

Up

Today is the general public's chance to fly a Cessna for about thirty minutes – accompanied by a certified instructor, of course. A free barbecue lunch has attracted an impressive crowd of people; I can see their blurred figures underneath the pavilion, distorted by the heat waves coming off of the ground. They are all sipping free soda and enjoying chicken smothered in sauce. However, I am denied this relaxing afternoon meal. Instead, I'm sitting nervously inside a small, two-passenger airplane, in a seat that looks ridiculously similar to an electric chair. The window beside me is propped open, the smell of barbecue sauce hangs heavy in the air, mixed in with the sharp metal tang of airplane hulls. The afternoon breeze is thick with humidity. As a trickle of sweat runs down my forehead, I wonder why I decided that I could attempt to fly. I think it was my father who suggested that I sign up for the event. He told me that flying was just like riding a giant, airborne bicycle.

I've never flown in a plane before; I don't think I've even been four stories off of the ground. Hell, I'm in college and I still don't *drive*. I get around just fine with a two-speed bicycle equipped with a rubber horn and a reflector. I'm terrified of fast-moving objects, and I'm not too fond of heights.

I'm about to ask the instructor if I can change my mind about this whole flight when he looks up from the chart he's been filling out. "Are you ready to go?" he asks.

"No."

He laughs, thinking I'm joking. He hands me a headset with heavy black pads over the ears and turns the key in the ignition. With a dangerous rumble, the plane jerks to life. I can feel the engine buzzing in my teeth; my ears might be bleeding from the noise. I hurriedly put the headset on. The thudding propellers in front of me are thankfully muffled.

I can hear voices crackling on the other end, and then my instructor, "Roger that. "

We begin to move. I feel all the blood drain from my face; a small whine begins in the back of my throat. The pilot looks over at me. "Put your hands on the yoke and help me take this plane up."

No, I want to stay on the ground. Slow down, we're going too fast. I woodenly move my arms to grasp the yoke in front of me. We gain even more speed; the trees beside the runway become a blurry line of autumn foliage. The plane wheels begin to skip against the ground. I squeeze my eyes shut; the yoke moves in my hands and my stomach gives a massive lurch as the plane wheezes

into the sky. I chant words like a mantra in my head: *giant airborne bicycle, giant airborne bicycle, giant airborne bicycle!*

The horizon drops crookedly away from us as we ascend, and suddenly we are buffeted around by wind; the plane jerks around in the sky like it's being pummeled with physical blows.

"Air pockets in the atmosphere," the pilot says to me. "They're like little surprises to keep you on your toes when you fly."

I have a little surprise of my own, which I put, very neatly, into a plastic baggie in the nick of time. I wipe my mouth and squeeze my eyes shut. *This plane jumps more than the Irish people in Riverdance!*

The pilot's voice cuts through my nausea. "You can't fly the plane very well with your eyes closed," he jokes. "Are you all right?"

"You can't fly the plane very well with your face stuffed into a barf bag, either," I answer.

"I'll hold her as steady as I can. In the meantime, why don't you look out the window? That helps sometimes."

"I am looking out the window. I'm looking straight ahead."

"Look down."

I turn my face slightly, still holding my air sickness bag in case I have another 'surprise' waiting, and glance downward. At first, I have to squint; the sun reflecting off of the paved ground gives the world below sharp, bright clarity. And then I begin to take in the sights, forgetting, for the moment, that I'm still terrified of flying. I can see the shingled rooftops of houses and the burning yellow and red of the autumn trees; cars march like ants down the highway, gleaming in the sunlight. We soar over a rock quarry and the man-made lake that was dug there; the water winks and shifts in the wind. There's a baseball diamond and a soccer field, freshly mowed. We pass over sprawling farmlands; the brown backs of the cows look like fat chocolate sprinkles in mint green ice cream. The plane throws a T-shaped shadow over snowy cotton fields and buildings baking in the suburban afternoon.

"Have you ever flown before?"

"No, never." I'm still staring down at the ground, trying to find places I recognize. Being this high up doesn't bother me as much as I thought it would, and I'm finally noticing that I'm not feeling the hundred or so knots that we're pulling. There's too much sky all around us to really get anywhere fast. It actually feels like we're floating.

The pilot smiles. "Well, you should be proud of yourself for handling yourself so well on your first flight. If you're still feeling sick, we can abort and return to the airfield."

I consider for a moment. “Let’s keep flying,” I say. “This is sort of fun. And I’m sorry I puked in your plane. I guess I’m so used to going slowly on a bicycle that I panicked.”

The pilot adjusts the rudders. “Don’t worry about it,” he says. “There’s no shame in riding a bike.”

I nod, staring at the glowing reflective dome that crowns the downtown mall. Webs of road stretch out towards the rounded horizon. I wonder how long it would take to reach the next county.

“You know,”

the pilot says after a while, “planes are pretty similar to bicycles.”

I look at him. “You’re the second person who’s said that to me. How do you figure that? Bikes can’t fly and can barely get over thirty miles an hour.”

The pilot nods. “True. But, did you know that the first people to build a plane and fly – the Wright Brothers – were bicycle designers? I bet they used bicycle blueprints when they first began building their plane. So, in a way, the bicycle and the plane are first cousins.”

“So this plane is just a giant airborne bicycle?” I ask.

“Exactly.”

My stomach has stopped churning, and I’m beginning to relax. I’m a little embarrassed now that I made such a fuss about flying, but now that I’m up in the sky, I’m proud of myself. I’m on top of the world, riding around in a flying bike, with thirty whole minutes of airtime under my belt. If I can fly, I can do anything. I bet I can even start driving a car to my classes one of these days.

. . . Though I still prefer the bicycle.

First Place
Senior Short Story
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