

CROWNING JOURNEY

He soared above Placerville and banked hard to the left. Willy looked down. Naked vineyards shivered in the frosty wind and the hillsides were blanketed in snow. Small towns and houses dotted Highway 50 as it snaked through the forest on its way up to Lake Tahoe. Puffy white clouds swelled about him, patches of blue sky sprinkled between.

Willy slapped his right palm against the outside of the freshly polished, red de Havilland Tiger Moth biplane, head bobbing to the rhythm of whatever music the wind whistling through the struts contrived in his mind. The old bird he'd inherited from Grandpa hadn't been flown in years and it took his mechanic weeks to get it airworthy, but Willy spiffed up the outside himself just for this flight. He followed the narrow highway from a mile above, tiny cars pulled their Mickey Mouse trailers and a small outcrop of buildings stood by a widening in the road, George's General Store, a gas pump and Becky's Cafe. Willy knew it well, he'd eaten there many times, even took Becky's daughter to the movies once, but that was a long time ago. Smoke escaped from a cabin hidden amongst tall pines. The old pictures resonated clearly for Willy, the landscape shroud in black and white. But the Lake would be a blaze of glorious color, just as he remembered, royal blue waters, rays of golden sunshine piecing the overcast sky and gray clouds mirrored off the lake, all framed by a ring of white, snow capped peaks.

A bossy, military like voice broke the tranquil refrain of the wind. "5375 Alpha, climb and maintain 10,000 feet." Willy jerked, momentarily startled. He'd wanted to take this trip alone, free from people telling him what to, where to go, how to live; but most of all, before it was too late. He reached up and felt the headset and then it came back to him, the man on the

radio was still there. Willy froze, several moments passed in silence, hoping that perhaps the radio man would go away if he ignored him.

“5375 Alpha, this is Sacramento Center. Climb and maintain 10,000 feet.”

Willy hesitated, staring at the instrument panel. He slowly reached for the mic, lifted it from its cradle and pressed the side button. “75 Alpha, climbing to 10,000.” He held the mic in his hand, waiting, but silence was the only reply. Perhaps that was enough to make the radio man happy.

What he wouldn't give to have Grandpa sitting in the front seat, reliving old WWII stories of dog fights in the sky, barking orders and pointing out landmarks. Grandpa taught Willy how to fly before he could drive a car. They flew everywhere, just the two of them. Willy hadn't much thought of his flying days with Grandpa for decades, but for the past month the old memories, every flight, every adventure, paraded in and out of his head. Perhaps he should give Grandpa a visit soon, he lived somewhere back East, but Willy couldn't recall exactly where.

Sudden turbulence jarred the plane violently to the left, lifting Willy out of his seat before the seat belt cinched tight and brought him back to rest. He pulled the stick right and leveled out, but the plane bounced back and forth off invisible walls as if an orb in a fast paced racquetball game. The clouds grew darker, thicker and the patches of blue sky sparser. He clenched the stick tightly, beads of sweat dripped off his brow. Willy had logged thousands of hours flying, but it had been a few years. He might be a little rustier than he thought he would be. His long, carrot orange hair flailed in every direction and Willy freed one hand to tuck it under the strap of his goggles. He hadn't cut his curly locks since losing his job a few years ago. His wife Joanne didn't much like them, but they made him feel good, took him back to his

college hippie days in the 60's, a freer, happier time, back to a time when he had control of his life, a time when he was still relevant.

“5375 Alpha, you're still level. We need you to begin that climb immediately to 10,000 feet.”

Willy peered over the side, the ground creeping towards him, the cars getting bigger. He'd postponed this flight three times, waiting for a good day, a day when he would be sharp. Today was a good day, he was sure of it. He'd returned a few emails this morning and read the newspaper over breakfast, even gave the cabbie directions to the airport. Today was a good day. But then why was his mind so cluttered, so confused, mushy as Joanne would say. There was a lot of stuff in this little airplane; he hadn't recalled so many instruments. Perhaps he should have waited for better weather. He didn't want to hurt anyone; he just wanted to fly over Lake Tahoe again. But too late for that, Willy knew he wouldn't get another chance. He whacked himself on the side of the head as he always did in an important moment when it was time to buckle up and muster his resolve. He had to concentrate, stay focused, concentrate, stay focused.

“Roger.” Willy pulled back on the stick and spiraled into a steep, ascending 360 to gain altitude. He wasn't sure who Roger was, the name just came to him. But it seemed to shut up the man on the radio. The plane wobbled, trees spun and the highway flickered in and out of sight. Concentrate, stay focused, you can do this, Willy.

