

Learning to Fly

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I HAD NO FEAR of flying when I matriculated at Yale but a very considerable fear of my father's learning that I had taken up a sport that, in 1946, he was unprepared to concede was anything more than rank technological presumption, fit only for daredevils. It turned out that several of my co-conspirators had fathers with similar prejudices, so that when our little syndicate was formed, we all agreed that communications to each other on the subject of our surreptitious hobby would go forward discreetly, lest they be intercepted. During the Christmas holidays, it was my duty to send out the accrued bills from the little grass-strip airport at Bethany where we lodged *Alexander's Horse* (as we called the little Er-coupe), and I realized, envelope in hand, I could not remember whether T. Leroy Morgan, one of the six partners, was a junior. With a name like that, I felt he must surely be a junior—was there any other excuse? On the other hand, if I wrote "Jr." after this name and my friend was in fact the "III," then his father would open the letter. I assumed his father must be formidable, since who else would live at One Quincy Street, Chevy Chase, Maryland?

So, to play it safe, I addressed the letter to: "T. Leroy Morgan—the one who goes to Yale, One Quincy Street, Chevy Chase, Maryland." It happened that, at the breakfast table distributing the mail among the family, Mr. Morgan *père* displayed an imperious curiosity about the contents of a letter so manifestly intended to be seen only by his son.

I will contract the suspense and say that in no time at all, the word passed around a circle of fathers, reaching my own. Whenever my father was faced with rank transgression by any of his ten children, he replied to it in one of two ways, sometimes both. His first line of attack would be to announce that the child could not afford whatever it was my father disapproved. He tried that for an entire year in his running war against cigarettes, but the effect was ruined when we all saw

The Grapes of Wrath and Henry Fonda, between heaves of hunger, kept smoking. His second line of attack would be to ignore the delinquency, pretending it simply did not exist. Thus one of my brothers, who hated to practice the piano, was relieved from ever having to play it again by the simple expedient of being held up by my father in public discussions of the matter as the most exemplary pianist in the family.

I received a brisk memorandum (his reproachful communications were normally rendered in that mode) advising me that he had "learned" that I was "flying an airplane" at college, and that the distractions to my academic career quite apart, I clearly could not afford such an extravagance. One didn't argue with Father, who in any case would never return to the subject except in a vague, sarcastic way. Three years later, he would write my prospective father-in-law, "You will find it very easy to entertain Bill when he visits you. You need only provide him with a horse, a yacht or an airplane."

And so for the few months of our joint venture, we continued to pass around the bills, like tablets in pre-Christian Rome. They were not, by current standards, frightening. Our capital was \$1,800—\$300 apiece. We paid that exactly for the second-hand airplane. We decided, after getting quotations from the insurance companies, to insure ourselves, subject to a \$300 deductible payable by the offending partner. Anyone using the plane would pay his own gas, oil and instructor. All capital improvements would have to be approved unanimously. Anybody could sell his one-sixth interest to anyone at any time. Reservations to use the airplane would be filed with the secretary of the *Yale Daily News*. These, we satisfied ourselves, were surely the most informal articles of association in modern history, though I suppose it is appropriate to add that the association was one of the briefest in history.

I was off to a very bad start. My experience was akin to arriving at a casino for the first time at age twenty and winning a dozen straight passes at the crap table. When Bob Kraut, my instructor—a dour, hungry ex-army pilot, ex-mechanic, owner of the starveling little airport, who would sell you anything from a new airplane to a Milky Way—took me up for an hour's instruction, I could not believe how easy it all was. I

remember it to this day: check the oil, check the gas, turn your wheel and check ailerons, pull and check elevator. Run your engine at 1,500 rpm, check one magneto, then the second, then back to both. Then gun her up to 2,250. Then exercise the knob that said "carburetor heat." Then head into the wind (or as close as possible at the single-strip field), push the throttle all the way forward, roll down the strip, when you reach sixty miles per hour ease the wheel back, and after the plane lifts off, push the wheel forward to level until you reach eighty mph. Then adjust your trim tab to maintain a speed of eighty mph. Rise to 600 feet on your course, then turn left until you get to 800 feet. Then do anything you want.

Landing? Go back to approximately where you were when you hit 800 feet and proceed downwind twice the length of the field while descending to 600 feet. Then turn left descending to 400 feet. (I forgot something: you should pull out your carburetor heat when you begin your descent.) Then turn in toward the field, reducing your throttle to idling speed, coast down, glance sideways—which helps perspective—don't let your speed fall under eighty mph till you are over the field, then keep easing the wheel back until your tires touch down, at which point *immediately* set your nose-wheel right down; Ercoupes, you see, had no separate rudders, the wheel incorporating that function—a nice advantage except that you cannot cope easily with crosswind landings.

The first lesson consumed an hour, the second a half hour, and that very night I was speaking to a forlorn junior who had been a pilot during the war and grieved greatly that he could not be the following day at dinner with his inamorata in Boston. Why could he not? Because his car wasn't working, and no train would get him up in time, since he could not leave until after lunch. I found myself saying, as though I were P. G. Wodehouse himself, "Why my dear friend, grieve no more. I shall fly you to Boston."

