# Think black

Richard Bach

Think black. Think it above and below and all around you. Not a pitch black, but just a darkness without horizon or moon to give it reference or light.

Think red. Put some softly in front of you, on the instrument panel. Let it barely show twenty-two instrument faces with ghostly needles pointing to dim markings. Let the red flood gently around to your left and right. If you look, you can just see your left hand on the thick throttle, and your right holding the button-studded grip of the control stick.

But don’t look inside, look out and to the right. Ten feet from the plexiglass that keeps pressure around you is a spot of red light, flashing.

It’s attached to the left wingtip of the lead airplane in the formation. You know that the plane is an F-86F; that its wings are swept to a thirty-five-degree angle; that in its fuselage is a J47-GE-27 axial-flow jet engine, six fifty-caliber machine guns, a cockpit like yours, and a man. But you take it all on faith; you see only a dim red light, flashing.

Think sound. A dynamo’s whine behind you, eerie, low and unceasing. Somewhere on the dim panel in front, an instrument is telling you that the engine is putting out ninety-five percent of its rpm; that fuel is being fed to it at a pressure of two hundred pounds per square inch; that there is thirty pounds of oil pressure at the bearings; that the temperature in the tailpipe, behind the combustion chambers and the spinning turbine wheel, is five hundred seventy degrees Centigrade. You hear the whine.

Think sound. Think the hiss of light static in the foam-rubber earphones of your crash helmet. Static that three other men in a sixty-foot radius are hearing. A sixty-foot radius at thirty-six thousand feet, four men alone-together swishing through the thin black air.

Push with your left thumb and four men can hear you talk, can hear how you feel, seven miles above a ground you cannot see. Dark ground, buried under miles of dark air. But you don’t talk, and neither do they. Four men alone with their thoughts, flying on the flashing light of the leader’s airplane.

Everything else about your life is normal, and everyday common. You go to the supermarket; the gas station; you say, “Let’s eat out tonight!” But every once in a while you are far away from that world. In the high blackness of a star-studded sky.

“Checkmate, oxygen check.”

You slide your plane out a little from the flashing light and look into the dim red of your cockpit. Hiding in a corner is a luminous needle, pointing two-fifty. Now your thumb hits the microphone button, there’s reason to talk.

Your own words sound strange in your ears after the long quiet. “Checkmate Two, oxygen normal, two-fifty.”

Other voices in the black:

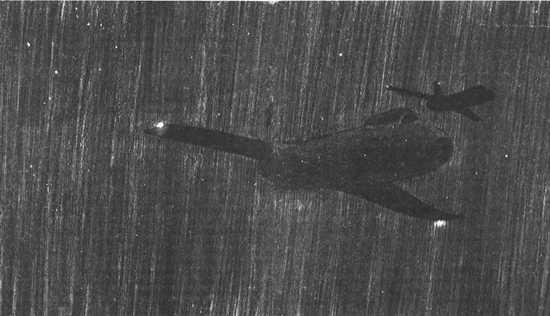
“Checkmate Three, oxygen normal, two-thirty.”

“Checkmate Four, oxygen normal, two-thirty.”

Silence pours back in, and you close again on the flashing red light.

What makes me different from the man behind me in the grocery line? you wonder. Maybe he thinks I’m different because I have the glory-filled job of a jet fighter pilot. He thinks of me in terms of gun-camera film in the newsreels, and a silver blur of speed at an air show. The film and the speed are just part of my job, as preparing the annual budget report is part of his. My job doesn’t make me any different. Yet I know that I am different, because I have a chance that he doesn’t. I can go places he will never see, unless he looks up into the stars.

Still, it isn’t my being here that sets me apart from those who spend their lives on the ground, it’s the effect this high, lonely place has on me. I get impressions that can’t be equaled anywhere else, impressions that he’ll never feel. Just to think of the reality of the space outside this cockpit is a strange feeling. Eleven inches to my right, eleven to my left, is a place where man can’t live, where he doesn’t belong. We flick through it like frightened deer across an open meadow, knowing that to stop is to flirt with death.