Willy leveled the wings and continued his ascent towards the Lake. He struggled to master all that had come naturally to him for so many years. He stared at the instrument panel, trying to recall the use for each gauge. The letters “ALT” were etched in the largest circle in the middle panel. The small arrow pointed towards the “8” and the big arrow pointed to the “2”, but

it was moving, to the “3”, then to the “4”. He knew this gauge, he knew all the gauges, they were all important. Willy banged his fist against the dash and cursed himself. What were they telling him?

Willy was again jolted by the radio man. “5375 Alpha, continue climb to altitude of 12,000 feet.” He looked back at the big circle in the center of the panel, the ALT gauge, and a perf smile came to his face. Of course he knew ALT; that was the Altimeter, 8,500 feet, 8,600. He turned the plane slightly to the left and the new Turn and Bank Indicator he’d installed years ago tilted to the left. He pushed in the throttle and the RPM gauge revved higher and the Airspeed Indicator crept up faster. He eased the stick right and the miniature plane in the gauge tilted to the right. Willy slapped the outside of the fuselage and let out a hoot, now we’re flying. It all came back; he was the pilot in command once again.

“Roger, 75 Alpha.” Willy banked left and continued soaring towards a sliver of blue sky hanging over the white clad mountains to the west side of the Lake. The air smoothed out as he continued to climb, not much longer now. Willy whistled and he sang, one song after another, just like the old days, his confidence grew. He held the stick loosely in his right hand while the fingers of his left hand banged on the outside of the fuselage to the rhythm of the music. *She’ll be coming around the mountain when she comes, when she comes. She’ll be coming around the mountain when she comes.* Oh how the grandkids loved that song. He picked them up from school every day in his old blue Chevy Pick Up and they sat four across singing all the way to the ice cream store. Ben didn’t really like that song too much; thought he was too old for it, but the girls sure loved it. *She’ll be riding six white horses when she comes.* And the girls always got their way with Willy. Rachel tapped her fingers on the dashboard, playing the piano for their

quartet. Ben sang along, reluctantly, and only because he knew he wouldn't get an ice cream cone if he didn't. But the youngest girl sang the loudest, she loved to pump her fist and bellow out *Toot, Toot* at the end of each verse. *She'll be coming around the mountain when she comes, toot, toot.* The cute little girl, what was her name? You know, Ben and Rachel's little sister. Willy stopped singing, his fingers went limp and his face turned sober. Damn, what was her name? He whacked himself on the side of his head, but to no avail. He could see her face as clear as if she were standing right in front of him, the curly orange hair just like his, the big smile with a missing front tooth and freckles splattered across the bridge of her nose. But the name of the adorable little girl who always called him Grampy remained a mystery.

Willy fought back a tear welling under his goggles. He wanted to be remembered as the happy man who sang with his grandkids and took them to get ice cream in his old pick up. Not the crazy old man who didn't know his granddaughter's name, got lost walking across the street and never wiped the mustard off his face. Not the dumb shit with Alzheimers. How could he forget her name, the precious little girl in pig tails was always his favorite. Willy remembered that much.

Willy and his shiny red biplane crested over the peaks guarding the west side of Lake Tahoe at 12,000 feet. There it stood, majestic, just as it was etched in his mind. Boats wobbled against the docks in the harbor at Meeks Bay, white caps cast a silver glint upon the waters and the top of Alpine Meadows disappeared into the clouds to the north, although the skiers were too small to be seen. Willy floated high above the top of the world. He wished Joanne were with him, she would love this scene. But, of course, if she knew about the flight, she never would have allowed him to leave the house.

Joanne was a great artist, her pictures hung throughout their house and in galleries across the state, landscapes and portraits mostly. But she didn't paint so much anymore, he couldn't recall the last time she even entered her little studio in the back of the house. Mostly, she just took care of Willy, taking him for walks, wiping hot chocolate off his chin and cleaning up his piss when he couldn't find the toilet in time. Joanne was patient and kind, but her smiles were forced and her eyes drooped a little more each day. They talked about little things like a parent would to a two year old, but they never talked about the future. Willy wished she would go back to painting.

Joanne could sit in Grandpa's old seat in front, swivel it about and face backwards, easel and paints at her side. She'd be close enough to reach out and stroke him as she did so tenderly in the old days. Mona Lisa would be jealous of the beautiful Lake Tahoe landscape in the background. Joanne laughed and scolded him, imploring him to remain still. Willy straightened his shoulders and puffed his chest; chin high and his thin lips carved a faint smile across his face. He no longer felt cheated out of the last good years of his life. Willy beamed with pride, he'd written the perfect script to his own ending. This will be great painting, a perfect way to be remembered.

