

Flying Lessons

Will walked home from school along the dirt road to his grandfather's farm. It was another blustery day, like nearly all days were in southwestern Kansas. But Will was glad for the wind that day, clutching his kite to his chest. It quivered against him as if it wanted to jump out of his grasp and fly on its own. He kicked up puffs of dust with his little boy boots, and the sun shimmered through them. The glimmerings made him think of the prism his teacher, Miss Wilson, had shown them—how it split the light into all its colors like rain does to sunlight when it makes a rainbow. It looked like each sparkling bit was doing just that.

Of all the lessons Miss Wilson taught, science was always Will's favorite, and today's had been the best. Her desk had been heaped with sticks and balls of string and jars of glue and big sheets of red, blue, brown, yellow, and green construction paper that morning. They would build and fly their own kites, "just like Benjamin Franklin's," she'd said, holding up a picture of the odd old man with long hair and spectacles. He was not only one of America's founding fathers, but a scientist and inventor too, and had used a kite in a famous experiment about lightening and electricity.

She'd drawn a picture on the blackboard for each step and guided them along, helping sometimes, especially with lashing the sticks together, since they kept slipping out of place before the strings could be pulled tight. It had to be just right, Miss Wilson had said, because the framework was the most important thing.

When they'd finished cutting and lashing and gluing, she'd explained how kites flew. Will could hardly sit still while she'd talked about air flowing over and under the kite, "lift" she'd called it. *Up and away*, he'd thought, racing across the schoolyard when she'd finally let the class out.

Miss Wilson had said they should help each other, but Will had decided to try it on his own, not trusting his kite in anyone else's hands. He'd run hard and launched it, but instead of flying, it bounced along the ground. He'd stopped then—looked around at his classmates and their kites, at the trees, at the flag flying in front of the school, and then changing direction, he'd set up, and run again. His kite caught the wind and rose above him. the string pulling through his fingers. *Lift*, he'd thought, and as the kite sailed higher he had felt like he was flying himself.

Some kites had crashed and some had soared, but Miss Wilson made sure that everyone got to fly one, laughing along with them as their kites danced and dipped in the spring wind. She'd had to clap her hands over and over to get the class to reel the kites in. Will had been the last to ground his, reluctantly winding the string onto its spool as she stood over him, hands on her hips.

Will liked his teacher. She smiled easily, sat on the floor with the class in reading circle, and never hit anyone. So different from old Mrs. Harper who he'd had for first grade last year. She'd made it fun to go to school, fun to learn. Today especially.

As he walked, he grinned thinking about flying his kite. *Up and away!*

“As soon as I get home,” he said to the kite, “even before chores.”

Will whistled the rest of the way, like Joe, the old farm hand, had taught him, pressing his tongue up to the gap from his missing tooth.

Spring had finally arrived after a long, cold winter, and that meant Will could spend more time outside, on his own. As long as his chores got done neither his mother nor his stepfather Lucien paid much attention to him. And Will liked it fine that way.

When he got to the house, Will drank a big glass of milk. Looking around and listening for his mother, he didn't find her, so he snuck a cookie, too. Then he grabbed his kite and ran outside, the door slamming behind him in his hurry. A few steps into his run, the kite sailed out

of Will's hand. He marveled at the way it climbed, the paper bowing out in a perfect curve, welcoming the wind across it. The breeze shifted and the kite swooped, its colorful tail whipping behind. He pulled in on the string, turning and running, feeling for the lift, reading the wind, playing with it. He moved the spool up, down, and around, watching and feeling the kite react, and for the second time that day, Will felt like he was above the ground, flying with his kite. He laughed out loud.

Intent on the kite, the whack across his right ear and the back of his head caught him unaware. Startled, he cried out.

“Woke me up,” Lucien yelled. “Slammin’ doors like you own the place.”

Struck speechless, Will was stunned by the blow and the still awful sight of the deep pocket of scar that had been Lucien's left eye, lost in a bar fight the year before. Recovering himself, Will darted out of his stepfather's reach, and shouted, “You don't either. Own the place.”

“You little fucker,” Lucien growled, stepping unsteadily toward him.

Will scurried farther from his stepfather. He felt a jerk on his arms, and looked up to see his kite snared in the branches of the apple tree. Too late. He looked down from the tangled kite to Lucien advancing on him, then dropped the spool and ran.

