



SILVER WINGS

By Kevin Holdsworth

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COMPANY-SUPPLIED BINOCULARS AND A couple of field guides could be spotted on the seat of Ron Larsen's work truck beside his lunch pail. There were places he'd favor for birding, and many owed to happenstance. He had to check out the substation on the Parker Range and scared up some sage grouse. He bet he'd found a lek. On the line in Boobe Hole, he came across chukars. Whenever his duties took him near water, he made time to watch and learn. The pelicans at Fish Lake. The cinnamon teal at Pine Creek Ponds. The canvasbacks at Koosharem Reservoir. The grebes in Solomon Basin.

Papa Olaf supported Ron's new avocation and shared it with him as it fledged. Hell, there were plenty of birds in the Bicknell Bottoms. It wasn't good for anyone when Ron didn't have an interest. Just what the interest was didn't matter. Ron had gone through two dozen hobbies and followed them for a while. Ron's strength was sticking with something once he found the scent. Papa Olaf knew his boy was like a gun dog that needed work. Take him out to the marshes and let him run all day, or at least watch birds all day. Watch and learn. Ron would plunge into any bottom, pond, or stream.

In the meantime, Shirley was getting into the children business again. She scolded Ron relentlessly and always for small things. She felt entitled to because he had left the fold. The left back pockets of his jeans were embossed with the bleached full moon of Copenhagen tins, a very public sign of sin.

Often when she began to talk, his mind filled with the wet slippery sounds of red-winged and yellow-headed blackbirds: birds perched on cattails, chattering. The sounds rose until he no longer heard Shirley at all. He then saw ibis circling, mallards scooting across flat water, mer-

gansers mergansing, and avocets, cranes, curlews, and sandpipers making the Bicknell Bottoms their home.

He knew that the spirit children obsessed her. Once he'd let slip a careless and unfair comment about her weight. She'd immediately taken up aerobics, step and swing. She'd gone in for the full plumage, too: neon headband, torn pink T-shirt, teal tights, buff leggings, white Reeboks, Olivia on the cassette player with "Let's Get Physical," and Richard Simmons in the mail.

It was very uncharacteristic of her to be forward, but just then she did offer to get physical, very physical. Ron really liked the leggings. They reminded him of an image that he carried deep—saucy French girls in a dirty magazine.

She still looked good to him, as good as anybody, but there were problems. Maybe she was right—it was his drinking. He avoided getting too close to her for fear she'd smell it on his breath and scold him. The special Mormon underwear—garments—didn't help. Foreplay was like trying to grope someone in a beekeeper's outfit. He wasn't even sure if she liked it. He knew that she had been taught not to, that the purpose of sex was procreation.

He remembered the early days when she had pranced around in sexy little next-to-nothings, the days before her mother, Nola, had started in with the temple business and moved on to the spirit children. Ron was visual; he liked to watch. Shirley had taken to wearing garments all the time.

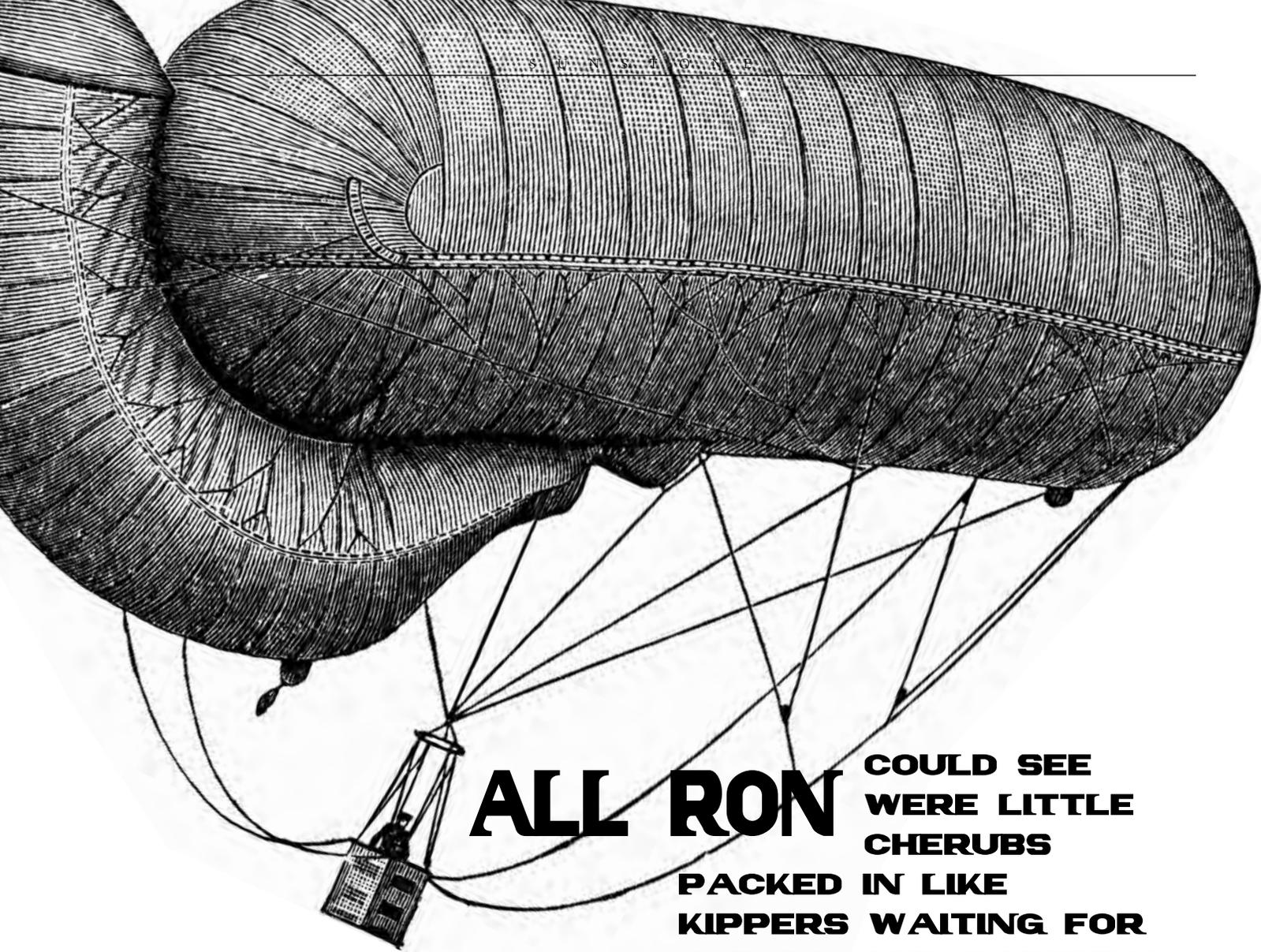
She'd once said that the General Authorities had counseled them to pray before doing it. They tried that. Talk about awful. There he was trying to get warmed up and interested, and all he could see were the spirit children up above in heaven—watching them—little cherubs packed in like kippers waiting for a body and earthly domain. They were waving the windshield-wiper index finger.