Willy turned towards the middle of the lake. Joanne had often asked him to sit for a portrait, but Willy always declined, said he was too embarrassed. That wasn't actually it, but he couldn't recall the real reason. No matter, Joanne would never have come anyways, she hated to fly. Just as well, she wouldn't ever have to take care of him again. A few regrets, a tearful goodbye and she could move on with her life.

"5375 Alpha, descend and maintain 10,000 over the lake."

Willy banked into a wide, descending arc over the lake. The temperature dropped, clouds closed in and the blue sky disappeared. He zipped his down jacket to the top, tightened the scarf about his neck and begged his hands to stop shaking. There had to be an easier way, a bottle of pills or a quick gulp of arsenic laced water. But this was more exciting, he couldn't remember the last time he'd had so much fun. Willy was right, it was a good day, but he wasn't sure he had the nerve to see it through to the end. He squinched his eyes and locked his jaw; concentrate, stay focused, you can do this Willy. This is your last chance. It's worth enduring a moment of pain to forego a lifetime of misery. The winds screamed through the struts and plane bounced fiercely from side to side.

"5375 Alpha, please be advised of embedded clouds in the area and that a VFR approach into South Lake Tahoe airport is no longer possible. What are your intentions?"

Willy descended through 9,000 feet. He was engulfed in clouds and could no longer see the lake. The airport hid in the forest just beyond the south shore, but he wouldn't be visiting the airport, not today.

"5375 Alpha, would you like the ILS approach into South Lake Tahoe or would you like to divert? Do you copy?"

Willy's scarf flapped straight back. He tucked it into his jacket and adjusted his goggles. A billowing thunderhead soared heavenward, directly in his path. Willy clenched the stick and tightened his seat belt, his muscles stiffened. His left hand quivered, but he managed to pick up the mic, "This is 75 Alpha."

"5375 Alpha, say intentions."

They passed through 8,000 feet and Willy's couldn't stop shaking. He hesitated, not sure

if he could manage to get his jittery lips to speak. He finally managed to eke out, "Please tell my wife Joanne that I love her very much."

"5375 Alpha," there was a slight pause before the radio man lost his official persona.

"Look buddy, I can get you down. Just stay with me and don't panic."

"And my son Jack, tell him I've always admired him and thank him for the three beautiful grandchildren he gave me, Ben, Rachel and Betsy." Willy surprised himself. He smiled and his hands stopped shaking. "That's right, Betsy. Tell Betsy, tell her, toot, toot." He pumped his fist, ripped the headset off and tossed it over the side. He wouldn't be needing the radio man any longer. *She'll be riding six white horses when she comes, toot, toot. She'll be riding six white horses when she comes, toot, toot.*

The giant thundercloud swallowed Willy's tiny plane. Blue sky of moments ago was replaced by dark, dreary gray; hazy visibility exchanged for near blindness. Beads of ice pelted against his face and fog formed along the inside edges of Willy's goggles. The little plane ricocheted left, right, back and forth, up and down, hurtled about in nature's colossal washing machine. The rate of Willy's heartbeat instantly doubled and perspiration soaked the palms of his hands. He slid his left hand alongside his right and clenched his teeth, gripping the stick as he would the reins of a wild horse gone berserk. He wondered what the hell he was thinking entering that cloud, this wasn't part of the plan. Yet he couldn't deny the wild rush of adrenaline pouring through his veins.

Willy's eyes fixed on the instruments. The plane stabilized, the air smoothed out and the gyro leveled. He dared to release one hand from the stick and wiped the inside of his goggles. Airspeed was good, they were straight and level. His eyes slid over to the altimeter, it was rising,

8,000 feet, 9,000, 10,000 feet. He checked the pitch, they were still level, but he kept climbing. The ride remained smooth, 11,000 feet; the altimeter was whirling like the dial on an old fashioned fast elevator. Turn and bank indicator okay, 12,000 feet, airspeed was still good. Willy trusted his instruments; a bad case of vertigo had taught him that lesson. He wiped the perspiration from his forehead, tightened his belt and took a deep breath. His heart was still thumping hard against the side of his chest. The updraft continued hoisting them skyward, 13,000 feet.

Willy glanced to side, one to the other. Layers of ice formed on the wings and icicles hung from the struts; there was no trace of red paint anywhere. The rate of ascent slowed, 13,500 feet. He tried to lower the nose, but they kept climbing, 14,000 feet. He knew this plane wasn't capable of that altitude; the forces of nature were pulling them up as if on a string. The arm inside the altimeter slowed to a halt and they remained level at 14,500 feet. The ride was steady and all the instruments were good. The wings sagged from the weight of icebergs stretched across their surface. But Willy had been on this elevator ride before. Ten seconds passed, then twenty. He tried to call out a warning to himself, but his lips wouldn't move. His mouth froze shut. He cleared his throat and gulped. Thirty seconds of smooth air. He mustered all his strength and yelled as loud as he could. "Buckle up and hold on tight."

