# The thing under the couch

Richard Bach

The seat belts in the airplanes are different, for one thing. Instead of an American strap and buckle, there’s a four-way affair that traps you in the cockpit like a fly in a spider web. The parachutes here are different, too. All the harness webs snap into a single steel block which, turned and hit hard, releases everything at once. Everyone drives about on the wrong side of the aerodrome roads, speaking in Irish brogues of petrol and carburetors, of stall turns and flick rolls instead of hammerheads and snaps, circuits instead of patterns, undercarriage instead of landing gear. It’s not hard, in Ireland, to feel like a lonely foreigner.

The aerodrome is a great green square, three thousand feet on a side, grazing a block of puff-ball sheep that frighten easily but still need to be driven out of the way by a low pass before landing.

On this field one Sunday afternoon appeared a sort of Taylorcraft fitted out with an all-glass cockpit, and a little in-line engine, which I found out was an Auster. The pilot was one Billy Reardon, and the first thing he did after we met was to offer the lonely foreigner a ride in his airplane.

It was one of those parallel-world stories out of science fiction, when life feels the same as normal, but isn’t, quite. The propeller turned clockwise instead of American counterclockwise; the control stick linked not to wires under the cabin floor, but to a strange yoke assembly beneath the instrument panel; the tachometer needle swung not smoothly from low rpm to high, but shuddered in quick whiplash leaps as though caught on stop-motion film.

Still, the Auster lifted up from the ground and sailed over rock walls and emerald hedges into a sky remarkably like the sky of home. We flew for twenty minutes, Billy Reardon showing the character of his airplane as would a pilot, I think, of any country. My two landings were among the worst I’ve ever made, but Billy stood tactfully by with an excuse that he hoped I’d believe. “She takes an hour’s flying to get used to, really. She stalls at only twenty-eight miles per hour—you’ll have her on the ground and along comes a little gust and you’re flying again!” I liked Billy Reardon, for saying that.

Then, days later, I went to dinner at the house of Jon Hutchinson, an Englishman flying BAC-111s for Aer Lingus out of Dublin, owner of a 1930 Morane parasol, just flown after a year’s rebuilding. There were photographs of airplanes on his walls, as there are on mine at home; he had shelves of aviation books, as I have.

We talked, after dinner, and all at once he said, “Let me show you … the most beautiful …” and he was on his hands and knees reaching under the living-room couch, sliding something heavy. What it was, under there, was a black steel cylinder for the two hundred thirty horsepower Salmson engine of the Morane.

“Isn’t that a pretty thing?”

It shone like printer’s ink, the machined cooling-fins catching light, in the room.

To whom, I thought, to how many people could he have said that, would he have admitted that there was indeed a big old engine part under the couch? Perhaps only to another citizen of his own country, of the sky. I was honored.

“Now there’s a beautiful cylinder, Jon. Beautiful. What’s this, here? Three spark-plug holes?”

“No, this one’s for the primer …”

A week later I came to know another Aer Lingus pilot, who kept his Tiger Moth at the same green sheep-meadow field from which I flew. Roger Kelly’s voice, except for the Dublin accent, sounded like voices I’ve heard more and more often in the last few years.

“The fact that you’ve got Air Line Transport Pilot written on your license doesn’t mean you fly any better,” he said. “One day these pilots who fly for the money of the job, they’re going to lose everything, the cockpit’s going to burst or some such thing and they’ll be left with a stick and rudder and they won’t know how to fly.”

He didn’t mean it literally, perhaps, but he did mean that distressing feeling most sport pilots have felt, a moment later: “The day they make me put a radio in the Moth is the day I give up flying.”

It was about that time, I think, that I finally learned that an airman leaving the boundaries of his nation isn’t a foreigner at all. In whatever part of the world he travels, chances are there’s a couch under which lies a cylinder for an airplane engine; chances are there’s another airman, who put it there, and finds it beautiful.



