

Skyscape

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I am currently working on a novel that pivots around Amelia Earhart's disappearance. Long an admirer of the aviatrix, I'm weaving together clips of life (both documented and imagined, and in some cases both) from the months prior to her disappearance. The excerpt here covers Earhart's first—and lesser known—attempt at circumnavigating the world.

—CP

It started, officially, with the note. In her mind it started with the little torn scrap he passed in the minutes before that first doomed leg of her flight around the world. He sent it on the jury-rigged clothesline that ran between the front and back of the plane: their quaint communication device. The little iron hinge squeaked slightly. Like a Pavlovian dog, she'd come to hear the sound as a harbinger of something palatable. Not that it had been that way at first. She'd always detested even the slightest distraction while flying. Some pilots liked to whistle, or listen to a loudly ticking watch, or snap their chewing gum. A.E. found all of these inappropriate, somehow, as if even the humblest earthly sound disrupted the purity of flying. But now, well, when the hinge squeaked, it squeaked. She didn't mind so much.

Good luck, my brave girl, the note read.

It was the "my" that struck her. A surprisingly possessive word choice. She smiled, lips shut. She'd trained herself to smile this way, no teeth, better for the photographs, J.P. had told her. Gives you an unreachable, magisterial look, like a bygone queen. This declaration struck her as funny in the torpid heat of the cockpit, where stains had already bloomed at her armpits, where gasoline, grease, and sea smells commingled not entirely sociably.

My brave girl.

J.P. wouldn't like that, she decided, folding the note into a tight little square and tucking it into one of the front pockets of her jump-

suit, along with the other mementos she always carried. She might take it out and read it again hours from now, if the sky were clear, if she could afford to look askance.

Outside, the crowd that had gathered before dawn was cheering raucously. Voices drowned by the whirl of machinery, the people looked like hapless mimes. She ignored the attention. She didn't favor crowds, and especially reporters, when starting a high-risk venture. Only when finishing it.

On the 3,000-foot hard-surface runway of Luke Field, she blinked through the windshield of the cockpit. An earlier rain had left a million liquidy finger-streaks. The air still hung heavily with condensation. At her request, the floodlights came to life, but they illuminated more shadows than they vanquished. The gothic contours of the landscape jarred her. She gave the engineers another signal and the lights died. Her pupils minimized as the terrain resettled into normalcy, the military shacks and makeshift buildings and tanks in the immediate distance no longer hulking nascent monsters, and farther away, the mountains now serene, haloed in soft white mist. She started both engines. The plane's wheel chocks were hauled away. A firm-postured lieutenant issued the all-clear signal and she guided her Lockheed Vega to the end of the runway. Scores of flashlights cut through the early-morning light. Little dancing glints, like fireflies, she thought. At the line on the ground A.E. braked, turned the engines to idle, rechecked the pressure and temperature gauges. Normal. Everything normal. The small army of engineers on base had inspected every last inch of the Lockheed in the last twenty-four hours, anyway, and they'd addressed all problems, including a small deposit of sediment in the fuel tank. Her confidence was bolstered by their thoroughness, and also by her crew. Manning and her note-giver, Noonan, sat behind in the navigator's compartment. They were two of the most knowledgeable, reliable comrades a pilot could have, surely. She'd expressed this exact sentiment to J.P., although he hadn't looked convinced.

The note was in a far corner of her mind as she let go the brakes

and advanced the throttles. Eagerly, the plane pushed forward. A.E. held steady the control yoke. Her feet skipped carefully on the rudder pedals. She took several deep breaths, the brusque tang of pineapple juice drunk hours ago on her tongue. In her peripheral vision: the dozens of young officers who had helped her prepare for this moment frozen in proud, anxious anticipation; the admirers jostling and surging at the barrier ribbon.

Heavy with fuel and equipment, the plane's tail lifted to flying position. The craft, her beloved pet—really, her only true love—at first showed no distress. It started to drift off-center so slowly A.E. didn't notice until the straight line on the runway began angling to the right. Another deep breath. She tried to compensate by pushing the left rudder pedal, a little, at first, then as far as it would go. The suspicion that something wasn't right iced into fact. She felt this with the cool-headedness of a seasoned aviatrix, but also with the primal dread of a child. She wondered what the inspectors could have missed, what she could have missed too. The wings seemed to rock, and now maybe she had overcompensated, for the whole ship veered jerkily to the left. She was no longer working with her Lockheed, but separate from it; it had asserted its power and detached from her, the invisible umbilical cord that united them snapping swiftly and unpredictably, as was its right. Only the foolish pilot believed too strongly in his own command.