Whose fault was it, anyway? Was he shooting blanks? Did she have problems in the egg department? It was impossible to know without outside help. Ten years of marriage was a long time to be childless. He knew that in Shirley's world, a woman could not be truly fulfilled if she were childless.

Ron didn't want a place in the Latter-day Saint world. Mainly he wanted to be left alone. Mainly he wanted to watch the birds.



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ALL RON COULD SEE WERE LITTLE CHERUBS PACKED IN LIKE KIPPERS WAITING FOR A BODY AND EARTHLY DOMAIN. THEY WERE WAVING THE WIND-SHIELD-WIPER INDEX FINGER.

"I MUST DO my work here," Papa Olaf would say any time Ron would tell him he ought to move away. "It's my calling."

"It's not your calling, Dad." Endlessly Ron tried to reason with him. "You call this a calling? How could it be?"

Papa Olaf let himself get so aggravated by the righteousness of the Bicknellites that he returned the favor in spades. He met the fast offering boys at his door with a shotgun. In his living room hung an oversized lithograph of the Scandinavian Jesus wearing Ray Bans.

Papa Olaf asked the owner of the grocery store in Loa why the hell didn't he carry beer every time he visited, and since Shirley worked part-time in the store doing the books, these outbursts were intensely embarrassing to her.

He named his horses after the Church presidents, the prophets. He named one of his cats Spencer W. Kimball.

"Listen, Shirley, he's got a little voice box, too."

"Your calling should be to move away, Dad."

"You just want the farm."

"I don't just want the farm. You can sell the farm. I want you to be happy."

"That's nice, Ron," said Papa Olaf. "You Phil Donahue in

your spare time now? Where's Marlo? What's the point of being happy? Anyone can be happy. Delbert D-Dumas is happy in his d-d-doublewide over there. Happy? Not when you've got a calling like mine."

"Like yours?"

"Wise men have always agreed on this one thing, son . . . Life, it is no good. It must be endured." He spat. "Happy—"

It exasperated Ron. Hell, Papa Olaf had plenty of money: all his holdings, the big settlement from the death of his mother, Renee. Maybe get a Winnebago, a wardrobe of zip-up jump suits and corduroy slippers. A little dog. Spend the winters in the south. Find a special someone in a state with no income tax. Spread your tiny wings and fly away, Papa Olaf. He wasn't going to find someone special here, and

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little dogs were always helpful to meet the ladies.

But no, Papa Olaf stuck in his self-imposed gulag. He wasn't going anywhere until he got Ron taken care of, and if that included Shirley, so be it. Part of his calling was to educate Ron and his gang, admittedly a long-shot task, about as lengthy as the migration route of the Arctic tern, but worthwhile.

Lately Papa Olaf had professed to be a modernist. He wanted to reenact Sputnik and work backward from where the world had gone wrong.

SOME MONTHS LATER, as he looked proudly at Ron's shiny radio-controlled airplane, Comrade Aeroflot, Papa Olaf said to the gang, "The thing you don't remember . . . And some of you are old enough to remember, is just how damned scared the Ruskies made us. Those Soviets. Excuse me, I mean those former Soviets. Send up a rocket with a dog in it—right up the sky's ass and into our living rooms. We thought the whole world was going to end up Communist. Being from the old country like me, the last thing you wanted was to end up Communist."

Ron knew his father was not from the old country, but he might have been.

"That's nice, Pop," said Ron. "But this plane is not exactly a rocket, and I'm really not sure it'll hold this little runt." He patted the guinea pig's head. It wiggled and squeaked in the open cockpit, held in by chicken wire and duct tape. "This cute little runty..."

"Oh, it'll hold," Papa Olaf said. He looked south toward Boulder Mountain. "And I'm not going to deny it's not a rocket. It's a plane, and radio-controlled, but you've got to start somewhere. And what we're after here is the effect."

"The effect on what?" Ron said adjusting the chicken wire as the guinea pig gnawed on his finger.

"You'll see."

The gang had started with domestic beer but moved on to vodka with spiced tomato drink chaser. Papa Olaf ran through all his stock Russian ticks.

