

WINGING IT

Two brothers scanned the cold front stalled in the northeast. Wind stung their cheeks, they tasted briny grit. Not promising at all, and yet their blood was humming yes! Their vision had evolved beyond the wax and feather stage, the Icaros infection now afire in a traveling cleric's gangling sons.

They stood on a continental splinter that spared North Carolina's coast the sea's punishment. Some of the natives claimed it was where Neptune's private aviary wintered and bred. Today a new breed waited for its fledging time, no longer a cold pretender but an impatient bird, warm-blooded thirst for fuel in its craw.

"What d'you think?" Wilbur's eyes stayed on the clouds.

The wind increased as Orville thought of past debacles-- the mistakes of men he held in awe--who knew much more than he, and yet they clung to principles now proven false if he could dare believe his own findings. He thought how Wilbur's first box made the Outer Bankers laugh: a kite, a toy designed to lift a man and let him guide it down.

Then came a larger one. They set it free-- without lines to their grounded hands-- a managed arch responsive to their afterthought of rudder and shifting body weight. Its shallow glide

was like a petrel's outspread, unflapped wings, its shadow low, sometimes skewed, its landing nothing more than an ungainly stall.

Orville remembered how the wind twanged the wires and ribs, honing their expertise on subtleties of air and its sudden whims. And he remembered the Bankers' snickers.

"Good lads but daft," they often said as they winked at cronies, and watched the brothers sweat two summers on the beach.

One day a wizened fisherman warned: "You Wright boys had your fun. Y'sailed on air like seamen rolling combers in a skiff. It's high time you set your minds on more solid things back home."

And in their cluttered shop when bicycles bored them and flight seemed doomed, an artist's misbegotten farce, those words added more drag on Orville's hope. Yet it was he, the admitted, uncured romanticist, who would spark the re-ignition of them both. "Let's us 'boys' show them how!"

Today his optimism soared again. In spite of Wilbur's big Ohio frown.

"Too much weather up there. Guess we'd better wait," Wilbur said finally.

"--No! You asked what I think. I think we should try it." Orville raised his brows and made half a grin.

The coast guard station men came out to help as usual, no longer snickerers but not convinced. So many things had gone wrong, so many times--the shapes, the shafts, the theories of lift.

Just yesterday the half-tamed hawk had failed when the guards

helped pulley Flyer up to crown Kill Devil Hill--and Orville's hand lay on his dream, its substance taut and sound, a-thrum with life. He was confident they had mastered the secrets of wing warp and stability-- except the plane blundered down and broke a skid.

Today with most of the gawkers gone, unwilling to risk a chill watching another dismal performance-- today-- today could unchain history from gravity, could free man from the limits of his surface.

Wilbur was grinning now.

Fresh winds concaved the dunes as Orville prayed, an upturned-head, unclosed-eyes petition as Wilbur yanked on his cap and hurried up the strand where Flyer waited.

They warmed the bird. Repaired, improved from yesterday's attempt, it trembled, eager to play its starring role, a hulking hawk with wings of forty feet.

Old Bankers picked their teeth and mended nets. It was a biscuit and fish stew day, good for little else, they said among themselves. Some talked of winter tides and rain. Some scratched and dozed.

Out on its tracks, the hawk was intent on lifting its own weight with a man along to hold it true. Orville threaded himself between wing ligaments to lie on his belly, his leanness part of Flyer's form. He heard the species growl, felt it in his bones as it strained to be loosed upwind.

The hybrid, flesh and fabric, wire and oil and metal, left its wooden rails and climbed its element as startled gulls veered from

the creature's path. And high as they fled, cheers went higher still. Eleven seconds-- twelve! Amid applause the floating apparition traded sky for sand again. But seconds were enough.

Orville's laughter was swallowed by the wind. He saw his brother running to meet the clumsy crate he rode--to take his turn to keep the noisy dream aloft, to inhale its fumes, extend its reach, exceed the time.

Twice each, the brothers broke an earthly law. Each test was higher and longer than the one before. At last, for almost a minute, Flyer flew, vindicating its design and its name. It claimed the air and arced the emptiness, its altitude eight-hundred-fifty feet for half a mile. A whole lifetime of heights above the ancient shore of Hatteras.

And as the omen rose for the last time that early winter day above the tossed-up caps and shouts of guardsmen, the Dayton "boy" on the ground squinted at the dream he pushed so high. And somehow knew the here below would never be the same.



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