From behind the barn, Will peeked around the corner.

Lucien stalked toward the barn, yelling, “Hey, girly, why'd y'run? You afraid?”

After a few steps Lucien stopped, his meaty hands rubbing his head. Then he turned slowly and started back to the house. At the apple tree, he stopped again, looked up, and yanked the kite string. The kite tore out of the branches, falling into his hands. He snapped it in two and dropped it to the ground.

Will leaned against the barn wall, slid down in the shadows, pulled his knees up close and pushed his eyes into them. “No crying,” he said to himself.

He felt something warm on his neck and reached for the spot. His fingers came away bloody. He took his bandana from his overalls pocket and held it to his ear, wondering if that’s why bandanas were red.

“Damn,” he said, even though he knew he wasn’t supposed to cuss, Miss Wilson said so. But what would she have thought about what happened to his kite? Wrecked in one day. He put his head down again, pressing his eyes back into his knees.

Will wasn’t sure how long he had been there, against the wall, thinking about his kite. He imagined the tug of the string on his fingers as it flew over the schoolyard, then over the farm, over the whole world. He would build a new one. Make it even better than the first. He would get a book from the library. Miss Wilson said that’s what you do when you want to learn about anything and everything, and Will wanted to learn how to build the best kite ever.

He must have been there a while when Joe came by on his way from the yard to the barn because he said, “Wondering where ya been, buddy. Late for chores today.”

Will looked up at his friend. “Sorry, Joe.”

Joe knelt down beside Will. “Hey there, what happened?” he said, reaching for the bandana that stuck to Will’s right ear. He peeled it away from Will’s skin and looked at the wound.

“It’ll be okay, looks like,” Joe said, but he was shaking his head as he said it. “You wanna tell me what happened this time?”

“Nah.”

“Okay, buddy, but let’s get you cleaned up some, then we’ll do the chores. You okay with that?”

Will nodded.

“That’s a boy,” he said, patting Will on the back. “Light here a minute.”

Joe left Will sitting on a hay bale while he got a bucket, went to the well, and pumped some water into it. He watched Joe, comforted by the sound of the creaky well handle, the smell of musty hay, and the nearness of his friend. Though all Joe could do about Lucien was shake his head, somehow Will felt safer with him nearby. Dipping his own neatly folded bandana into the water, Joe patted the sticky blood away from Will’s ear and neck.

Will sat up straight, scrunching his face, but didn’t pull away.

“That’s a boy,” Joe said. “Reminds me of the time Joe Junior fell out of the tree behind the house and split his ear open. Awful messy.”

“Yeah, messy,” Will said. “Where’s JJ now, Joe?”

“Boot camp. Training hard for FDR. Here gimme that.”

Joe took Will’s bandana and swished it around in the bucket. They watched the water turn pink as the blood rinsed out of the fabric. Joe twisted the bandana tight in his strong, weathered hands, wringing the last of the water out, then shook it open.

“There,” he said handing it to Will, who stuffed it into the bib pocket of his overalls.

“Hope JJ will get to visit before he ships out. Sure do.”

“Me too, Joe. Sure do.”

Joe smiled down at Will and patted him on the back again. “Okay, then, ready to go?”

Will nodded. “Thanks, Joe.”

Afternoon chores were feeding and watering the pigs and chickens, and milking the cows. Will didn’t mind doing them because he got to be outside and he got to do them with Joe. Lucien worked with Joe on morning chores because Will had to get ready for school, but come summer, Will would do them too. Helping with chores was part of their rent for the small house,

the house Will had been born in on his grandfather's farm. His father's father. Though Will's father had left just weeks after Will was born, his grandfather had let Glory (that was his mother) and the baby (that was him) stay, out of shame at his son's abandoning them, his mother often said. Grandpa had even let them stay, though he started charging rent, when Glory married Lucien. As soon as Will was old enough, he'd begun helping with the chores, and that was how he'd gotten to know Joe, who Grandpa called "the best hand this side of the Mississippi" and who became Will's best friend.

Joe suggested that Will handle the chickens and he would take care of the pigs that day, since they were late getting started. Usually they did the work side by side, not because they needed too, but because they liked the time together.

They each finished their respective tasks at the same time, and met at the barn to bring the cows in from the corral. Joe got his milking pails and cans ready, while Will fed the cows and got them into their stalls.