"Boris, Vladimir, and members of the Politburo . . . Here we meet at my grand country dacha . . . To celebrate the culmination of the most recent Five Year Plan . . . To show the capitalist swine the power of the working man and also the working wimmen . . . Comrades, meet Laika, the space dog—the world's veddy first space dog . . ."

Space dog or guinea pig, it was only a matter of degree.

Ron felt ready. The lane featured an easy grade down toward the Bottoms. The cargo might affect flight dynamics, so he gave the poplars wide berth. Comrade Aeroflot swayed and shimmied on its way down the runway. Ron pulled back on his radio-control panel levers, and with one brief listing skip, the plane nosed up and cleared the row of cottonwoods over toward Cemetery Hill. Comrade Aeroflot then climbed boldly southward into the high-hazed spring sky.

Ron ran around the front yard with the control panel like a badminton player chasing a high-lobbed shuttlecock.

He made a long banking turn, then brought the plane closer in. Its wings glinted as it passed overhead. It made a sharp tinny sound like a tree shredder. Somebody pointed out how natural the caged rodent looked, and natural was good, always good.

Papa Olaf thought that things could not get much better than watching his boy fly this plane around.

Ron gained confidence with each pass. Still, he didn't want to press his luck. And you never knew with Bicknell weather. Wait five minutes, and it'll change—especially in the spring. So, after one broad final triumphant sweep, he brought it in for a landing.

Comrade Aeroflot cleared the trees, dipped a little too steeply, recovered, then touched down on the graveled lane, bounced toward the cheering gang, and swerved to a stop amid the greening alfalfa. There ensued much back-slapping and high-fiving. Success.

Ron was carried on their backs like a successful football coach.

In the rush of excitement, they forgot about the runt guinea pig. Papa Olaf flourished it free using his Leatherman. The little brown-and-white thing took off squealing in greased-lightning circles, dodged the lunges and dives of the gang, and then veered toward a sheep fence. Tripped up on a tuft of grass, it collided with a low-down strand, which folded its neck and flung it backward. The gang looked at each other, cringing. The guinea pig quivered for a few sickening moments, pawed the air as if running on slick glass, twitched twice, and was still. A gritty breeze blew up.

Ron Larsen suddenly thought about Shirley.

THE STORY OF the guinea pig went round. In testimony meeting a week after the tragedy, Shirley Larsen drew a tearful analogy between Ron's lost rodent and the sacrifice the Lord made in giving up His Only Begotten Son. People's hearts went out to her. Everyone was aware of all the details. Ron could not be made to go to church. She stood quaking and alone.

Ron had lost interest in his plane, and Comrade Aeroflot languished in the garage next to some shovels, rakes, and hoes. Hoping to reignite his passion, Papa Olaf took him on a long Sunday drive over Hell's Backbone and down into Escalante before returning toward Bicknell by way of the Aquarius. Grebes at a pond in the high country seemed to pique his attention.

After church, Shirley brooded out the kitchen window, waiting for Ron to get back from who-knew-where. She had to admit that Ron had a hard time finishing anything. What it was that caused him to stop, she never knew. He'd be working on it—and thinking about it for twenty hours at a time, and talking about it or not talking about it—and for days, but then, inexplicably, he'd drop it. She'd ask why and he'd just say, "I don't know," or "Saw all I needed to see, I guess."

The moods bugged her. Shirley liked things neat and or-

derly, not chaotic. That's how she'd been raised. You pay your bills on time, and you keep track of things. She feared Papa Olaf's extremes, too. Sure, he was generous, and sometimes he really did seem to care about her—and certainly about Ron—but then he'd snap and get funky up and dismal.

This line of thought depressed her, so she chose another window from which to brood. But as she looked at the sorry backyard, she was confronted by more evidence. The unpainted greenhouse still missing a window. The little blue Fiesta still up on blocks and still surrounded by stacks of still unused boards.

Ron was not a very successful hunter, either. Yet hunt he did, each fall with his gang of idiots. Just what they did on those hunting weeks, she didn't know or want to know. When he came back, though, he smelled of wood smoke and he wanted her. He wanted her in a frankly insistent way. But she wasn't really sure if he wanted her, or someone else—just anyone. The image of someone else. Someone like the sluts in *Playboy* that she knew where he hid.

Shirley was a private person. It's not like she wanted to share her problems with the world. Even if she had just spoken in front of the whole ward—the entire congregation—in testimony meeting, it's not like she had wanted to. It just came out that way. She was private, and all of Ron's junk was a billboard. All of Ron's bad habits were a loud-speaker. His dumb plane and dead guinea pig, a For Sale sign in the front yard. And what had she done to deserve this? She remembered the time he had asked her to strip and then tried to take photos of her. Take photos with his stupid little Polaroid. "Honeymoon" photos. It had gotten worse from there. He made her tell him where the leggings were, and then, and then he'd tied her up with the leggings and had his way with her.

She had trusted him. It was impossible to trust him like that again.

There came a phone call from her bishop, Brother Allred, just calling to see how she was doing.

Late as always, Ron always came back, always the prodigal, always saying it was his daddy's fault they got carried away up at Ajax Reservoir with the grebes and geese.

Shirley never spoke a word to Ron about the mishap with the little runt. Nor too many, really, about his low-life friends, his drinking, her humiliation, his stacks of unfinished projects, his lack of affection, his inability to do anything meaningful to help her around the house, the fact that if he had been ambitious in life, he might have a better job than being line foreman for the local electrical cooperative, their need for counseling, maybe even fertility treatment, her strong feelings that if things didn't change, she certainly wasn't going to spend the rest of her life with him in Bicknell, Utah.

