### Flight of Fancy

Isaac Asimov

When I dine with George, I am careful not to use a credit card in payment. I pay cash, since that gives George the chance of exercising his amiable habit of scooping up the change. Natu­rally, I am careful to see to it that the change brought back is not excessive, and I leave a tip separately.

We had had lunch, on this occasion, at the Boathouse and were walking back through Central Park. It was a beautiful day and just a bit on the warm side so we sat down on a bench in the shade and relaxed.

George watched a bird, seated on a branch in the twitching way birds have, and then followed it with his eyes as it flew away.

He said, “When I was a boy I was outraged that those things could go darting through the air, and I couldn't.”

I said, “I suppose every child envies the birds. And grown­ups, too. Yet human beings *can* fly, and they can do so faster and farther than a bird ever could. Look at the plane that circumnav­igated the Earth in nine days, nonstop and without refueling. No bird could do that.”

“What bird would want to?” said George with contempt. “I'm not talking about sitting in a machine that flies, or even dangling from a hang glider. Those are technological compromises. I mean being in control: flapping your arms gently, then rising and moving at will.”

I sighed. “You mean being free of gravity. I once dreamed that, George. I once dreamed that I could jump into the air and stay there by the gentlest maneuvering of my arms, and then come down slowly and lightly. Of course I knew that was impossible, so I assumed I was dreaming. But then, in my dream, I seemed to wake up and find myself in bed. I got out of bed and found I could *still* maneuver freely in the air. And now, because it seemed to me I had awakened, I believed I could really do it. And then I *really* woke up and found I was as much a prisoner of gravity as ever. What a feeling of loss I had, what a keen sense of disappointment. I didn't recover for days.”

And, almost inevitably, George said, “I've known worse.”

“Is that so? You had a similar dream, did you? Only bigger and better?”

“Dreams! I don't traffic with dreams. I leave that to dabbling scriveners like yourself. I'm talking about reality.”

“You mean you were really flying. Am I supposed to believe you were in a spaceship in orbit?”

“Not in a spaceship. Right here on Earth. And not me. It was my friend, Baldur Anderson — but I suppose I had better tell you the story —”

Most of my friends [said George] are intellectuals and profes­sional men, as perhaps you might consider yourself to be, but Baldur was not. He was a taxi driver, without much education but with a profound respect for science. Many an evening we spent in our favorite pub, drinking beer and talking about the big bang and the laws of thermodynamics and genetic engineering and so on. He was always very grateful to me for explaining these arcane matters to him and insisted, over my protests, as you may well believe, on picking up the tabs.

There was only one unpleasant aspect of his personality: he was an unbeliever. I don't mean your philosophical unbeliever who happens to reject any aspect of the supernatural, who joins some secular humanist organization, and who carefully ex­presses himself in language that no one understands by way of articles published in magazines that no one reads. What harm is there in that?

I mean that Ealdur was what in the old days would have been termed the village atheist. He would pick arguments in the pub with people as ignorant of such matters as he was and they would go at it with loud and scurrilous language. It was not an exercise in rarefied reasoning. The typical argument would go as follows:

“Well, if you're so smart, onionhead,” Baldur would say, “tell me where Cain got his wife?”

“None of your business,” his adversary would say.

“Because Eve was the only woman alive at the time according to the Bible,” he would say.

“How do you know?”

“The Bible says so.”

“It does not. Show me where it says, 'At this time, Eve was the only dame on the whole Earth.' “

“That's implied.”

“Implied, my foot.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“Yeah!”

I would reason with Baldur, during some quiet moments. “Baldur,” I would say, “there's no reason to argue matters of faith. It won't settle anything, and it just creates unpleasant­ness.”

Baldur would say belligerently, “It's my constitutional right not to go for the phony-baloney stuff and to say so.”

“Of course,” I said, “but one of these days, one of the gentle­men who are consuming alcoholic beverages here might hit you before he stops to remember the Constitution.”