Will's hands weren't big enough yet to milk, but he stood behind Joe, listening to the swish swash of the milk hitting the pails, then hauling them to the cans, being careful not to spill as he poured. Joe whistled between his crooked teeth as he milked. Usually Will whistled along, but that day he was quiet as he walked the pails back and forth, relieved to be with Joe, but regretting the loss of his kite, berating himself for not noticing Lucien soon enough. He'd slipped up. He knew to be more careful.

When they finished, they parted at the barn, Joe saying, "See you t'morrow, buddy," with a firm squeeze of the boy's shoulder. "You watch yourself."

Will could still feel the pressure of his friend's comforting hand as he nodded and said, "I will, Joe."

Will lingered, strolling beside the barn. He skirted around the tractor and the implements, as Joe called the plows, the harrow, and the rake. He passed the neat stacks of posts and boards, piled and waiting for spring fence mending. He stopped at the two mounds where Joe had helped him bury Scout and Tuck, his pony and his dog. The graves were behind the windbreak along the north side of the farm, sheltered from the winter winds, and out of the way. He sat down beside the smaller mound, Tuck's, with the little wooden marker that Joe had helped him make. He rested his hand on the earth, much like he used to rest his hand on the dog's back when they'd sit together in the shade of these same trees.

Will had bolted down the dirt road when Lucien killed Tuck, thinking he would never go back. But then he had stopped, knowing that he couldn't leave Tuck lying there in the farmyard. He had gone to Joe, and they had buried Tuck together—digging the grave, then placing his beloved dog on the bed Will had laid down in it. He had tenderly arranged Tuck's legs into the position his dog had most favored for naps in the sun. He had stroked the dog's head, and at the last minute, leaned in to hug Tuck one last time. After that he had swathed Tuck under the soft blanket Joe handed him. Then Will had taken the shovel from Joe and slowly covered his dog with earth. Laying him to rest, as Joe had said, beside Scout.

A tear rolled down Will's cheek at the memory, but he swiped it away and insisted, "No crying."

He stood, took a step, then paused beside the bigger mound to say, "Hi Scout, I miss you too, old pal."

Will added "old pal" for Scout, remembering the day Joe handed him the pony's reins saying, "JJ's got too old for a pony now, he said you could have Scout. This pony's a good old pal, will you take care of him now?"

Will had said, "I will. I promise, Joe."

And he had done his best, with Scout and Tuck both, but it hadn't been good enough to save them. Will stayed a moment more, his hands jammed deep in his pockets, feeling the wind buffet him. He knew he'd better not be late for supper, that would only cause more trouble, so he turned toward the house. Looking down at his boots as he walked, he remembered how the dust had shimmered in the sun that afternoon. *Gone wrong*, he thought. *This day's gone wrong*. Like so many of them did.

Despite that, Will realized he was hungry. His nostrils twitched at the smell of raw onion when he pulled the door open, this time careful not to let it slam behind him. Will was surprised not to find his mother in the kitchen, but supper was started, and he heard her rattling jars in the cellar. He hopped onto the counter by the sink. From that spot, he could wash his hands, like he was supposed to, and see what was cooking, too.

Will noticed the wind blowing harder outside. It sounded like screaming. Then his mother was too. Sounds of glass breaking and wood splintering and feet clamoring and Lucien's yelling and his mother's shrieking vibrated up from the basement. The door trembled from the bedlam below. He heard some of the words Lucien and his mother spat at each other.

"Give it here," Lucien demanded.

"Dirty drunk."

Another crash.

"I'll kill ya, bitch."

"Let go a'me."

Will felt the house shake as feet beat their way up the basement stairs, the sound of his mother's heels followed by heavy boots. She pushed through the narrow door and it slammed back hard, straining on its hinges. She hesitated, then turned toward the front of the house, but she'd missed her chance to run. Lucien grabbed her and dragged her backward. He slapped her

and her head snapped to the side, her eyes squeezed shut, her mouth contorted. Lucien hit her again and again, the shape of his sausage fingers rising on her cheeks. She cursed him, but stopped pulling away, given up on getting away from the blows. Will could tell it would be another night choking down supper with his mother's face across the table looking like the raw meat she had just cooked.

Neither his mother nor Lucien saw Will sitting on the counter, and he watched it all as if it were in slow motion, like at the movies when the projector slowed way down. With each swing of Lucien's arm, Will saw the hundreds of swings of Lucien's arm that he had witnessed over the years the man had been married to his mother.