Instead, two days after the testimony meeting, when Ron was at work, Comrade Aeroflot went away to the Wayne County Landfill, courtesy of Brother C. Boyd Allred, who took the opportunity of letting more air into the craft

by emptying three clips of his 9mm pistol until he felt quite certain that the plane would not fly again. The bishop and Shirley grew closer. Whom else could she turn to?

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AND YET THERE were still some good times. Papa Olaf was always generous with Ron and Shirley, whether it was the new VCR with the Richard Simmons tapes or the matching Stump Jumper mountain bikes. Unexpected visits with "Let's go down to Torrey for dinner, for heck sake," or "How about a picnic at Sunglow—it might as well be my birthday."

They went fishing in Papa Olaf's *Sea Ray* on Fish Lake, and the conditions were perfect. Hardly a breath of wind, the aspens on the Seven Mile Cirques golden and glittering, the pines on Mytoge Mountain dark and sweeping, the water six shades of dark blue, and just good times. No, the fishing wasn't great, and yes, they did spend a little too much time in the channel that flows into Widgeon Bay, glassing pelicans and talking, but the lovely dinner at the lodge, and all the rest of it made one of those days to remember.

In the meantime, Papa Olaf spent hours poring over the catalogues to get the necessary parts for a replica B-17. From the 141st Division, Army Air Force, Screaming Eagle Squadron. Four powerful engines. A massive payload capacity. Gun turrets. An eight-foot wingspan. A ten-man crew, some of whom might not be expected to return from such a mission.

Shirley Larsen soon refused to acknowledge her father-in-law. Whenever he came round to help Ron, she ground her teeth, pretended not to see him, and cranked up KLRD.

But two could play at this game. Papa Olaf electrical-taped a line down the center of the garage. Shirley could park her Taurus on the right side, but it was clear without words that Ron's side was left, especially once plane parts were hung and dangling with fishing line from the trusses.

Things went missing: Exacto knives, bottles of booze, catalogues, string, cigarette packs, playing cards with topless women, screwdrivers, chisels, packs of matches, film canisters, straws, tubes of Gorilla Glue.

There were a lot of "war cabinet meetings" held in the garage. Coached by Papa Olaf, they played various roles. Lord Beaverbrook, General Ismay, Field Marshall Montgomery, Premier Molotov, General de Gaulle.

Papa Olaf would perorate. "Oh boys, let me tell you how it came to be. If that drunk-by-noon Churchill and Franklin D. hadn't been such good buddies and great allies, we'd all be speaking German today. It would be *Jawohl* and *Schweigen Sie bitte* and *Haben Sie ein kaltes Bier?* and *Vielen Dank, mein Fuehrer*. But that is not exactly the way things turned out, is it? I would say not. No, and the reason is simple, boys, simple. You've got your hands on it. The B-17. The Flying Fortress. Best damned airplane there ever was. Hell on the guys in the turrets. Freedom Bird!"

It was not in Shirley Larsen's nature to open up. Any time she talked to Nola about her problems, her mother always used the confession against her and adopted a superior, all-knowing air, usually complemented by saying how the Larsens were never any good, not one of them.

With her lady friends, it had taken years just to get her past second base. Eventually they did share intimate details. For instance, Ron was pretty much an in-and-out guy. Not that Shirley was comfortable talking about it. It seemed that a lot of them were married to in-and-out guys, but with one important difference. Her friends all had children. She and Ron did not. Ron was an in-and-out guy, not a very good hunter, and he could never finish anything. She wondered sometimes if Ron had another woman. As lacking as their sex life had become, she feared he might have chosen to lead a secret life, that he might be swinging both ways.

Her meetings with Boyd Allred were altogether more confusing. At first they had met at his office in the ward house, but as time passed, he began to visit her at home, like a home teacher or visiting sister would, as someone in his office might minister to the sick. With Brother Allred there was something different, something special. She knew it was the power of the priesthood. She sensed it. She felt it. It wasn't like Ron with Boyd—he wasn't evasive or dodgy.

No, Boyd talked about the old days—the nineteenth-century days in the Church, before the Principle, polygamy, had been abandoned, before statehood, even before Bicknell had been settled. It was a better time, a clearer time. Sometimes Shirley would see a vision, and it took her breath away.

THE SMALL TOWN of Bicknell was situated with its back against red and white cliffs and open to the south, with gently sloping fields and pastures running down to the Fremont River. The town had originally been called Thurber and had arisen in the bottomland along the river's banks. Disastrous floods in the 1890s had convinced settlers to seek higher ground. Site and topography combined



PAPA

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to make a felicitous scene, yet there lingered among the inhabitants a kind of communal chip on the shoulder, probably a memory of those early deluge days.

The only time it rained was when the hay was fresh cut on the ground. The such-and-such federal government wouldn't let them cut all the timber they needed for the sawmills to survive. Tree huggers and drought had forced grazing allotments to

be reduced in size, and hell, there was no money in cattle to begin with. Bicknell stood sun-kissed and wind-dappled, but it was not a town that rewarded daring, innovation, or change.

To first hear, and then indeed to see, as so many Bicknellites did, a surprisingly large airplane, silver wings glinting in the noonday sun, buzzing the town and its environs, seemed a strange and somehow wondrous thing. Not that news of Miss Lana had been confined to Ron's garage. No, everyone knew about the new plane, just as everyone knew that the only time Ron would have the huevos to fly it was when Shirley was up at the Manti temple with Nola or shopping in Provo. People dropped what they were doing, stood outside on their porches, and watched.