Now the leftward tilt had become a horrible urgent detour. The plane gained panicked speed as it wobbled, the controls trembling in her hands, under her feet. In her bones it seemed. The wings, like a trapped bird's, flailed haplessly. The landing gear collapsed. The craft fell forward on its belly, painfully, grinding, screaming, shouting against the ground, sparks lighting up the air like some hokey, small-town fireworks show. Her lips pressed tensely. Hysterics weren't her nature. She'd never in her life screamed. It was just another stereotypically feminine habit she wasn't prone to; it was, in fact, one she detested and would have consciously avoided anyway. The plane continued its wild, belly-first run. Skidding, sliding, a pro-

testing, land-bound beast, until, after what seemed like an eternity, it stopped.

She thought, first, am I dead? The stench of something oily and charred burned her nostrils, so that she wasn't quite sure if she were in hell. Second, she wondered, if not in hell, would she die now? After all this abuse, the fuselage was bound to blow. Sitting in the plane was like taking a grenade, pulling its stem, and holding it against her breast.

Swiftly, calmly, she turned off the ignition and opened the overhead hatch. She climbed out of her seat, realizing she needed to vomit. But not here, she resolved. Not in front of anyone. She would not heap personal embarrassment onto an already spectacular failure

Noonan came away with nothing but a scraped elbow. A.E. claimed a bruised ego. It was further assaulted when she learned, through a drunk Noonan, that Manning considered the incident her fault.

"That's ridiculous. It was the right shock absorber, obviously. Anyone could have been piloting."

Noonan took a hard slug of whiskey. He smiled obliquely. His eyes, A.E. thought, were about to blur into oblivion. She'd seen this dress rehearsal before. All of a sudden her little crush seemed a bit ridiculous.

"Sweetheart, it might just be the two of us next time," he told her.

"That's fine with me."

"You're not angry?" he asked teasingly, even tauntingly.

"Angry, no. Annoyed, yes."

His gaze trailed to the empty shot glass. When he looked at her again she couldn't deny that though inebriated, a part of him was dead sober.

"Well cheer up, kitty-cat. You've still got eight lives left."

She'd wanted to resume immediately. Not in a month, or a week, but tomorrow, even today. Right this damn second, she thought, fury rising in her. She'd just given another speech, this

one to a university, and she hadn't fumbled a single word. It was a perfectly controlled, perfectly apt address, full of hope and vigor, and yet she'd felt doubt filling many of the eyes on her. How ridiculous that she still needed to prove herself, even after flying across the Atlantic, after breaking flying records held not only by women, but also by men. And she being almost 40 now. Still this wild girlish nag to push higher than they thought she could, to achieve more, to win, so that they, whoever they were, couldn't deny her.

Leave 'em slack-jawed with awe, as J.P. had said.

She looked at the toast before her, which was half-eaten. The strawberry jam was spread evenly to the edges. In the sky she let go her dominion, but on the ground she was naturally exacting. Even her bite marks were tiny, neat.

J.P. appeared and snatched the toast from her plate, took a mouthful and set it down again. He patted her head affectionately. He was handling the reporters on the backend. He'd already dashed off a press release and made the right phone calls. He'd told her to write about the crash from her perspective. They'd get it published in the Tribune, guaranteed.

"We've got it under control," he told her. She smiled wryly.

"I'm going to try again, so don't try to talk me out of it. As soon as the plane is ready, I'm off."

"You're off," he echoed.

In the past every conceivable flight scheme had delighted him. The more cockamamie, the better. In the last year, though, A.E. detected a lilt of resignation creeping into his voice.

"I couldn't stop you if I wanted to," he said, grabbing her about the shoulders and kissing her on the forehead.

Because she was pleased with this, but too proud to show it, she picked up the plate of toast and handed it to him. The thought of Noonan, of the note, flickered briefly through her head. But she didn't feel guilty, guilt being another feminine tendency she did her best to avoid.