It was all very well for my friend, who with 2,000 hours' flying, navigated us expertly to Boston, landed the airplane and waved me a happy good-bye. I was left at Boston Air-

port, headed back to Bethany, Connecticut, never having soloed and having flown a total of three times.

Well, the only thing to do was to proceed. I remembered that the plane came equipped with a radio of sorts and that my friend had exchanged arcane observations and sentiments with the tower coming in, so as I sashayed to the end of the runway, I flipped the switch—and found myself tuned in to an episode of “Life Can Be Beautiful.” I truly didn’t know how to account for this, and I remember even thinking fleetingly that when the traffic was light, perhaps the tower entertained area traffic by wiring it in to the controller’s favorite program. This bizarre thought I managed to overcome, but it was too late to stop and fiddle with a radio I hadn’t been instructed in the use of, so I went through my little motions, looked about to see that I wasn’t in anybody’s way, and zoomed off.

I was flying not exactly contentedly that bright autumn day. I felt a little lonely, and a little apprehensive, though I did not know exactly why. I was past Providence, Rhode Island, when suddenly my heart began to ice up as I recognized that either I was quickly going blind or the sun was going down. I looked at my watch. We should have another hour and a half of light! Ah so, except that I had neglected to account for the switch overnight away from daylight saving time. I had put forward my watch dutifully at about midnight, but today I thought in terms of light until about 7 P.M., same as yesterday. I looked at the air chart, so awfully cluttered and concentrated by comparison with those lovely, descriptive, onomatopoeic ocean charts you can read as easily as a comic book. I discerned that the New York, New Haven & Hartford railroad tracks passed within a few hundred yards of the airport at Groton. I descended, lower and lower, as the white began to fade, as from an overexposed negative soaking up developing solution. By the time I reached Groton, I was flying at 100 feet, and when I spotted the lights on the runway for the airfield, I was as grateful as if, coming up from the asphyxiative depths, I had reached oxygen.

I approached the field, did the ritual turns and landed without difficulty—my first, exhilarating solo landing; my

first night landing; on the whole, the culmination of my most egregious stupidity. But there we were: plane and pilot, intact. I hitchhiked to the station, waited for a train, and by 10 o'clock was sitting at a bar in New Haven, chatting with my roommate about this and that. I never gave a thought to Mr. Kraut.

I have been awakened by angry voices, but by none to equal Robert Kraut's the following morning. While hauling the plane from the hangar, an assistant at the airfield had overheard me conversing excitedly with my friend on my impending solo flight from Boston to New York. In the internalizing tradition of New England, he had said nothing to me about my projected violation of the law. But he spoke to his boss about it later in the afternoon, who exploded with rage and apprehension. Kraut called the tower at Boston, which told of an Ercoupe having landed and then taken off at 4:07, without communication with the tower. Kraut calculated that I would arrive in the Bethany area in total darkness and thereupon began frantically collecting friends and passersby, who ringed the field with their headlights, providing a workmanlike illumination of a country strip. Then they waited. And waited. Finally, at about 10, Kraut knew I must be out of fuel and, therefore, on the ground somewhere other than at Bethany. Whether alive or dead, no one could say, but at least, Kraut growled into the telephone, he had the pleasure of *hoping* I was dead. *Why hadn't I called him?* I explained, lamely, that I did not know he even knew about my flight let alone that he thought to provide for my safe return. He consoled himself by itemizing lasciviously all the extra charges he intended to put on my bill for his exertions and those of his friends, which charges the executive committee of *Alexander's Horse Associates* voted unanimously and without extensive discussion would be paid exclusively by me.

I got my clearance to solo; and, twenty flying hours later, my license to fly other people. I am compelled to admit that I cheated a little in logging those twenty hours, giving the odd half-hour's flight in the benefit of the doubt, listing it at one hour, and I feel bad about this. But I did achieve a limited proficiency, and I would often go out to the field and take up

a friend for a jaunty half-hour or so in my little silver monoplane, though I never felt confident enough to do any serious cross-country work, having no serviceable radio.

I remember two experiences before the final episode. In the early spring I invited aboard a classmate, a seasoned navy veteran pilot. We roared off the lumpy field under an overcast that the mechanic on duty assured us was 1,200 feet high. It wasn't. The Bethany airport is 700 feet above sea level, and at 1,000 feet, we were entirely enveloped in cloud. I had never experienced such a thing, and the sensation was terrifying, robbing you, in an instant, of all the relevant coordinates of normal life, including any sense of what is up and down. We would need, I calculated, to maintain altitude and fly south until we figured ourselves well over Long Island Sound. Then turn east and descend steadily, until we broke out unencumbered by New England foothills; then crawl over to the New Haven airport, which is at sea level. I willingly gave over the controls to my friend Ray, who assumed them with great competence as we began our maneuver. Then suddenly there was a hole in the clouds, and he dove for it, swooping into the Bethany strip, landing not more than three minutes after our departure. I stayed scared after that one and resolved never again to risk flying in overcast.