Will's mind flashed through the images Lucien had left there—being thrown across the yard and his blood melting the snow he'd landed in when his teeth broke and punched through his lip, his mother splayed out on the sitting room floor with her nose bleeding into her new rag rug, Scout's agonized cries when Lucien blinded and bloodied him with a board run through with long nails, Will dodging the same weapon while he yelled for Lucien to stop, and Lucien kicking Tuck so hard that he broke the dog's back. As if it were happening again, Will heard the crack of breaking bone, saw Tuck land in a heap, unmoving, and something snapped inside him. *No more*, he thought.

Will shifted, ready to jump down, do something, though he didn't know what. His leg bumped the cast iron fry pan on the counter beside him. He looked down. Brown gray, and rough on the outside, the inside shone with the slick of oil from years of frying countless chickens and endless strips of bacon. There was a half-chopped onion on the deeply grooved cutting board next to the pan with bits of onion stuck to the mottled metal of the knife blade. The knife handle was smooth, the color of honey. The other half of the onion tipped beside the knife, cut side up,

the rings even, perfect circles within circles within circles. Will stared, his mother's cries filling the kitchen, then his hands reached out.

The weight of the pan almost pulled Will off the counter when he swung it. It shoved him sideways when it hit the right side of Lucien's head with a deep thunk. The blow knocked the pan from Will's hands and it crashed to the floor, landing hard on its edge, denting the linoleum, then clattering from side to side, until it settled flat. During the seconds the skillet was coming to rest, Lucien hung in the air, swaying, his head cocked oddly. Then his knees buckled. Will looked down between his dusty boots at the Lucien pile on the floor. The screaming went silent, except for the wind.

His mother regarded Will through puffy, red eyes.

"Oh my God, Willard, why'd you go and do that? When he wakes up, he'll kill us both."

Will looked at her, then down at the floor. "Had to," he said.

He jumped down, reached for the pan, and placed it back on the counter beside the cutting board.

As he and his mother stood looking at Lucien, blood began to trickle from his right ear. They watched it trace a line down his square jaw, then drip, drip, drip onto the floor.

"Well, oh, oh boy. I guess we're leavin' then," she said. "You stay here and watch him. Run quick and tell me if he moves."

She ran out of the kitchen and up the stairs toward the bedrooms.

After clearing Lucien with a big step, Will inched toward the kitchen door and pushed it partly open. He heard doors and drawers opening and closing. His gaze clocked back and forth, from Lucien on the floor in front of him, over his shoulder toward the stairs. He wasn't sure how long. When Will's mother came down the stairs, she placed two suitcases by the front door, then turned without a glance at him and went up again.

Finally Will felt her hands, a shaky touch on his shoulders. She peered over his head at Lucien and said, “Good riddance.” She led Will toward the front of the house, the kitchen door swinging closed behind them. There was a pillowcase stuffed full, leaning on one of the suitcases. She handed it to Will. “There’re your things.”

He clutched at the sack to keep it from spilling over, pulling a wad of fabric tight in each hand to carry it.

With a suitcase in each of her hands and her good purse hanging over her left wrist, his mother pushed the screen door open with her hip. It screeched on its rusty hinges, like it always did. They both looked back toward the kitchen, but the swinging door remained still. A look passed between them, then Will followed his mother through the door, across the porch, and down the steps. She rushed toward Lucien’s old red beater truck, her dress whipping around her legs in the wind. She kicked the remnants of Will’s kite as she hurried to the truck, and it cartwheeled across the yard like a tumbleweed.

“Up and away,” Will said bitterly.

His mother scowled. “What’s that?”

“Nuthin’,” he said.

She loaded the suitcases in back, while Will climbed into the cab clutching his things.

He reached his chin on top of the pillowcase, and asked, “Can we say good-bye to Joe?”

“No, we’re just goin’, no good-byes, no one knowin’ where we’re goin’.”

She cranked the truck. It whined once, turning over on the second try.

“Where *are* we going?”

“Willard, stop askin’ so many questions. We’ll get goin’ then I’ll figure out where we’re goin’ to. We just gotta get before Lucien comes to is all.” She jerked the truck into gear.

Will turned around to see the little white house, curtains fluttering in the windows like they were waving good-bye.

“Bye Joe,” he whispered. “Bye Scout. Bye Tuck.”