You make tiny automatic motions with the stick, correcting to keep in position on the flashing light.

If this were day, we’d feel at home; a glance downward would show us mountains and lakes, highways and cities, familiar things we can glide down to and be at ease. But it isn’t day. We swim through a black fluid which hides our home, our earth. Engine failure now, and there’s no place to glide to, no decision to make where to go. My plane can glide for a hundred miles if the rpm falls to zero and the tailpipe cools, but I’m expected to pull the handgrips, squeeze the trigger, and float down through the darkness in my parachute. In the daylight, I’m expected to try to save the airplane, try to put it on a landing strip. But it’s night, it’s dark outside, and I can’t see.

The engine whirls faithfully on, and stars shine steadily. You fly the flashing light, and wonder.

If Lead’s engine failed now, what could I do to help him? Simple answer. Nothing. He flies now twenty feet away, but if he needed my help, I’d be as far away as Sirius, above. I can’t take him in my cockpit or hold his airplane in the air, or even guide him to a lighted field. I could call his position to rescue parties, and I could say ‘Good luck’ before he fired his ejection seat into the black. We fly together, but are as alone as four stars in the sky.

You remember talking to a friend who had done just that, left his plane at night. His engine had been on fire, and the rest of the formation was completely powerless to help. As his plane slowed and started down, one of them had called, “Don’t wait too long to get out.” Those helpless words were the last he had heard before he fired into the night. Here was a man he had known and flown with, who had eaten dinner with him, who had laughed at the same jokes with him, saying, “Don’t wait too long …”

Four men, flying alone together through the night.

“Checkmate, fuel check.”

Once again, the voice from Lead cuts into the silence of the engine’s airy roar. Once again you move away, read the dim needle, pointing.

“Checkmate Two, twenty-one hundred pounds,” your stranger’s voice calls into the thin static.

“Checkmate Three, twenty-two hundred.”

“Checkmate Four, twenty-one hundred.”

Back in you slide, back to the flash of the red light.

We took off just an hour ago, and already the fuel says it’s time to go down. What the fuel says, we do. Strange what a complete respect we have for that fuel gage. Pilots who respect neither laws of man nor of God respect that fuel gage. There’s no getting around its law, no hazy threat of punishment in the indefinite future. Nothing personal. “If you don’t land soon,” it says coldly, “your engine will stop while you’re in the air, and you will bail out into the dark.”

“Checkmate, descent check, and speed brakes … now.”

Black air roars outside as the two metal slabs that are your speed brakes push into the slipstream. The red light keeps flashing, but now you push forward on the stick to follow it down, toward the invisible ground. Abstract thoughts fly to the depths of your mind, and you concentrate on flying formation in the steep descent. Those thoughts are for high places, for as the earth approaches, there is more to do to fly the airplane safely. Temporal, concrete, life-depending thoughts jumble your mind.

Move it out a little, you’re too close to his wing. Fly smooth, don’t let a little rough air bounce you out of formation.

Impersonal turbulence pounds your plane as you turn together toward the double row of white lights that mark the waiting runway.

“Checkmate, turning initial, three out with four.”

“Roger Checkmate, you’re number one in traffic, winds west northwest at four knots.”

Funny, that in our sealed cockpits at three hundred miles per hour, we still must know about the wind, the ancient wind.

“Checkmate’s on the break.”

No thoughts now, but reflexes and habits as you land. Speed brakes and landing gear, flaps and throttle; you fly the landing pattern, and in a minute there is the reassuring squeak of wheels on concrete.

Think white. Think glaring, artificial light shining reflected from waxed tabletops in the flight shack. A sign on the blackboard: “Squadron Party … 2100 hours tonite. All the beer you can drink—FREE!”

You’re down. You’re home.