“Those guys,” said Baldur, “are supposed to turn the other cheek. It says so in the Bible. It says, Don't make a fuss about evil. Leave it be.”

“They could forget.”

“So what if they do. I can handle myself.” And indeed he could for he was a large and muscular man with a nose that looked as though it had stopped many a punch and fists that looked as though they had exacted exemplary vengeance for such acts.

“I'm sure you can,” I said, “but in arguments over religion, there are usually several persons in opposition and only one of you. A dozen people acting in concert might well reduce you to something approaching a pulp. Besides,” I added, “suppose you do win an argument over some religious point. You might then cause one of these gentlemen here to lose his faith. Do you really feel you should be responsible for such a loss?”

Baldur looked troubled, for he was a kindly man at heart. He said, “I never make any remarks about real tender parts of reli­gion. I talk about Cain and about Jonah not being able to live three Says in any whale and about walking on water. I don't say anything *really* lousy. I don't ever say anything against Santa Claus, do I? — Listen, I once heard a guy say right out loud that Santa Claus had only eight reindeer and that there was no Ru­dolph the red-nosed reindeer ever pulling that sleigh. I said, ‘Are you trying to make little kids unhappy?’ and I popped him one. And I don't let anyone say anything against Frosty the Snow­man, either.

Such sensitivity touched me, of course. I said to him, “How did you ever get to this state, Baldur? What turned you into such a rabid unbeliever?”

“Angels,” he said, frowning darkly.

“Angels?”

“Yeah. When I was a kid, I saw pictures of angels. You ever see pictures of angels?”

“Of course.”

“They got wings. They got arms and they got legs and on their backs they got big wings. I used to read books on science when I was a kid and those books said that every animal that had a backbone had four limbs. They got four flippers, or four legs, or two legs and two arms, or two legs and two wings.

Sometimes they could lose the two hind legs, like whales did, or two front legs like kiwis did, or all four legs like snakes did. But none of them could have more than four. So how come angels have six limbs, two legs, two arms and two wings. They got backbones, ain't they? They ain't insects, or something? I asked my mother how come and she said to shut up. So then I thought of lots of things like that.”

I said, “Actually, Baldur, you can't take those representations of angels literally. Those wings are symbolic. They simply indi­cate the speed with which angels can move from place to place.”

“Oh, yeah?” said Baldur. “You ask those Bible guys anytime if angels got wings. *They* believe angels got wings. They're too dumb to understand about six limbs. The whole thing is dumb. Besides, it bothers me about angels. They're suppose to fly, so how come *I* can't fly? That ain't right.” His lower lip thrust out and he seemed to be on the point of tears. My soft heart melted and I looked for some way to console him.

“If it comes to that, Baldur,” I said, “when you die and go to heaven, you'll get wings along with a halo and a harp and then you'll be able to fly, too.”

“You believe that junk, George?”

“Well, not exactly, but it would be comforting to believe it. Why don't you try?”

“I'm not going to, because it ain't scientific. All my life I've wanted to fly — personally, just me and my arms. I figure there must be some scientific way to fly by myself, right here on Earth.”

I still wanted to console him so I said incautiously, having had perhaps half a drink above my abstemious limit, “I'm sure there is a way.”

He fixed me with a censorious and slightly bloodshot eye. “Are you kidding me?” he said. “Are you making fun of an honest childhood desire?”

“No, no,” I said, and it suddenly occurred to me that he had had perhaps a dozen drinks too many and that his right fist was twitching in a most unpleasant way. “Would I make fun of an honest childhood desire? Or even of an adult obsession? I just happen to know a — a scientist who might know of a way.”

He still seemed belligerent to me. “You ask him,” he said, “and let me know what he says. I don't like people who make fun of me. It ain't kind. I don't make fun of you, do I? I don't mention that you never pick up a tab, do I?”

That was treading on dangerous ground. I said hurriedly, “I'm going to consult my friend. Don't worry, I'll fix everything up.”