Then there was the bright spring day with the lazy-summer temperature. My exams, it happened, were banked during the first two days of a ten-day exam period. In between I did not sleep but did take Benzedrine. Walking out of the final exam at five the second afternoon, numb with fatigue and elation, I was wild with liberty, and I knew I must stretch my limbs in the sky. So I drove out to Bethany, pulled out *Alexander's Horse* and zoomed off by myself, heading toward downtown New Haven and climbing to 4,000 invigorating feet. There I fell asleep.

I have ever since understood what they mean when they write about the titanic intellectual-muscular energy required to keep one's eyes open when they are set on closing. What happened was that the drug had suddenly worn off, and the biological imperative was asserting itself with vindictive adamance. It was, curiously, only after I landed that I found it relatively easy to summon the adrenalin to stay awake for

long enough to make it back to my bedroom. In the tortured fifteen minutes in the air, my eyes closed a dozen times between the moment I discovered myself asleep and the moment I landed. It is safer to learn these things about the human body aboard a sailboat than an airplane. Boats can be dangerous, but they don't often sink when you go to sleep at the wheel.

My final flight, like so many others, was propelled by a certain mental fog. My best friend at Yale became engaged to my favorite sister. All my siblings had met Brent, save my poor sister Maureen, cloistered at the Ethel Walker School, in Simsbury, Connecticut. I would instantly remedy that, and I wrote my sister, age fifteen, telling her to send a map of the huge lawn that rolls out from the school (which I had many times seen while attending various graduations of older sisters). It arrived by return mail—on all accounts the most nonchalant map in the history of cartography. At the east end, she had drawn vertical lines marked “trees.” Running parallel from the top and bottom of that line to the west were two more lines, also marked “trees.” At the extreme left end of the paper she had marked “main schoolhouse.” Armed with that map and my future brother-in-law, I set out on a bright spring afternoon for Simsbury, which was about an hour's flight away.

I found the school and flew around it a couple of times with a creeping agitation. My sister having advised her classmates of my impending arrival, the entire school was out on the lawn, and, when they spotted us, their great cheer reached us through the roar of the little engine. The trees at the east side happened to be the tallest trees this side of the California redwoods. I buzzed them a time or two. Could they really be *that* tall? I estimated them at a couple hundred feet. That meant I would have to come over them, then drop very sharply, because a normal landing approach would have had me three-quarters down the length of the lawn before touch-down. “Well,” I said to my stoical friend, “what do you say?” Fortunately, he knew nothing about flying.

I was terribly proud of the way I executed it all, and I wished Mr. Kraut had been there to admire the deftness with which I managed to sink down after skimming the treetops,

touching down on the lawn as though it were an eggshell. I looked triumphantly over to Brent as our speed reduced to thirty mph. The very next glimpse I had of him was, so to speak, upsidedownsideways. We hit a drainage ditch, unmarked by my sister, that traversed the lawn. The problem now was quite straightforward. The aircraft was nosed down absolutely vertical into the ditch, into which we had perfect visibility. We were held by our seat belts, without which our heads would be playing the role of our feet. We were there at least a full minute before the girls came. I am not sure I recall the conversation exactly, but it was on the order of:

"Are we alive?"

"I think so."

"What happened?"

"Ditch."

"Why did you run into it?"

"Very funny."

"Well, why didn't you fly over it?"

"We had landed. We were just braking down."

But the girls, with high good humor, giggles and exertion, managed to pry us out. We dusted ourselves off outside the vertical plane, attempted languidly to assert our dignity, and were greeted most politely by the headmistress, who said she had tea ready in anticipation of our arrival. We walked sedately up the lawn to her living room, accompanied by Maureen and two roommates. The talk was of spring, Yale, summer plans, the Attlee Government and General MacArthur, but Maureen and her friends would, every now and then, emit uncontrollable giggles, which we manfully ignored. It all went moderately well under the circumstances until the knock on the door. An assistant to the headmistress arrived, to ask whether her guests had any use for—"this," and she held forth *Alexander's Horse's* propeller or, rather, most of the propeller. I told her thank you very much, but broken propellers were not of any particular use to anyone, and she was free to discard it.

Eventually we left, having arranged by telephone with Mr. Kraut to come and fetch the corpse at his convenience. We returned to New Haven by bus. Brent, who had a good book along, did not seem terribly surprised, even after I assured

him that most of my airplane rides out of Bethany were round trips.

Oh, the sadness of the ending. The plane was barely restored when, during a lesson, one of my partners was pleased by hearing his instructor say as they approached the strip for a landing, "You're hot!" My friend figured, in the idiom of the day, that this meant he was proceeding splendidly, so he nosed the ship on down, crashing it quite completely. As he later explained, what reason did he have to know that, in the jargon of the trade, to say you were "hot" meant, "You're going too fast"? He had a point. The estimate to repair *Alexander's Horse* was an uncanny \$1,800—exactly what we had paid for it. Mournfully, we decided to let her rest, selling the carcass for \$100. Father was right, as usual. I couldn't afford to fly.