# Gift to an airport kid

Richard Bach

In my life I had been to four cocktail parties and this one was the fifth and the voice within offered me no mercy. What possible reason, it said, what possible excuse under the name of heaven can there be for you to come to this place? There is one person, clear across the room, who has the mistiest idea of flight, you have one friend in a roomful of strangers intent on paper-thin discussions of national economy and policy and society. You are a long way out of an aviator’s element.

A man stood by the mantel this moment, tailored in a double-breasted blazer with polished gold buttons, and talked of a motion picture.

“I liked Trash,” he said in a cultured tone, and described in detail a scene that would bore a toad to stone.

What was I doing here? Not fifty feet away, just on the other side of the wall, was the wind and the night and the stars, yet there I stood, soaked in light from electric bulbs and pretending to listen to this man talk.

How can you stand this, I asked me. You are a fake. Your face is turned toward him but you think he’s duller than rock and if you had a shred of honesty you’d ask where he finds a point for living if he has to find his values in Trash and you should just quietly leave this room and leave this house and get as far away from cocktail parties as you can get and learn your lesson at last and never appear at one of these things again. These affairs are fine for some people but they are not, not for you.

Then the crowd kind of swirled, as it does every once in a while, and I was isolated with a woman crushed with worry over her son.

“He’s only fifteen,” she said. “He’s failing high school and he’s smoking marijuana and he doesn’t care about living at all. He’s blaming me. He’ll be dead in a year, I know it. I can’t talk to him, he threatens to disappear. He just doesn’t care …”

It was the first sound of emotion that I had heard all evening, the first hint that anybody in the room was a living human being. Saying what she was saying, casting a line to a scarce-met stranger for help, the woman rescued me from a sea of boredom. I flickered back to when I was fifteen, was eighteen, thinking the world a cold lonely place with no room for newcomers. But about that time I discovered flight, which for me was challenge, was I dare you to survive alone in the sky, and I offer you inner confident quiet if you’re good enough to do it, and if you do you’ll have a way to find who you are and never be lonely again.

“Has your boy ever flown an airplane, by any chance?”

“No. Of course not. He’s only fifteen.”

“If he’s going to be dead in a year, he sounds like a pretty old man.”

“I’ve done everything I can think of. Racked my brain to get across, to talk to Bill …”

I kept thinking of me, age eighteen, changing my life with a two-seater lightplane, with the sound of a small engine at seven a.m., dew in the grass, thin blue smoke from suburban chimneys going straight up into air calm and clear as autumn sky.

“Look. I tell you … I have an airplane at the airport, I’ll not be leaving till tomorrow afternoon. Mention that to Bill, why don’t you? If he’s interested, I’ll fly him in the Cub, he can get the feel of the controls, how it all works. Maybe he won’t like it, but then maybe he will. And if he does, we could go from there. Why don’t you tell him there’s a flight waiting for him, if he wants it?”

We talked a while longer and there was some faint hope in the woman’s voice, clutching at twigs to save her son. Then the evening was over.

I thought about the boy, that night. About the way that those of us who fly have our debts to pay. There’s no direct repaying our first flight instructor, for giving a new direction to our lives. We can only pay that debt by passing the gift along, that we were given; by setting it in the hands of one searching as we searched for our place and our freedom.

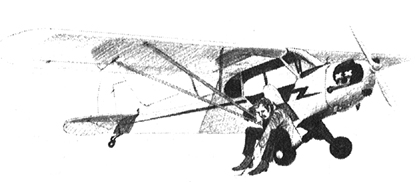
If he likes it, I thought, the kid can wash and polish the Cub in trade for flying lessons. He can work his way as kids have worked since first there were planes to wash. And one day he’ll be set free in the sky and part of my debt will be paid.

I was at the airport early next morning, looking forward to the flight. Who knows? Perhaps he’ll be one of those rare natural pilots who will see the idea of flight all in one intuitive flash and know that there is something here that a whole life-style can be built upon. In an hour he’ll be flying straight and level, climbs and glides and turns, he can be following through the landing …

I thought about this, untying the Cub, making the preflight check, warming the engine. Of course, he might not like it at all. Somehow there are people in the world who do not find that an airplane is a lovely enchanted being, who haven’t the faintest wish to be alone in a king’s-blue sky and look down upon the countryside. Maybe the kid is one of those. But at least I will have offered my gift, and he would know at least that it is not flight that he is searching for. Either way, it will be some help for the poor guy.

I waited all day. He didn’t show up. He didn’t even stop by to look at the plane. I’d never know whether he was a natural pilot or not.

“What a thing!” I said later to my navigator, flying cross-country home. “I mean, fantastic! Somebody comes along out of the sky and drops down and offers a free taste of flight, an adventure unlike anything he’s done before, and the kid doesn’t even try it! Why, if it were me, I’d have been there at sunrise, pacing back and forth all nervous, waiting!”



It was quiet for a while over a checkpoint, and then the navigator replied, “Did you ever stop to think how he got the offer?”

“What difference does that make how he got the offer? It’s the adventure that matters, not how he finds out about it.”

“His mother told him about it. His mother! Do you think that any fifteen-year-old rebel would ever investigate anything that his mother told him about?”

There was no need to answer. What is true has a way of making its point even over the roar of engine and wind.

This is the end of the story. Perhaps by now the kid has found his way or perhaps he’s hooked on heroin or perhaps he’s dead. The fellow had his own life to live and he lived it the way he wanted to. We can offer a gift, but can never make anybody accept it who doesn’t want it.

I’m not discouraged. I’ll try again, and maybe someday I can get started on repaying my debt to old Bob Keech, my first instructor, who walked out to meet me one morning at the airport and changed my life with a smile and the words, “Now this is what we call a ‘wing’ …”