On the whole, I thought I had better do so. I did not want to cut off my supply of free drinks, and I wanted even less to be the object of Baldur's resentment. He did not believe in the biblical admonitions that he love his enemies and bless them that curse him and do good to them that hate him. Baldur believed in popping them in the eye.

So I consulted my otherworldly friend Azazel. Have I ever told you that I have — I have? Well, I consulted him.

Azazel was, as usual, in a terrible temper when I brought him in. He held his tail at an unusual angle, and when I inquired about it he broke into a frenzy of very shrill commentary on my ancestry—matters concerning which he could not possibly have known anything.

I gathered he had been accidentally stepped on. He is a very small being, about two centimeters tall, from the base of his tail to the top of his head, and even on his own world I suspect that he can only succeed in being underfoot. He was certainly under someone's foot on this occasion, and the humiliation of having been too small to be noted had reduced him to frenzy.

I said soothingly, “If you had the ability to fly, O Mighty One to whom all the universe pays homage, you would not be subject to the clodhoppers of clodhoppers.”

That rather cheered him up. He kept muttering the final phrase to himself, as though he were memorizing it for future use. Then, he said, “I *can* fly, O Ugly Mass of Worthless Flesh, and I would have flown if I had taken the trouble to note the presence of the lower-class individual who, in his clumsiness, fell up against me. — In any case, what is it you want?” He rather snarled as he asked this, though the high pitch of his tiny voice made it sound more like a buzz.

Smoothly I said, “Although you can fly, Exalted One, there are people on my world who cannot.”

“There are no people on your world who *can.* They are as gross, as swollen, as clumsy as so many shalidraconiconia. If you knew anything about aerodynamics, Miserable Insect, you would know—”

“I bow to your superior knowledge, Wisest of the Wise, but it had crossed my mind that you might manage a small amount of anti-gravity.”

“Anti-gravity? Do you know how —”

“Colossal Mind,” I said, “may I have leave to remind you that you have done this before?”\*

\*[See “Dashing Through the Snow.”]

“That, as I recall, was only a partial treatment,” said Azazel. “It was barely enough to allow a person to move along the tops of the heaps of frozen water you have on your horrid world. You are now asking, I take it, for something more extreme.”

“Yes, I have a friend who would like to fly.”

“You have peculiar friends.” He sat down on his tail as he frequently did when he wished to think, and, of course, jumped up with a thin shriek of agony, having forgotten the contused state of his caudal extremity.

I blew on his tail, which seemed to help and mollify him. He said, “It will take a mechanical anti-gravity device, which, of course, I can get for you, together with the complete cooperation of your friend's autonomic nervous system, assuming he has one.”

“I believe he has one,” I said, “but how may he achieve the cooperation?”

Azazel hesitated. “I suppose that what it amounts to is that he must *believe* he can fly.”

I visited Baldur two days later in his unassuming apartment. I held out the device to him and said, “Here.”

It was not an imposing device. It was the size and shape of a walnut and if one put it to one's ear, one could hear a very faint buzz. What the power source was I could not say, but Azazel assured me it would not run down.

He also said it had to be in contact with the skin of the flier, so I had put it on a small chain and made a locket of it. “Here,” I said again, as Baldur shied away from it suspiciously. “Put the chain around your neck and wear it under your shirt. Under your undershirt, too, if you have one.”

He said, “What is it, George?”

“It's an anti-gravity device, Baldur. The latest thing. Very sci­entific, and very secret. You must never tell anyone about it.”

He reached out for it. “Are you sure? Did your friend give you this?”

I nodded. “Put it on.”

Hesitatingly, he slipped it over his head and, with a little en­couragement from me, he opened his shirt, let it fall down be­hind his undershirt, and then buttoned up again. “Now what?” he said.

“Now flap your arms and you'll fly.”

He flapped his arms and nothing happened. His eyebrows hunched in lowering fashion over his small eyes. “Are you mak­ing fun of me?”

“*No.* You've got to *believe* you're going to fly. Did you ever see Walt Disney's *Peter Pan?* Tell yourself, I can fly, I can fly, I can fly.'”

