talk about it much was not because there wasn't much to say, which there wasn't, but because the card Beth was holding close was her conviction -- a bedrock misconception, really -- that I didn't want to give up flying. This made it hard for her to believe that the big new beginning was our joint project, that it was something we both wanted, and not something that I "did for her" as she put it. While I considered it a done deal, a nailed-down and closed conversation of no further

practical import, there remained in her way of seeing things a structural snag smack through the foundation of our new start. Because no talk of mine could dispel her worry, she was unable to bring it up in any kind of an even-handed or clear way. There I was, thinking we'd both turned the corner together. And there Beth was, with everything she'd said she wanted, shoaled high and dry on the single idea that in my heart of hearts I wasn't really there at all. And given that, that it wouldn't last. It was a hard belief to argue down. Realizing there was little hope that I could talk her into a change of mind, I left the topic well alone; in fact, I avoided it like clear ice. It was my guess that with a few more entries in our logbook her doubts would fade away, to be filled over and buried by the accumulating details of our new life on the farm. And at times, it almost seemed to me that we were heading that way. Until Greene called.

Beth and I were sitting on the back porch, sharing a pot of Earl Grey. Grace was down and hangered for the night. I'd happened to glance up at a plane angling in for Pearson. From where we were sitting, the sun had slipped below the horizon. But the fuselage of the plane, up a few hundred feet and east, was glazed a brilliant rose. The cockpit canopy shone like a plate of pure gold.

"You're missing something," Beth said. Her words were kindly. As if she was inviting me to pour my heart out, like a cup of that Earl Grey, so she could help me with whatever my problem might be. I knew right off, though, where her conversation would likely finish up. Her tone, one of uneasy restraint, lit caution lights across my mind. After a few years of time together, the lay of the land reads pretty quick. I kept on looking at the plane. The landing gear folded out of its shadowed belly. I could just make out the leading edge slats as they inched up and jacked forward of the wing. Up on the console, three greens would be flashing. I was stalling for time while I searched for a response that would calm her suspicion, derail the conversation from the direction it was heading, and avoid the familiar pitfall she'd opened up in front of me, wide and deep as Lake Ontario. Truth was, nothing I could think of was missing right then, except perhaps a deeper bank account, a concern I had managed to park at the outskirts of my preoccupations.

"You have to miss some things to have others. I am not disappointed with my choices." I beamed her my best version of a contented farmer's smile. And I did it with a clear heart. I knew Beth would never buy it if I told her I was a satisfied man. My play may have been weak,

but it was far enough out in left field that she'd have trouble working it back to home plate. At least so I hoped. The phone rang. I was relieved to hear it and concluded, too early, that good luck was circling my way. I made a mental note to avoid looking up at planes at inopportune times. Beth set her cup on the porch, got up and went in to answer the telephone. The plane tucked out of sight, into the ribbon haze-grey layered at the horizon. I got up and walked off the porch, enroute to check out the chicken coop. By now, the hens would be perched and dusk-quiet, their skinny eyelids at half-lens, drooping down in direct sync with the falling light. The muted roar of the plane's engines rose softly, and then fell in the distance. To hear it this far from the airport, they'd have had to have selected full reverse thrust; the flight crew was likely finishing off their day with a wager on making the first turn-off to the taxiway. Or maybe they just landed too late, too far down the runway, and needed every ounce of power on tap to get turned around. I heard the screen door squeak as it opened behind me. Beth's voice carried out to me in the quiet yard.

"It's for you, Ernest." The screen door snapped shut, without a squeak. Beth was back inside, which meant

to me that she'd positioned herself within easy earshot of the telephone. Not a good sign. Wondering who it could be, I turned back, and went in for the bad news.

"How goes it, Ernie?" Greene's voice. Greene's timing. I told him things were going just fine, leaning heavy on the "just fine." Beth had filled the sink with water and was loading in the supper dishes.

"We need a machine north, pronto."

"Where to? Where's Donaldson?" Donaldson was the assigned ferry pilot. Beth's back stiffened a fraction. Most wouldn't have noticed it. But I knew where to look. I should have just asked about Donaldson and not been in such a hurry about the when and where to.

