# The girl from a long time ago

Richard Bach

“I want to go with you.”

“It’s going to be cold.”

“I still want to go with you.”

“And windy and oily and so loud you won’t be able to think.”

“I know, I’ll wish I had never done it. But I want to go with you.”

“And sleeping under the wing at night and storms and rain and mud. And little small cafes in little small towns is where you’d eat.”

“I know.”

“And no complaining allowed. Not one complaint.”

“I promise.”

And so, after teetering on her own quiet brink for days I could not number, my wife told me she wanted to ride the wild roaring front cockpit of my 1929 barnstorming biplane, on a flight planned to cross thirty-five hundred miles of spiky western America—across the Great Plains into the low hills of Iowa, and back to California through the Rocky Mountains and the Sierra Nevada.

I had a reason to make the flight. Once a year a thousand clattery slow harp-wire flying machines, antiques out of old skies, converge for a week at a grasscarpet airfield in the middle of summer Iowa. It is a place where pilots talk of dope-and-fabric joys and oil-sprayed sorrows, each glad for friends as mad and as loving of aeroplanes as himself. They are a family, these people, and I was one of them; the reunion was to be, and that was all the reason I needed to go there.

It was harder for Bette. She had to admit, as she arranged for two weeks of child-care, that she was making the flight because she wanted to go, because it would be fun, because she could say that she had done it. That took courage, of course, but I wouldn’t help but wonder whether she could make it, and I was convinced that she hadn’t the first idea of what that flight was going to be like.

I had made one long flight in the biplane, bringing it home to Los Angeles from North Carolina, a week after I bought it from an antique airplane collector. During that flight I had one minor crash, one engine failure, three days of freezing cold, and two days over the desert that were so hot the engine temperatures rose to their limits. I had fought winds that pushed the biplane backward, and one time had to fly so low under clouds that my wheels were brushing the treetops. I had more than enough to worry about on that flight, all by myself, and this one, with my wife, was to be a thousand miles longer.

“You’re sure you want to do this?” I asked as I rolled the biplane from the hangar, the sun lifting its first faint dawn-light into the sky. She was intently rummaging under our sleeping bags, adding one last item to the survival kit.

“I’m sure,” she said absently.

I have to admit that I held a certain savage curiosity to see how she would handle the adventure. Neither of us have much interest in camping or roughing it; we like to read, to see a play now and then, and, because I was a pilot in the Air Force, we like to fly. I enjoy my airplane, but I have a great deal of respect for it. Only the day before, I had finished repairing the engine after its fifth failure in as many months. By now, I hoped, it had all its troubles repaired out of it, but nevertheless I vowed to fly so that I could always glide to some kind of level ground if the engine failed again. I was not taking bets on whether we would make it to Iowa at all—the odds were about fifty-fifty.

None of this turned her head.

Now, I thought, as I cranked the old engine into its deafening blasting blue-smoke life, as I checked its instruments and let it warm, I’ll find out just what kind of wife I married, seven years ago. For Bette, strapped in the open cockpit, dressed in a 1929 flying costume beneath a huge furry coat, lashed already by propeller blast, the test had begun.

An hour and a half later, at a temperature of twenty-eight degrees, we were joined in flight by two other antiques, both of them closed-cabin monoplanes, both, I knew, with heaters. Cruising at five thousand feet and ninety miles per hour, I moved closer to my friends’ airplanes, and waved. I was glad to have them there. If our engine quit, we wouldn’t be alone.

Flying within a few yards of the monoplanes, I could see the wives were dressed in skirts and blouses. I shivered under my scarf and leather jacket and wondered in that early-morning air if Bette was already sorry for her decision.

Though our two cockpits were only three feet apart, the wind and the engine roared so furiously about us that even a shout couldn’t be heard. We carried no radio, no intercommunication system. Whenever we had to talk to each other, it was in sign language, or by passing a wind-battered scrap of paper with words scrawled in bouncing letters.

In that moment that I was shivering and wondering if my sheltered wife was about ready to admit that this was all a foolish mistake, I saw her reach for her pencil. Here it comes, I thought, and I tried to guess how she would word it. Would she write “Let’s quit,” just like that? Or “Can’t stand the cold”? Our breath came in white frost-puffs swept instantly overboard. Or just “Sorry”? Depends on how cold and wind-blasted she is. I could see the spray of engine rocker-box grease across her windshield and I saw it on her goggles as she turned to hand me the note, her tiny, thin-gloved fingers extending from the huge furry sleeve. Holding the airplane control stick between my knees, I reached for the scrap of folded paper. We were only one hundred fifty miles from home, and I could fly her back in two hours.

There was one word written. “FUN!” With a little laughing face drawn alongside.

She was watching me read, and when I looked up, she smiled.

What can you do, with a wife like that? I smiled back, touched my glove to my leather helmet, and saluted.