“They had some kind of dust they sprinkled.”

“That's not scientific. What you're wearing is scientific. Tell yourself you can fly.”

Baldur favored me with a long, hard stare, and I must tell you that although I am as brave as a lion, I felt a bit anxious. I said, “It takes a little time, Baldur. You've got to learn how.”

He was still glaring at me, but he flapped his arms vigorously and said, “I can fly. I can fly. I can fly.” Nothing happened.

“Jump!” I said. “Give it a little head start.” I wondered ner­vously if Azazel had known what he was doing this time.

Baldur, still glaring and still flapping, jumped. Up he went in the air about a foot, remained there while I counted three and then slowly descended.

“Hey,” he said eloquently.

“Hey,” I responded in considerable surprise.

“I sort of floated there.”

“And very gracefully,” I said.

“Yeah. Hey, I *can* fly. Let's try again.”

He did, and his hair left a distinct greasy spot where he hit the ceiling. He came down rubbing it.

I said, “You can only go up about four feet, you know.”

“In here, I can. Let's get outside.”

“Are you crazy? You don't want people to know you can fly. They'll take that anti-gravity thing away from you so scientists can study it, and you'll never be able to fly again. My friend is the only one who knows about it now and it's secret.”

“Well, what am I going to do?”

“Enjoy yourself flying around in the room.”

“That's not much.”

“Not much? How much could you fly five minutes ago?”

My powerful logic was, as usual, convincing.

I must admit that as I watched him move about freely and gracefully within the rather unfragrant air of the limited confines of his not very large living room, I had a distinct urge to try it myself. I was not sure he would give up his anti-gravity device, however, and, what was more, I had a strong suspicion it would not work for me.

Azazel consistently refuses to do anything for me directly, on what he calls ethical grounds. His gifts, he says in his idiotic fashion, are meant only to benefit others. I wish he didn't feel that way, or that others did. I have never been able to persuade the beneficiaries of my beneficence to enrich me noticeably.

Baldur finally came down upon one of his chairs and said complacently, “You mean I can do this because I believe?”

“That's right,” I said. “It's a flight of fancy.”

I rather liked the phrase but Baldur is wit-deaf, if I may invent a term. He said, “See, George, it's much better to believe in science than in heaven and all that junk about angel wings.”

“Absolutely,” I said. “Shall we stop off for dinner and then have a few drinks?”

“You bet,” he said — and we had an excellent evening.

And yet, somehow, things did not go well. A settled melan­choly seemed to cast its pall over Baldur. He abandoned his ancient haunts and found new watering holes.

I didn't mind. The new places were a cut about the old ones and usually produced excellent dry martinis. But I was curious and asked.

“I can't argue with those dumbheads no more,” said Baldur glumly. “I get the craving to tell them I can fly like an angel, so are they going to worship me? And would they believe me? They believe all that crud about talking snakes and dames turning into salt — fairy tales, just fairy tales. But they wouldn't believe me Not on your life. So I just got to stay away from them. Even the Bible says: ‘Hang not out in the company of jerks, nor sit in the seat of the scornful.’

And periodically he would burst out and say, “I can't just do it in my apartment. There's no *room.* I don't get the *feel* I got to do it in the open air. I got to climb into the sky and go swooping around.”

“You will be seen.”

“I can do it at night.”

“Then you'll crash into a hillside and be killed.”

“Not if I go up real high.”

“Then what'll you see at night? You might as well fly around in your room.”

He said, “I'll find a place where there are no people.”

“These days,” I said, “*where* are there no people?”

My powerful logic always won the day, but he got more and more unhappy, and finally I didn't see him for several days. He wasn't at home. The taxi garage out of which he worked said he had taken a two-week vacation that was coming to him, and no, they didn't know where he was. It wasn't that I minded missing out on his hospitality — at least I didn't mind much — but I was worried what he might be doing on his own with all this mad­ness about swooping through the air.