"He was cleaning his eaves this morning. Fell off the ladder and twisted his ankle. I gotta have a machine in Fayne Bay this week. How's first light for northbound? Straight up and straight back." Fayne Bay, up in the eastern Arctic. I'd hadn't been there yet. On top of that, ferry flights are good ones: you're solo and light, no passengers on board to take care of and distract you. Beth stopped with the dishes and walked back out to the porch, letting the screen slam in again, which I knew she knew I wouldn't fail to notice. In our particular lexicon, which was as fine-tuned as most couples', letting

the screen door bang twice like she had, with Grace just sleeping, was the rough equivalent of a five-minute volley an inch off my bow. I told Greene I'd get back to him later and hung up the phone. On my way back to the porch I diverted to the pantry and dug out a can of 3 in 1 oil. Once outside, I moved the screen door back and forth with my left hand and squeezed a few drops of the oil over the hinges. I kept on moving the door until the oil worked in and the squeaking disappeared. And then I waved that door back and forth a few more times for good measure. I closed the door without letting it make a sound, and sat down beside Beth.

"You are missing something," Beth said again, "you are missing something big, and you don't even see it. There's not a thing you can do about it, now. It's too late." It was past the time for being cagey. That much I knew.

"Greene needs me to ferry a machine north. Donaldson fell off a ladder and broke his leg. It would be a fast two thousand bucks. With good weather I'll be home for Sunday's barbecue." Just, and a few of the pilots and their families, were scheduled to come by on Sunday afternoon. I looked towards Beth. Over the porch and about her the twilight had deepened gun-barrel blue, too

dark to see clearly but for the silhouette-curl of her hair, lined sharp against the cluster of white sweet-peas she'd hung under her kitchen window. Beth didn't say anything. Which meant that she was waiting for me to say another word now, to say something that would tear us loose from this one conversation to which we seemed irrevocably bound.

"With the extra money we could maybe fly Grace to Disney World this winter. It's not that far from Tampa-St. Pete. Greene's got an apartment there. I could make a deal with him." I looked away from her then, to out off the porch, giving her time to appreciate my new possibilities.

"I think you should make your deal with Greene," Beth said, with hardly a second thought, her voice a little less crisp but still hard-edged.

In the quavery near-night beyond the coop, a neighbour's window lit small and square, golden-warm. Across the field in the other direction a car door slammed. An engine started, revved, revved up again, and then motored out of earshot.

"I'd better check the chickens." I said.

"Ernest, you are missing something. For me." She said it a third time, adding the "for me" quietly at the

end. It was an obscure twist tacked on to the tail end of our talk, something for me to puzzle over. It was a tactic of Beth's, long-familiar to me, one which left her the last word, and one without which our exchange would not be over. And at that, she was up on her feet and head bent, shaking the night out of her hair, tossing the leavings of Earl Grey out over the lawn before heading in. Though less quick, I was up too, and off the porch and across the yard lickety-split. Almost to the henhouse, where I was struck cold by a quick, funny sensation. I turned around and looked back to the porch where now no one was sitting. The windows of the house were dark. Except for Grace's upstairs, which was lit faintly by her night-light, and the one above the box of sweet-peas, which was bright, the one at the kitchen sink. I could see Beth leaning over the dishes. I stood there for a moment, stock-still in the yard, to see her framed like that. And just then, she stiffened up her back again, and looked straight out, steady into the night-filled pane. I waved her a small wave and moved a few steps closer in, towards the light from the window that spilled, like a strip of yellow tin foil, over the porch to the yard. For a second I was sure she'd seen me too. But she gave me no sign back. She just looked ahead, dead ahead, as if her

mind was set and full of worry. None of which could be eased by seeing me. In the pit of my stomach there came a hollow feeling, a feeling that trouble of a proportion greater than I could know was settling down upon me.

I looked up at the sky. It was clear all round, the black overhead pierced only by one pale blue star. 'The North Star,' I thought to myself, almost automatically. But it was hanging south of the airport, too far south to be that one. It didn't matter. In any case it was perfect weather for flying; good, solo flying. 'No sky falling,' I thought to myself, Grace's favourite chicken story fresh in my mind. 'No sky's falling on me.' And I headed in, to call back Greene and pack my dufflebag for the flight.