Miss Lana soared over the fresh-plowed fields and lines of poplars and clumps of Russian olives. The four matched engines roared louder than a dirt bike, blithely shredding the cloud-mottled sky. Ron reflected on the progress that had brought him here. Comrade Aeroflot was just a toy compared to this. The power and surge, the heft of Miss Lana, etched against the darkness of the mountain, or against the lighter gray plateau, and the way he felt to be in charge—man, there had been nothing else like it. So many times in life, he thought, you'd build things up, only to be disappointed. But Miss Lana was no disappointment. It far exceeded his feathery dreams.

"This, my friends," shouted Papa Olaf, "is what liberated Europe. American industrial might, combined with the right on our side!"

"Here, here!"

They had estimated the fuel capacity would allow for a half-hour flight. He steered Miss Lana into a lazy bank over the Awapa.

Alvin Jones was working his north pasture, turning it under and discing it in preparation of planting a few acres in barley. People often joked that the only sure way to bring on a dust devil was to go plow a field. Invariably the fresh-tilled topsoil would corkscrew up, making a tail for your International, Case, or John Deere. The western sky had darkened and a cold high-country breeze blown up.

From where they stood, the gang could see the flecks that would be airborne cardboard boxes and newspapers and other trash, for Alvin Jones was a lifelong bachelor and not tidy around his place.

Dust devil and dark cloud merged alarmingly. Dust devil and dark cloud and Miss Lana met on the slow bank back from the Awapa. The plane began to shimmy and wobble, diverging from its earlier crisp course. Ron ran around the front yard, pointing the control panel this way and that, trying to get Miss Lana to respond. It worked—the plane started heading for home. It didn't work—she started to waggle around like a sock in a puppy's mouth. The gang shouted oaths and directions.

They then watched, silent, as Miss Lana began to rise in slow-winding circles, taking on a life of her own, disappearing in the dust devil now grown immeasurably large.

She rose upward and upward like a red-tailed hawk, or a band of turkey vultures, twisting upward and upward into the dark-curdled sky. Then she was only a speck at eleven thousand feet, still twisting upward and upward until she was no longer visible to the naked eye, until she was lost even to field glasses and spotting scopes. Upward until Miss Lana was gone.

"Somebody better get hold of the FAA. That plane just invaded commercial air space."

"Hell you say. They'd toss Ron's ass in the slammer faster than you can say Intermountain Farmer's Cooperative."

"What goes up must come down, Ron."

"We'll find it. You bet we will."

"It's just a matter of time, surely."

Ron Larsen stood, unable to move. He just clutched his control panel, and it seemed as though he would cry.

"What we have here is just a leetle setback," said Papa Olaf. "Let us go out now, boys, to find this leetle darling and see what we can do."

They couldn't just sit there doing nothing. They got in their pickups and rattled off, each one stopping from time to time to look up at the inscrutable March sky.

3

ALL OF HER lady friends knew that Shirley was desperately unhappy. They all knew the reasons. Or thought they knew, for in many tear-tinged speeches Shirley had listed Ron's many transgressions. Imagine their surprise, however, when Shirley dropped a little bomb.

"How do you know he is? Swishy? I mean, Shirley, Ron don't seem that way to me?"

"Really, Shirley. I've heard some things about him and they sure don't sound that w-a-y."

"You haven't caught him...with, you know, have you?"

"I heard he used to spend a lot of time with that Ruby Danvers over to Slice 'Em Thins . . . before he knew you, of course, but I never in my wildest dreams would've thought that."

"He doesn't watch those Richard Simmons workout videos, does he?"

She shook her head.

"He's not what you might call a florist, Shirley."

"Or a fashion designer."

"Well," she stammered. "It's just that . . . It's . . . I used to think it was all about the plane. But lately, he's gotten really . . . He's acted really strange. And he gets phone calls. And he has some specially marked videos, and they're, well, there are groups involved. And he does seem to spend a lot of time with that new guy at work—you know, the one who lives over to Torrey. We all know there's something not quite right about him, something quest-ion-able . . ." She made the limp-wristed gesture.

"Shirley!"

"The Bishop told me he thought Ron might have those inclinations, probably was, you know, too—says it goes

back to Boy Scout camp and some experiences—that’s what he calls them, experiences, that him and Ron had. It sounds . . . I mean, far-fetched . . . to me. But I believe it.”

“Then there’s those phone calls. He’s in this rotten mood until he gets a jingle from that new guy at work. Then he lightens up, just like that. Then he leaves. He goes over to Torrey. And then he comes back, and, well, you know . . . I do think it’s because of the new guy. Not going to say this or that, only that it’s wrong.”

They all agreed that she deserved better. They also agreed on a plan.

FOR DAYS, WEEKS, Ron would stop on his rounds and look into ravines. Nothing. He would spend Saturday morning walking the marshes, looking for his plane. He’d drive out on the Awapa with a twelve-pack and see nothing but golden eagles circling, a few jackrabbits scampering, and horned toads poised and ready to squirt blood out of their eyes when he got out to get a closer look at the lay of land.

For his birthday, Ron received a bottle of cologne, some videos (to be unwrapped only in her presence), and a Speedo swimming suit from Shirley. Also a ten-part set of videos from Papa Olaf, *The History of Flight*.

Ron was not the type to talk about regrets. Even when he talked about his mom, and missing her, there was a note of finality to it that bothered Shirley. “Shouldn’t’ve happened, but it did. Goshdangit, but it did. And that’s about it, Shirley.” She’d seen him cry, and even Papa Olaf tear up, with a kind of angry resignation, talking about Renee.

There were other regrets they didn’t talk about, mainly about Crystal Jackson. She’d dumped Ron, everyone knew that. And Shirley had ended up with Blake Rasmussen—who’d dumped her. They wouldn’t have ended up together only because they both got dumped, could they have? There was a lot more than that, or at least there used to be.