I found out eventually, when he returned to his apartment and telephoned me. I scarcely recognized his broken voice, and of course I came to him at once when he explained that he needed me badly.

He sat in his room, dispirited and heartsick. “George,” he said, “I never should've done it.”

“Done what, Baldur?”

It poured out of him. “You remember I said I wanted to find a place where there was no people.”

“I remember.”

“So I got an idea. I took some time off when the weather forecast said there would be a bunch of bright, sunny days, and I went and hired a plane. I went down to one of those airports where you can get a ride if you pay for it — like a taxi, only you fly.”

“I know. I know,” I said.

“I tell the guy to head out to the suburbs and fly around all the hick places. I said I wanted to look at the scenery. What I was gonna do was look around for some real empty places, and when I found one I'd ask what it was and then some weekend I'd come out there and fly like I really wanted to fly all my life.”

“Baldur,” I said, “you can't tell from up in the sky. A place may look empty from up there, but be full of people.”

And he said bitterly, “What's the use of telling me that *now.”* He paused, shook his head, then went on. “It was one of those real old-fashioned planes. Open cockpit in front and open pas­senger seat in back, and I'm leaning way out so I can watch the ground and make sure there are no highways, no automobiles, no farmhouses. I take off my seat belt so I can watch better — I mean, I can fly, so I'm not scared of being high in the air. Only I'm leaning way out and the pilot don't know I'm doing that and he makes a turn and the airplane sort of leans in the direction I'm looking out, and before I can catch hold of something, I fall right out.”

“Good heavens,” I said.

Baldur had a can of beer at his side and he paused to gulp at it thirstily. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and he said, “George, did you ever fall out of an airplane without a parachute?”

“No,” I said. “Now that I think of it, I don't think I have ever done that.”

“Well, try it someday,” said Baldur, “it's a funny feeling. I was caught all by surprise. For a while I couldn't figure out what happened. It was just open air everywhere and the ground was sort of turning around and then moving up and going over my head and around and I kept saying to myself, What the heck's going *on.* Then after a while I can feel a wind and it's blowing stronger and stronger, only I can't tell exactly from what direc­tion. And then it sort of percolates in my head that I'm falling. I just says to myself, Hey, I'm falling. And as soon as I say that, I can see I am, and the ground looks like it's below and I'm going down fast and I know I'm going to hit and covering up my eyes isn't going to do me any good.

“Would you believe, George, all that time I never thought I could fly. I was too surprised. I could've been *killed.* But now when I'm almost down there, I remember, and I say to myself: I can fly! I can fly! It was like skidding in the air. It was like the air turning to a big rubber band that's attached to me on top and is pulling back so that I slow down and slow down. And when I'm about treetop high I'm going real slow and I'm thinking: Maybe now is the time to swoop. But I feel sort of worn out and there's just a tiny way to go so I straighten out, slow down some more, and land on my feet with the tiniest, tiniest bump.

“And, of course, you're right, George. Everything looked empty when I was way up there, but when I got down to the ground there was a whole crowd of people gathered around me and there was a kind of church with a steeple nearby — which I guess I didn't make out from way up, what with the trees and all.”

Baldur closed his eyes, and for a while he contented himself with breathing heavily.

“What happened, Baldur?” I asked finally.

“You'll never guess,” he said.

“I don't want to guess,” I said. “Just tell me.”

He opened his eyes, and said, “They'd all come out of the church, some real Bible-believing church, and one of them falls to his knees and lifts up his hands and yells, ‘A miracle! A miracle!’ and all the rest do the same. You never heard such a noise. And one guy comes up, a short, fat guy, and says ‘I'm a doctor. Tell me what happened.’ I can't think what to tell him. I mean, how do you explain how come you're shooting down from the sky? They're gonna holler I'm an angel soon. So I tell the truth. I say, ‘I accidentally fell out of an airplane.’ And they all start hollering, ‘A miracle’ again.

