

The Spinning Line

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In the airstrip diner, Dan tries to instill a proper fear of clouds.

“I know and the FAA knows that once you have your pilot’s license, you’re going to try and push the weather.”

From our booth at the window I can see out to the edge of the airfield, where two mammoth Constellations, retired, look forlornly out at the horizon.

“You don’t need to know how to fly by instruments alone. But I do need to make sure you’re going to be all right when on the gauges.”

His menu lies untouched in front of him as he practices spinning a new pair of sunglasses on his finger. Two spins, stop, and flick—properly executed, the maneuver ends with the sunglasses ready to slide onto his face. He folds them and tries again.

“Now, what are the two gauges you need to stay level when you have no visibility?”

“The turn coordinator and the airspeed indicator,” I answer promptly. I never give any Dan shit with my replies and I try not to make him wait too much, either. At 39, he’s not so much older that I can’t talk to him casually. We think of each other as friends on the ground. But however careless we may be

talking trade in the diner, he's an airline pilot, my dream job, and that I take seriously.

“Turn coordinator and airspeed indicator,” Dan repeats. “The seat of your pants is not a gauge. Unless it's planted firmly on the ground, it provides no navigational aid. Good pilots aren't cocky, Ray. They're cool.”

Having just perfected the sunglasses trick, he beams from under wide lens with a boyish grin. Ironically, his are knock-off aviators, the tear-drop shape even more pronounced, the thin metal frame a garish green-gold, and the bridge some weird, woodgrain thing. I have to admit, he wears it well.

“No one is sure how some birds retain their sense of direction while deep in a cloud,” Dan continues. “Intuitively, you figure it must just enter the cloud flying level and keep steady by feeling a turn. Likewise, you notice you're speeding up in an overcast and pull the nose up a little, figuring that you're keeping it steady by the feeling in the seat of your pants. But in a banked turn, it always feels like gravity is pulling toward the floor of the cockpit, so you don't even realize your wings have dipped a little to the side. Instead of pulling up, you're actually slipping into a spiral, and steepening the dive the more you try to compensate.

“Your intuition simply doesn't apply. So birds may have developed the same solution for the problem we have: gyroscopic inertia.” He reaches into his open shirt to pull out a chain, and with a little push swings it over the table, from his end to mine.

“The preservation of angular momentum. Inertia. You may have learned this stuff in school. Given a little drive, the swinging pendulum, like a bird’s wing, will resist changes to its orientation.”

Looking very hard at the pendant I start to feel like its going side to side. But I might be looking at it too hard.

“This is the principle behind gyroscopes, like the one you have in your instrumentation. And the gyroscope is how your turn coordinator shows you how to fly straight, without visual cues, without your sense of direction, without any chance of jamming, self-contained.”

The pendant is definitely swinging in a different plane now. Maybe it’s Dan’s hands, but the little silver monkey on the chain has started swinging almost perpendicular from how it started.

“So you’re asking yourself, 'Then why’s this chain swinging from right to left? It was going back and forth just a minute ago, when you started in on that angular momentum stuff.' And the reason is," Dan says, his voice rising, "the earth has been revolving since then, but the chain, *the chain*, has stayed on course.”

“Ah, yes, I got it,” I say, feeling that people must be beginning to stare.

For dramatic effect, Dan leaves the chain dangling for another moment. He probably senses my discomfort and just doesn’t care. The monkey climbs less and less each time but remains true to its unique groove in the universe.

Dan replaces the chain and starts practicing his sunglasses spin again. He's gotten good enough that he doesn't need look at it in his hand anymore, and can scrutinize me instead.

"Your technique is solid. But my lessons have until this point overlooked an essential bit of pilot skill, essential as anything else: womanizing.

"Now, you've got a girlfriend, right?"

"Yes."

Dan says, "You love her?"

He says, "Just kidding. Now ideally, a good pilot has got a girl going at every major city he flies."

"First lesson," he says, and begins flagging a waitress from across the diner. She's a blonde, lithe and leggy, and not even looking in our direction.

"This is what you're going to be doing at every layover."

Dan stops furiously signaling for a moment as Marge, our usual waitress, rounds the corner toward us and toddles past.

"Heh, *layover*."

The waitress across the diner finally catches sight of us. At first she stares quizzically at Dan, whose sunglasses are back on now, and who makes motions to her like a runway crew.

Dan's smile gets broader as she closes.

"Howdy."

"Hey guys. Welcome," she says cheerfully. "I don't think I've seen you around before."