It was good to talk about regrets if not to dwell on them. Dwelling on them was wrong, but admitting that you had them, that was just taking care of business. Everyone had regrets. They were just part of living—not dwelling on them, but admitting to it.

Regrets were one thing. But when she got down to it, she had to wonder how could she be married to someone who missed a dumb plane? And he did, too. More than his mom. More than her. It was obvious. There were photographs of her in the garage. Stupid Miss Lana, gone and good riddance. How was she supposed to talk to Ron about it? It was so plainly ridiculous. “Oh Ron, I’m so sorry about what happened. I’m so sorry that you spent half a year on that idiotic contraption that got taken up to heaven because it was just too good for the earth . . .”

WHILE MOST EVERYONE in Bicknell knew that the Larsens’ marriage was in trouble and knew the reasons why, the next unexpected move came from Shirley. One brisk

fall Sunday after church, where she had been touched by a missionary homecoming story of the conversion of a poor native family to the ways of the gospel. The family had lived on the shores of Lake Titicaca and had twelve children and no father, for he had been killed in a mining accident, and how through the power of faith they had been able to overcome even this terrible adversity and learn to love the Lord. And how the missionary, a lanky Blackburn kid named Kyled, pronounced ‘Clyde,’ had grown to love the Peruvian people, and testified of the truthfulness of the one true church and its prophets.

After church, Shirley dressed her rat terrier Angel in some baby things tearfully borrowed from her trousseau and then placed Angel in her perambulator, which Nola had saved for the hopeful day when the Larsens would give body to a spirit child and have one of their own. Shirley then paraded Angel in the baby carriage up and down the gravelly Bicknell streets, humming and sometimes even singing a number of hymns, including, “The Lord is My Light” and “The Spirit of God Like a Fire Is Burning.”

Ron, who had been watching a football game at one of the gang’s, received a bustle of phone calls and updates. Disgusted, he grabbed the rest of his twelve-pack and steered his rig out toward the Awapa, aiming to drive all the way to Antimony if he had to. Maybe even Circleville. The lonely Parker Range at sunset reminded him of Miss Lana. And Miss Lana led to Shirley. And Shirley led him to a dark place.

He stood on the rim at sunset. Hell, it was thousands of feet right there, thousands of feet of empty space, on the west face of the Parker. He imagined how it might feel to fall at 120 miles per hour, as fast as he could fall without wings, so that the landing would be suddenly quick and busting up and nothing but thud and squish and silence. He stood facing it and wondering, really, what was the point of going on?

The trouble was, he hated endings. Is this the way he wanted to be remembered?

Miss Lana was gone. He’d held her in his arms and she had gone. He could hold Shirley, sure, but he couldn’t control her, couldn’t make her feel the way he felt right now, couldn’t get her to see things his way, either.

Love her? Did he really care for her? Part of him wanted just to be left alone, to disappear like grass under thick-falling snow. The valley below darkened. Part of him wasn’t sure he still loved her, but he did. Alone but not that alone. Loved having her around, usually. Liked . . . Love? Was it love? Was she more like a sister? Was there something wrong with that? He’d never had a sister but liked the idea. He’d grown accustomed to her, sure. What did he really want? Not to be scolded. What did she really want? Was it kids? Kids would be okay. Maybe they should try again. Maybe they should talk about a few things.

A few hours later, remorse and no beer had gotten the best of him. He drove back to town, thinking of all the good make-up scenes they had shared. Sometimes it took a little

bit out on the extreme to bring things right again.

Somehow all his good intentions came out as, “What in the hell are you trying to do, ruin me in this town?”

“What did you say, Ron Larsen?”

“Shirley, you took that stupid little dog of yours around in a baby carriage. A baby carriage, Shirley, and people think I’m nuts. I know you did, so don’t try to deny it, and by the way, just what the hell is wrong with you?”

“With me. With me. With me? With me! With me, oh you are a good one, Ron Larsen. A real gem. What’s wrong with me? With me? You are the one who would rather spend his time with a stupid airplane or watching your stupid videos or drinking, Ron Larsen, and you are drinking all the time, and spending time with the lowest of the low, and hunting, and never really doing the things that a good husband should be doing, and who knows what else, because when you get that far away from me, you are really far away from me, and is that really what you want, and is that really the way you want to treat me, Ron, and I’m the one who let you in and said that you could be with me and no other, and you flitting around to other nests, when you could be with your wife who loves you or who at least used to love you.”

“Used to love me? What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I don’t have any respect for you, Ron Larsen, and I happen to know about your secret life.”

“My secret life?”

“Yes, your secret life.”

With such a dramatic opening, it should come as no surprise that Shirley Larsen then began to make quite an involved list of her complaints, made far more lengthy by the fact that she had kept all this inside for so long. In psychology this is called stockpiling, and she had about ten years to get through.

Ron hardened his heart and mind against what she was saying, but she did begin to wear him down. True, he had been distracted; there could be no question of that. True, he did ignore her, sometimes even belittled her in front of the gang. True, regarding the list of unfinished projects, he did admit that he often lost interest in things—including her, yes, he was willing to admit, even her—and this took the better part of an hour. Yes, he was willing to admit that he might have a drinking problem and that his drinking did get in the way of their marriage, and that it was his fault not hers. But when she began to question his fondness for birding, when she ridiculed Miss Lana, and then when she probed using the many tools Boyd Allred had lent her, especially about the new guy and those puzzling “experiences” at Boy Scout camp, well, Ron Larsen knew when he had had enough.

A door slammed loud as a pistol shot, another swirling drive out on the Awapa.

Papa Olaf heard the door slam. He hoped that it was only love, the echo of love.