Three hours later, after a brief stop for fuel, we were over the heart of the Arizona desert. It was almost noon, and even at five thousand feet the wind was hot. Bette’s coat was piled on the seat beside her, the top of it whipping in the heated propeller blast. A mile below, and as far as we could see, the meaning of “desert.” Barren piles of jagged rock, mile on mile of sand, utterly and completely empty.

Once again I was glad for our companions. If the engine chose this moment to fail, it would be simple to come down on the sand, not even damaging the airplane. But it was blazing, rippling hot down there, and I was grateful in the thought of the water jug that we had packed into our survival kit.

Then it struck me full force, in delayed action. By what right did I even consider allowing my wife in that front cockpit? If the engine stopped, she would be five hundred miles from her home and children, standing by one tiny speck of a biplane in the center of the biggest desert in America. With sand and snakes and a scorching white sun and not a blade of grass or shred of tree as far as she could see. What kind of blind, unthinking, irresponsible husband was I, to allow that girl, my own wife, to be exposed to this? As I stormed at myself, Bette looked back at me, and gave her hand signal for “mountain,” all her gloved fingers together and pointing upward. Then she scowled dark, over the top of her signal to show that this was an especially mean mountain, and pointed down.

She was right. But the mountain was only a fraction meaner than all the rest of the dead land about us.

In seeing the land, though, I found my right to bring her there. In her mountain signal, the wife that I had tried so hard to shelter and protect was discovering her country, seeing it as it was. As long as she could see it this way, and with joy instead of fear, with gratitude instead of concern, that was my right to bring her. In that moment, I was glad that she had come.

Arizona rolled by, and the desert gave grudging way, an inch at a time, to higher land and scrub pine. Then in a rush it surrendered to broad forests of pine, and tiny rivers, and some lonely pastures, with far-set ranch houses.

The biplane rolled smoothly through the sky, but I was concerned. The engine oil pressure was not behaving properly. It slowly fell back from sixty pounds pressure to forty-seven. This was still within its limits, but it was not right, for oil pressure in an airplane engine should be a very steady thing.

Bette was asleep now in the front cockpit, letting the wind sweep over her head as she rested on a mound of furry coat. I was glad she slept, and concentrated on mental diagrams of the inside of the old engine, trying to think of what the trouble could be. Then, two thousand feet above the ground, the engine stopped. The silence was so unnatural that Bette awoke, and looked down for the airport where we must be landing.

There was none. We were fifty miles from any airport, and the more I worked over the engine, moving fuel selectors, setting ignition switches, the more I knew that we would never make it to an airport.

The biplane sank swiftly out of the sky, and I rocked the wings to our friends, telling them that we were having a little trouble. They turned toward us immediately, but they could do nothing more than watch us go down.

Forests carpeted the mountains behind and the mountains ahead. We were gliding down into a narrow valley, and along the edge of that valley, a ranch, and a fenced pasture. I turned toward the pasture. It was the only strip of level ground as far as I could see.

Bette looked back at me, and raised her eyebrows. She didn’t seem frightened. I nodded to her that everything was all right, and that we were going to land in the pasture. I was ready to allow her to be frightened, for I would have been had I been in her place. This was her first forced landing; it was my sixth. One part of me stopped to watch her critically, to see how she took this engine failure—this event that, as far as the newspapers told her, inevitably resulted in a gigantic fatal crash and tall black headlines.

There were two fields, side by side. I chose the one that looked the smoothest, making one final gliding circle to land. Bette pointed near the other field, raising her eyebrows in question. I shook my head no. Whatever you are asking, Bette, no. Just let me land the airplane now, and we’ll talk later.

The biplane swept down, losing height quickly, crossed the fence, and slammed hard onto the ground. It bounced one time back into the air, then came down again, bumping and thundering across the rough hard field. I hoped there weren’t any hidden cows. There were some on the hillside. In a few seconds’ rolling, my question about the cows became an academic thought, for we were down, and stopped. It was utterly quiet, and I waited for my wife’s first comment after her first forced landing. I tried to guess what she would say. “So much for Iowa”? “Where’s the nearest railroad”? “What are we going to do now”? I waited.



She lifted her goggles and smiled.

“Didn’t you see the airport?”

“WHAT!”

“The airport, dear. A little field over there, didn’t you see it? It has a windsock and everything.” She hopped down from her cockpit and pointed. “See?”

There was a windsock, all right. The only minor balm I held was that the single dirt runway looked shorter and rougher than the pasture we had landed upon.

That part of me that was watching and checking and grading my wife, and that was all of me, at that moment, broke down and laughed out loud. Here was a girl I had never met, I had never seen before. A beautiful young lady with tousled hair and engine oil edging a big white goggle-print around her eyes, smiling impishly up at me. I have never been so helplessly charmed as I was on that afternoon by this incredible young woman.

There was no way to tell her how well she had passed her test. The test was over and done in that moment, and the book thrown away.

