# A lady from Pecatonica

Richard Bach

Remember when you were a kid, how important it was to be loved and admired? How great it was, now and then, to turn up the hero of the game, with the girls watching and the other guys glad because you scored a point or brought glory upon the team? A strange thing, flying, to come along and reverse all that.

I was barnstorming Pecatonica, Illinois, in the summer of 1966. It had been a good weekday, we had flown thirty passengers from supper to sunset, and there was time for just one more flight before it would be too dark to fly. The crowd was still there, parked in cars or standing in groups of friends, watching our planes.

I stood at the wing of my biplane and called to them in the twilight. “One more ride, folks; last ride of the day—best ride of the day, coming up right now! No extra cost, just three dollars! Room for only two passengers!”

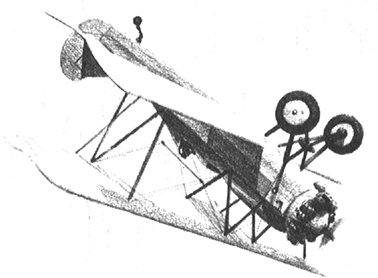
Nobody moved.

“Look at that sunset, all red up there! Twice as pretty when you see it from the sky itself! Step into this cockpit and you can be right in the middle of it all!”

The hills and trees were already dark silhouettes on the horizon, like the cutouts along a planetarium rim before the lights go down for the star show.

But nobody wanted to fly. I was helpless—the keeper of a magnificent beautiful gift, trying to share it with a world that wasn’t interested.

I tried one more time to convince them, and gave up. I started the engine and took off to see the sunset all by myself.



It was one of those startling times when I hadn’t known how truly I had spoken. The ground haze topped out at fifteen hundred feet, and from the crystal air above, in the last of the sun, it was a sea of liquid deep gold, with the hilltops rising green-velvet islands out of that sea. It was a sight that I had never seen so purely, and the biplane and I climbed alone, watching, soaked in the color of that living time.

Somewhere around four thousand feet we stopped our climb, unable to take the moment all so passively. The nose came up, the right wings went down, and we fell away in a power-off wing-over that melted into a loop that eased into a barrel roll, the silver propeller just a slow fan whisking away in front of us as we came down, earth beneath us, earth over our head. It was flying for the pure joy of being in the air, and for thanks to the God-symbol sky for being so kind to us both. We thought humble and proud at the same time, all at once in love again with this painful bittersweet lovely thing called flight.

The clear wind streamed around us in that airy shriek it has at the bottom of loops and rolls and then it went soft and calm, gently flowing over us at the tops of our great lazy hammerhead turns when we almost stopped in the sky.

The biplane and I, we who had shared so many adventures—storms and sun, rough times and smooth, good flights and bad—plunged at last together into that pure golden sea. We sank far down into it, wings going level, and we glided to the bottom, to land on the dark grass.

Switch off, and the propeller clanked sadly around to a stop. I stayed for one long minute in the cockpit, not even unbuckling the parachute. It was very quiet, although the crowd was still there. The high sunlight must have been flashing from our wings, and they must have stayed to watch.

Then in the middle of that silence I heard one woman say to another, her words loud across the night air:

“He has the courage of ten men, to fly that old crate!”

It was like being slugged with an iron pipe.

Oh, yes, I was the hero. I was loved and admired. I was the center of attention. And I was disgusted, instantly, with every bit of it, and with her, and I was terribly deeply sorry. Woman. Can’t you see? Can’t you even begin to know?

So it was in Pecatonica, Illinois, in the summer of 1966, in the cockpit of a biplane just landed, that I found it is not being loved and admired by other people that brings joy to living. Joy comes in being able, myself, to love and admire whatever I find that is rare and good and beautiful—in my sky, in my friends, in the touch and the soul of my own living biplane.

“… the courage of ten men,” she had said, “to fly … that old … crate …”