Willy's anxiety multiplied with every second he remained in smooth air, level at 14,500 feet in the center of the thundercloud. But the respite gave him time to think, perhaps too much time. The plane stood suspended in time and space, but thoughts raced through Willy's mind at a million miles per hour. Perhaps it wasn't too late for him. After all, he'd lost a lot, but his mind wasn't gone, not yet. There would be some bad times, but he did still have plenty of good days

ahead of him, he was sure of that. He could teach Ben and Betsy how to fly just as his Grandpa had taught him. Willy had certainly proven today that he could still fly. Rachel had piano concerts he needed to see. And oh how he would love to sing with Betsy at her wedding some day, he wasn't too old for that. Willy was sure he could make Joanne smile again, laugh and love together, maybe even sit for that portrait. He just had to try a little harder, carry a notepad to write down names and words he couldn't remember. Put signs with arrows on the walls so he could find that bathroom. Everybody forgets a few things once in a while, but it wasn't that big a deal. He still had a lot of life in him. Willy cursed himself for tossing the headset overboard. The plane teetered, just slightly. Willy wiped both hands, one at a time, then clamped onto the stick like it was gold.

Willy continued on straight and level, still barely able to see the front of the plane. His eyes riveted to the instruments. The arm of the altimeter started to wiggle, then gradually inched its way counterclockwise, 14,400 feet, 14,200, 14,000 feet. The string holding them up for the past minute instantly snapped. The plane dropped as if it were a large boulder pushed off a cliff. Willy pulled with every morsel of strength he could muster to keep the nose up and avoid a deadly tailspin. The large dial of the altimeter spun so fast it couldn't be seen. The small dial sped past 13,000 feet, 12,000. The downdraft sucked them in like water rushing down a drain, 10,000 feet. His scarf stood at attention, pointing to the sky, and he couldn't contain a high shrill scream like a kid falling off the top of a roller coaster. Willy arched his back, pulling with all his might, 8,000 feet. The wings bent further than could be imagined possible. He ducked to avoid a large block of ice whizzing past his head. The struts creaked and groaned. He banked slightly left and applied hard right rudder, 7,500 feet. Willy dodged left and right to avoid the meteor

shower of ice chunks careening off the wings and struts. The nose gradually leveled out, but the rate of descent remained constant, 6,500 feet. The descent immediately stopped and Willy's head bolted forward against the fuselage. They bounced as if off a trampoline, 6,800 feet, but the nose shot even higher. He scanned the instruments and managed to level the plane, the lake now in sight just a few hundred feet below.

Moments later they emerged from the thundercloud into blue sky. The wings sagged from the weight of the ice. Willy eased the throttle in and pushed forward on the stick. The nose pointed down, the biplane accelerated. He banked to the left and sheets of ice broke apart, creaking and sliding off the wings. Willy leveled the wings and flew low along the contours of the south shore of Lake Tahoe, the airport in clear view.

Despite the stupidity of flying into that thundercloud, the speed, the adventure, and the thrill of defying death excited him. Willy felt reinvigorated; his juices hadn't flowed for years as they did today. He thought back to the days when his grandfather taught him to fly over Lake Tahoe and the rugged Sierra Nevada mountains. He wished he'd taught his own son, Jack, how to fly and wondered what was so important that didn't allow him the time. He couldn't remember, but it didn't bother him, he couldn't remember a lot of things these days.

Willy stood at the front of the church, Joanne at his side leaning into him. The pews were packed, even the balcony, and people stood along the walls looking for a seat. The organist played a familiar tune and everyone stood up, eyes focused on the back of the church. Betsy's arm locked around Jack's as they walked down the aisle. She stood taller than Willy recollected, but she still sported bright orange pigtails, a wide smile exposing a missing front tooth and freckles that splashed across the bridge of her nose. *She'll be coming around the mountain when*

she comes, toot, toot.

Willy turned his shiny red biplane away from the airport and flew low over the lake. The storm had passed to the East and royal blue waters sparkled under the rays of golden sunshine. Ducks bobbed over the crest of the white caps and white gulls torpedoed into the waves looking for food. A lone fluffy cloud hung in the clear, turquoise sky, casting a shadow in the shape of an elephant across the middle of the lake. Willy pulled back on the throttle and dropped the nose. He flew under the shadow, closed his eyes and turned off the power. Willy always liked elephants. *She'll be coming around the mountain when she comes, toot, toot.* It had certainly been a good day.