Although Shirley had been frightened by his response and she felt guilty that it had taken so long for it all to come

out, she prayed for two things. First, that Ron would come back to her. Second, that he would see that she was right.

And she was. He finally came back in a mood to make up, make up without talking too much about it. There would be time for that later. Right now they needed to dance around their history.

She scolded him for smoking, listed a number of his shortcomings—and even made a list of her own. They vowed to try to work it out. They both vowed to do things better. She let him tie her up again—playfully, with the leg-gings.

Their lovemaking was passionate and real. She felt things she hadn’t in years. He remembered what had messed up his mind all those years before. Pictures of French dancers in leggings.

It was just the way it should have been. Shirley liked a little restraint. Ron liked to be in charge in that department.

Ten years. Maybe sometimes it takes ten years to make things right. Shirley, heaven waits for you.

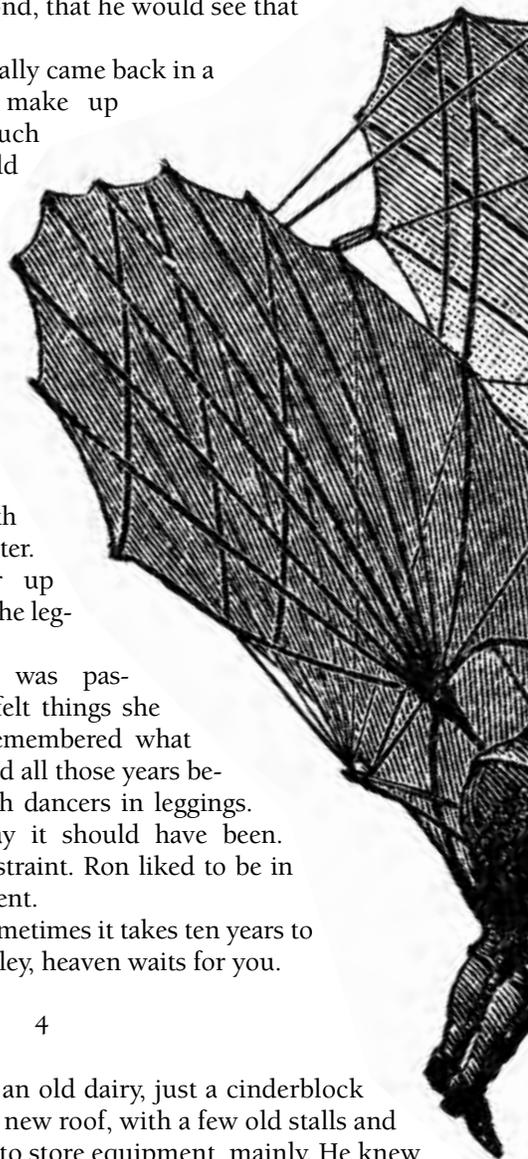
4

PAPA OLAF OWNED an old dairy, just a cinderblock building that needed a new roof, with a few old stalls and stanchions. He used it to store equipment, mainly. He knew better than to deliver Ron’s present in Shirley’s garage. Several thousand dollars worth of stuff in boxes and crates—a kit for an ultra light, a personal aircraft, a snowmobile with wings. The line back that had led from Sputnik to the B-17 now pointed to the beginning: to Orville and Wilbur Wright, and thence to Leonardo’s contraptions, to the purity of the original inspiration but with a technological twist.

The idea grew on Ron Larsen. His mind was a magpie nest. Every day brought a few more sticks, another layer.

As he worked, he listened. “Who thought the Wright brothers stood a snowball’s chance in hell? And who were they? Bicycle mechanics, son. Bicycle mechanics. But dreamers, boy. Dreamers . . . Kitty Hawk. You know how long the first flight lasted?”

Of course he knew. He’d seen it on “History of Flight” a hundred times and more. “A minute. Only a minute and six seconds, but a minute that changed the world.”





SHIRLEY

PRAYED FOR TWO THINGS. FIRST, THAT RON WOULD COME BACK TO HER. SECOND, THAT HE WOULD SEE THAT SHE WAS RIGHT.

well: Ron no longer saw Bicknell. Instead of Bicknell, he now saw the fog-thick plains of Lombardy. Lombardy, Italy. And his mind was filled with stripped-down flying machines, and the movements and wing-sound of birds.

He was in danger of losing his job, sick days and lame excuses building up like mounds of swallow guano beneath the eaves where they roosted. There were threatening calls from his superiors in Loa.

Concentrating on all the tasks and preparation, there was no time to think of the consequences or implications.

That's how it was with astronauts, with pilots. Get lost in the details of routine and thereby ignore the obvious—for example, that you were strapped to a cylinder with enough whoomph in it to flatten a fair-sized city.

All the work, all the effort. He knew he should have talked about it with Shirley, and there were many times when he almost had, but in the end that seemed like going back, and going back to where he really had no purpose in his life. And once you sample certain delights, take certain steps, when you realize that Crystal Jackson wasn't worth half the woe she'd caused him in high school, and Shirley, Shirley was bars on the windows, and a little tub full of water, a tray full of seeds that needed filling, and a piece of bone to sharpen his beak on, once you reach a certain point, there is no turning back. No sir.

5

SHIRLEY AND BROTHER Allred employed informants to discover just what was going on at Papa Olaf's dairy. A list was made and checked. The new guy from work came out there too, often, apparently when Ron was alone. Homosexuality was a choice and Ron Larsen had chosen it, had chosen it over his wife, his unborn children, and his earthly duties.