For a second the ground shook as our companions roared low overhead. We waved that we were all right, and pointed that the biplane was undamaged. They dropped a message, saying that if we signaled, they would come down and land. I waved them away. We were in good shape. I had some antique-airplane friends in Phoenix who would be able to help with the engine. The monoplanes flew low one more time, rocking their wings, and disappeared over the mountains to the east.

That night, after the engine was repaired, I said hello to the lovely young woman who rode the front cockpit of my airplane. We unrolled our sleeping bags in the icy dark, heads together, and looked out at the whirling blazing center of our galaxy, and talked about what it felt like to be a creature that lived along the edge of so many suns.

My biplane had carried me back into its own year, into 1929, and these hills around were 1929 hills, and those suns. I knew what a time-traveler felt like, to drift back into the years before he was born, and there to fall in love with a slim dark-eyed young mistress in flying helmet and goggles. I knew that I would never return to my own time. We slept, that night, this strange young woman and I, on the edge of our galaxy.

The biplane thundered on across Arizona and into New Mexico, without the monoplanes at its side. Long hard flights it made; four hours in the cockpit, a moment out for a sandwich and a tank of fuel, a quart of oil, and back again into the wind. The windswept notes that my new wife handed back showed a mind as keen and bright as her body. They reflected a girl looking on a new world, with eyes bright for seeing.

“The red balloon-sun bounces up from the horizon at dawn as if a child has let go of its string.”

“Pasture sprinklers in early morning are white feathers evenly strung.”

These were the sights I had seen in ten years of flying, and had never seen, until someone else who had never seen them either, framed them on scraps of notepaper and passed them back to me.

“The free-form ranches of New Mexico give way only gradually to the precise checkerboard pattern of Kansas. The top of Texas passes by underwing incognito. Not even a fanfare or oil well to mark it.”

“Corn from horizon to horizon. How can the world eat so much corn? Corn flakes, corn bread, corn muffins, corn on the cob, corn off the cob, cream corn, corn puddin, corn meal mush, corncorncorn.”

Now and then, as we flew, a utilitarian question. “Why are we headed for the only cloud in the sky, answer me that!” Question answered with a shrug, she went back seeing and thinking.

“Kind of takes the fun out of passing a train when you can see the engine and caboose at the same time.”

A prairie city moved majestically toward us, steaming in from the ocean of the horizon. “What city?” she wrote.

I mouthed the name.

“HOMINY?” she wrote, and held up the paper in front of my windshield. I shook my head and mouthed it again.

“HOMLICK?”

I said it over and over again, the word whipped away in the slipstream.

“AMANDY?”

“ALMONDIC?”

“ALBANY?”

“ABANY?”

I kept saying the name, over and over, faster and faster.

“ABILENE!”

I nodded, and she peered down over the side of her cockpit at the city, able now to properly inspect it.

The biplane flew three days into the east, content to have brought me back to its time and introduced me to this quick young person. The engine didn’t stop again, or falter, even when cold rain poured down upon it, on the last miles into Iowa.

“Are we escorting this storm to Ottumwa?”

I could only nod and wipe the spray from my goggles.

At the fly-in, I met friends from around the country, my wife quiet and happy at my side. She said little, but listened carefully, missing nothing with her bright eyes. She seemed glad to let the wind play in her midnight hair.

Five days later, we struck for home again, I with the hidden fear that I must return to a wife that I no longer knew. How much I would rather stay and roam the country with this mistress-wife!

“A fly-in,” her first note read, hours out of Iowa and over the plains of Nebraska, “is individual people; where they’ve gone, what they’ve done, what they’ve learned, their plans for the future.”

And then she was quiet for a long time, looking out upon the two other biplanes with whom we returned west, the three of us flying together into great flaming sunsets every evening.

The hour came, as I knew it must, when we had crossed plains and mountains and desert once again, leaving them holding their challenge thrust silently into the sky. Her last note read, “I think America would be a happier place if every citizen, on reaching the age of eighteen, would be given an aerial tour of the entire country.”

The other biplanes waved goodbye, and banked in steep sudden turns away from us, toward their own airports. We were home.

Biplane once again back in its hangar, we drove quietly to our house. I was sad, as I am sad when I close a book and must say goodbye to a heroine that I have come to love. Whether she is real or not, I wish that I could spend more time with her.

She sat beside me in the car as I drove, but in a few minutes it would be all over. She would comb her midnight hair neatly into place, away from the wind and the propeller blast, to become once again the focus of her children’s demands. She would walk again back into the world of shelter, a routine world that does not ask her to see with bright eyes, or to look down upon desert mountains, or to fight lofty windstorms. A routine that has never seen a double or full-circle rainbow.

But the book was not quite closed. Sparkling now and then, here and there, at strange and unexpected times, the young woman that I discovered in 1929 and that I loved before I was born, looks up at me impishly, and there is the faintest hint of engine oil around the eyes. And she is gone before I can speak, before I can catch her hand and tell her wait.