“The doctor says, ‘Did you have a parachute?’ How'm I going to say I had a parachute when there ain't none around me, so I say, ‘No.’ And he said, ‘You were seen falling and then slowing up and landing gently.’ And then another guy — it turned out he was the preacher of the church — said in a kind of deep voice, ‘It was the hand of God upholding him.’

“Well, I can't take that, so I said, ‘It was *not.* It was an anti-gravity thing I got.’ And the doctor says to me, ‘A what?’ I said, ‘An anti-gravity thing.’ And he laughs and says, ‘I'd go for the hand of God, if I were you,’ like I'm coming up with a gag.

“By that time the pilot has landed his airplane and come up and he's white as a sheet, saying, ‘It wasn't my fault. The damn fool unbuckled his safety belt,’ and he sees me standing there and he damn near faints. He said, ‘How did you get here? You didn't have no parachute.’ And everyone starts singing some kind of psalm or other and the preacher takes the pilot's hand and tells him it's the hand of God and I've been saved because I'm meant to do some great work in the world and how everyone in his congregation who was here this day were now surer than ever that God was on his throne and working away like anything to do his good work, and all sorts of stuff like that.

“He even got *me* to thinking about it; I mean, that I was being saved for something great. Then newspaper people came and some more doctors — I don't know who called them — and I was asked questions till I thought I would go crazy, but the doctors stopped them and carried me off to a hospital for an examina­tion.”

I was stupefied at this. “They actually put you in a hospital?”

“Never left me alone for a minute. The local paper had me in headlines and some scientist came over from Rutgers or some­where and he kept asking me about it. I said I had this anti-gravity and he laughed. I said, ‘Do you think it was a miracle, then? You? A scientist?’ And he said, ‘There are lots of scientists who believe in God, but not one scientist who believes anti-gravity is possible.’ Then he said, ‘But show me how it works, Mr. Anderson, and I may change my mind.’ And, of course, I couldn't make it work, and I still can't.

To my horror, Baldur covered his face with his hands and began to weep.

I said, “Pull yourself together, Baldur. It *must* work.”

He shook his head and said in muffled tones, “No, it don't. It only works if I believe and I don't believe no more. Everyone says it's a miracle. No one believes in anti-gravity. They just laugh at me and the scientist said the thing was just a piece of metal with no power source and no controls and anti-gravity was impossible according to Einstein, the relativity guy. George, I should've done like you said. Now I'll never fly again, because I lost my faith. Maybe it wasn't never anti-gravity and it was all God, working through you for some reason. I'm beginning to believe in God, and I've lost my faith.”

Poor fellow. He never did fly again. He gave me back the device, which I returned to Azazel.

Eventually Baldur quit his job, went back to that church near which he came down, and he now works as a deacon there. They take care of him very kindly because they think the hand of God was upon him.

I looked at George intently, but his face, as always when he tells me of Azazel, bore a look of simple candor.

I said, “George, did this happen recently?'\*

“Just last year.”

“With all this fuss about a miracle, and newspapermen and headlines in the papers and the rest?”

“That's right.”

“Well then, can you explain how it is that I've never seen anything about it in the papers?”

George reached into his pocket and extracted the five dollars and eighty-two cents that represented the change he had care­fully collected after I had paid for lunch with a twenty and a ten. He isolated the bill and said, “Five dollars says I can explain that.”

I didn't hesitate a moment, and said, “Five dollars says you can't.”

He said, “You only read the New York *Times,* right?”

“Right,” I said.

“And the New York *Times,* with due regard to what it consid­ers its intellectual readership, places all reports of miracles on page thirty-one in some obscure place near the advertisements for bikini bathing suits, right?”

“Possibly, but what makes you think I wouldn't see it even in a small, obscure news item?”

“Because,” said George triumphantly, “it is well known that except for some scare headlines, you see nothing in the newspa­per. You go through the New York *Times* looking only to see if your name is mentioned anywhere.”

I thought awhile, then let him have the other five dollars. What he said wasn't true, but I know it's probably the general opinion, so I decided there was no use arguing.