Wasn't Leonardo da Vinci a notorious sodomite? Hadn't he been exiled from Florence for taking indecent liberties with other boys? Later, didn't he keep a curly-headed youth with him, a catamite whom he called Salai, little devil?

Hadn't Ron taken to wearing a Leonardoesque hat, a kind of maroon pillbox beret? To be sure Ron identified with the painter of the *Virgin of the Rocks* in this sense as

THE ULTRA LIGHT.

They gathered at the Wayne Wonderland Airport.

Showmanship that Ron had secretly worked to master was something Papa Olaf had always hoped to foster in his boy. Without showmanship, without spectacle, there just

wasn't any point to it. Papa Olaf knew he'd done his work right. There's endurance, and there's endurance with embellishments.

Papa Olaf thought of Renee and felt a surging mixture of sadness and joy. She would have approved of his efforts. Maybe not approved in specific terms, no, but approved it in general. Death doesn't leave you with choices. Papa Olaf had had both good and bad days beneath the goddamned sun, and this was certainly a good one.

Ron Larsen stood at the verge in a leather jacket, with a white scarf, throw-back goggles, jodhpurs, and a cheroot held rakishly in the teeth. He tipped his hat to his dad. He then acknowledged the gang with hammy flourishes and a few swashbuckling pulls of the bottle of remarkably fine tequila.

The gang joshed and cajoled. They envied Ron suddenly, for they realized that they had just been hangers-on. They wished they'd showed half his daring. This was a real plane now, and he was going to fly it. Circle it around the valley and bring it back in. Soar like a bird and return safely to the earth. Their own trucks seemed like Hot Wheels. His knee boots were black and shiny; their boots were mud-caked and old.

Ron hugged his dad and felt him slip something into his jacket pocket. "That'll hold you for a while, Son."

Inspections: passed, checked, re-checked. The strapping in: both terrifying and strangely exciting. The vibrating whine of the two-stroke motor. The taxi-ing up and down. Waving to the crowd.

Ron checked the flaps and wires, pulleys and stabilizers, struts and wings for the twentieth time. He throttled up, and the plane just shook with it. He pushed the brake lever forward, and engaged the clutch wheel. The runway blurred past. He brought the stick toward him and watched the tarmac fall beneath his feet. Like the first foray from the nest, Ron was in the air.

Ron imagined he heard cheers, but he couldn't have for the drone of the motor, the rush of the wind.

The airstrip shrank below him. His dad, the gang waving like dark clumps of bunch grass. Nothing but air below him, sky above.

It glowed in sapphire and indigo. Nine hundred feet off the deck, he banked again and leveled. It was at that point he most clearly perceived the beating of wings. And he was one with them. Alone with the motor and frame and struts and nylon wings. No past, no future, just open air and movement.

The fuel gauge looked good, and the air was chilly as he framed himself between the orange cliffs of Sunglow, rose boldly against the sun, then leveled again, turned slowly, and found good bearing S-S-W, aiming for the big wide gap between the Timbered Knolls.

To say there was no turning back was to say that there was not fog on the plains of Lombardy. It settled thick and gray among the poplars. He smelled the rich waft of wet leaves, cattle, basil and thyme, Salai and pine wood.

If he ran out of fuel, hell, this bird was made to glide and

coast. He saw antelope on the Awapa that looked like striped ants. Beyond the guard station, between the Knolls, he banked as he reached nine thousand feet, turned west, and sailed over a gray-green wasteland toward the Parker Rim.

The updraft roaring off the mammoth west face rocketed him up like an elevator in a skyscraper. The G-forces pummeled him like the concussion he'd gotten in football. He gasped for breath and saw streaks and streamers. Struts wobbled and zinged, fabric sang, and the motor skipped, too much oxygen suddenly mixed in with the oil and fuel.

SHIRLEY MOVED BACK in with Nola at Annabella. She would keep herself busy. Maybe the return would be good. Of course it would. Leave time for things to settle. Her former life was over. Ron was gone. Ron was gone, and she needed some time. There was no closure. She had to endure a multitude of I-told-you-sos and Oh-poor-Shirley, you-can-stills. Yet, she was ready to start again. Start again at thirty. All right, thirty-one. Thirty-one was not sixty. Ron had left her. Ron had to be dead. There was no real closure. She would find hidden strength. She deserved to achieve happiness. She had known much sorrow. She could wait. She knew for what, and Nola would never have to know.

Shirley Larsen stared out at the dingy winter sky. She listened to old-school country turned up loud—Tanya Tucker and Marty Robbins and Merle Haggard. A lot of what had happened just plain wasn't right. She had a stake in it, a share, but people make choices. People make choices, and he had made his. He had made his, and she would make hers. She looked outside and steeled herself. She would push on—she knew she could. She would push on just as her ancestors had pushed across the Great Plains, over the Rocky Mountains and even unto the Promised Land.

She would endure. She looked at the sky, and she looked at the birds.

She waited for the call from Bicknell. She knew Boyd meant it. Even if it was complicated and took some time, it would be worth it. If he could keep his promises during the time of testing, then she could keep hers. She had lived in sorrow with Ron Larsen; she knew she could live the Principle, for the Principle was ordained and sacred. She had felt its power. If things worked out in a certain way, it might not even come to that.

PAPA OLAF WAS certain Ron would return, someday soon. He'd just drift into town like a well-traveled boomerang, and he kept his eyes low like the sun on the blue-gray Awapa winter horizon, watching, waiting for the speck to grow larger.

He'd been over to Circleville and joined up with the Wild Bunch.

He'd been down to Argentina and ridden through the pampas.

No, he'd come back with Elvis, and with Sundance, and with Etta Place in tow. Hell, it wasn't that far from Bolivia to Bicknell. Not these days.