"Nah," says Dan, cool, "I only come here when I feel like a dirt strip landing. Maybe take her down dead stick, you know. That's what she was designed for," he says with a nod out the big diner windows.

Shining in the grass beside the strip like a discarded toy sits Dan's aluminum single-prop Luscombe Silvair. The antique plane, with its long struts and crude bracing, really was designed for landing in fields and such.

April, her nametag says April, glances at it and says something nice and measured. As a waitress, she is no doubt familiar with this manner of beast and knows to be careful, keeping her level of engagement in the conversation strictly reciprocal, polite. I've found that a woman may want a guy to treat her like an object from time to time, if she's satisfied that this is not how he truly thinks. Dan was probably not helped by the fact that he just referred to the Luscombe, an object, as "she."

"Great for my little co-pilot here to learn on. This is Ray, I've taken him under my wing, you might say," says Dan, changing his approach.

I just kinda nod, aware he's using me to impress the girl like a bachelor walking a puppy.

“Wow, that’s great.”

“My name’s Dan by the way,” he says, peering slyly over the sunglasses.

“Hey, so can I get you guys some food or something?”

“You ever taken one this old for a ride?” Dan says, and I feel the ambiguity here, intentional, is not lost on her.

Her smile wanes some. “Oh no, in all my time working an airstrip diner I never dared dream. God, I feel faint,” she says, her arms crossed over her silly pink waitress attire.

Dan peels off the shades and frowns. “I’m sorry. Would I be more impressive with a British accent? I knew I should have faked a British accent.”

“Arrogant pilot,” she says, nonplussed. “You really think you’re such hot shit.”

“Arrogant, maybe, but that doesn’t mean that I’m wrong. It doesn’t mean that I’m not, in fact, hot shit,” says Dan, looking her in the eye for a heartbeat. He makes the sunglasses do their little flip around his fingers. I wince.

She, she just *cracks* up.

I’ve been working on the Luscombe for hours by the time Dan strolls in the open hanger this morning. He must have just gotten his third haircut of the month, I note, looking up from

where I've been working by the Luscombe's rudder. The small craft, perfectly smooth and tapered off, seems almost to lean forward eagerly on the asphalt.

"How is April?" I ask.

"Oh my little cadet, she is so tight, I can hardly—"

"—Damn, Dan!"

"Heh. Seriously, though, I feel like I'm picking a lock."

He lays one hand on a strut. "Better than a sports car. How was quality time today?"

Ordinarily I couldn't afford private lessons from an airline pilot, but Dan and I have a deal where I work restoring the Luscombe and am paid in flight hours. He is just in time, since the last few hours of work have just put me over for another flight.

"Spent most of the morning just polishing," I reply, tracing the grid work of rivets with my fingertips. There's actually very little work left to do on the Luscombe. So I ask him.

"When do I go solo?"

"Well, I am very pleased with your technical proficiency..."

"Dan, I am not going to pick up a waitress with you for my pilot's license."

“...it’s just that—you’re earnest enough about it all, but you oughta be awed. Hypnotized. Maybe I’m asking a lot. I don’t think so, though.”

I bow my head at this, not knowing what to say. Dan turns back to the Luscombe solemnly, not at all like you might face sports car.

“This polish makes the old girl look great,” says Dan. “Bilodeau’s newfangled Cessna doesn’t glimmer on the runway like this, does it?”

“Nope, no way.”

“Well then let’s get out there, eh? Finish the checklist and hop in, I’ll give the propellers—what am I sayin’, you wanna throw the propellers?” asks Dan.

He says, “Of course you do. Have at it.”

I have never hand-started an airplane before. But it’s just giving the props a spin. How can Dan not realize I’ve never done this? But I can handle this, I can spin a damn propeller.

I pause, my hand resting on the twisted blade. It will snap so quickly into motion, will I even feel it to lose my hand, my arm, to slip forward just a few fatal inches?

“Contact!” Dan barks from the cockpit.

I try positioning myself now so that my legs are far clear of the plane of rotation, but not so far back that I might fall forward

into the fan. I try to balance myself like this, try to make it look casual. I lean and crank.

The engine doesn't turn over and the propeller makes just two jerky rotations. I tell myself there's a chance that Dan didn't notice.

My face is flush; I'm angry at myself now. And before Dan can grin out obnoxiously at me and yell contact again I wind up with both hands and throw that propeller like a rock star smashing a guitar.

The engine awakens with a roar, the blades rushing in front of me under their own power at last. They don't actually push on the air, but rather each end is itself a vertical, lift-creating wing, tugging on my hair, pulling at my clothing, drawing me in. I feel the pressure drop and step back from the old girl.