

## Kiss Me, Catherine

She was really not too interested in him. He did have an airplane, drove a nice car, and he wasn't above stopping at a speakeasy now and again. As long as the principal or the board of education didn't have spies out, she'd go with him to the little houses tucked away on dirt roads over at St. Regis Falls, or downriver, outside of Norwood. She'd have one drink. That's all. She was a Catholic girl, you see, and he—well, she guessed he wasn't, since she'd never seen him, or any of his family, at church. But she'd never asked. His was only a temporary appearance, she told herself, in her search for love and happiness. He'd do for now.

Who knows what he had in mind? Probably the usual—a squeeze here, a nudge there, but no serious action. She was a Catholic girl, and he'd known Catholic girls. So he'd focus on the car and the plane.

Which he did all summer. She loved it—breezing along Rte. 11 in the middle of the night, the rain curtains in the trunk, the cool air whistling through her hair. He got it up to fifty one night—which frightened her. She asked him to slow down, and he did. No comments. No smirks. He was a gentleman. On such nights, she snuck into the house with shoes off, giggling, and he rolled the car past the house, in gear, engine off. She waved, and walked slowly up the stairs, glad that they were carpeted.

Then on a hot September day, while they were sitting on the side porch, he asked her: "Catherine, what would you think of a flight in my airplane this weekend?"

Lord, she thought. They'll never let me go.

"You don't have to tell your parents, if you don't want to. Unlike most of the pilots around here, I have a license, and over three hundred hours of completely safe flying."

She looked down at her lap. "Three hundred hours? That doesn't seem like much..."

He straightened: "Oh, it is. Many of the postal flyers have less. And they fly every day. It's in-air time. Half an hour to Watertown. About two hours to Syracuse."

"Well, I'll have to see."

She had to see. Which she did, a week later.

Me! Catherine Mary Macomber, up in the sky—a bird, an eagle. Not necessarily an angel, but—no one—none of the men, none of the women—in my family has even been to an air strip, not to mention in an aeroplane. I think I'll do it. I think I'll tell Charles I'm going to do it. No. I will do it. And Mother and Papa don't have to know.

So it happened. Charles was at the air strip early on that Sunday morning. Catherine, riding her brother Irving's old Schwinn bicycle, got there just before noon. She had stayed a few minutes longer in church after Mass, praying, as she told Mother, for a special intention. "Please, Lord. It's just a few minutes. Don't let anything happen."

Charles was standing in front of the tan biplane. A clean—probably new—leather flight suit and helmet, and a pair of goggles were draped over the side of the passenger cockpit.

"Go ahead, Catherine. Put on those things, and hop in." He smiled.

There was no hopping in—rather, she had to climb on a stool, lift her legs over the edge of the cockpit, and unceremoniously drop into the seat. She was embarrassed, but he wasn't looking.

Charles stood in front of the plane, grasping the propellor. He gave it a shove, the motor caught, and there was a loud noise—much louder than any car or truck she'd ever been in. He jumped into the pilot's seat, and looked around at her.

"Are you all right?"

"Yes. Of course." were the words that escaped from her bloodless face.

The aeroplane began to shake. And it was still on the ground! "Oh, Lord," she thought. "What has my pride brought upon me this time?"

Sensing her terror, Charles taxied, very slowly, out of the grass and to the edge of the dirt strip. He looked back. "Are you strapped in?" he asked.

"Strapped? Oh, I see." She tied a belt around her waist. Why hadn't he done this for me?

"I'm sorry, Catherine. You're my first passenger. I forgot to tell you about the belt."

His first passenger. Now he tells me. Does Charles really know what he's doing? He's such a good driver. But an aeroplane. Oh, Blessed Mother, remember me!

"Everything's OK. You'll see. We just go up, circle around town, and come down. Like I said the other day. Nothing fancy, and certainly nothing dangerous."

"Yes, Charles." I will not cry, and I certainly will not vomit!

He turned up the throttle. The propellor began to whirr.

Terrifyingly.

But the vibrations subsided as the plane began to find itself. They crawled out on the strip. Then they bounced along on it, picking up speed. Catherine looked down at her lap. What can I look at here? Let's see. I think there are little green leaves behind the violets on this handkerchief. I wonder how many?

And then Charles let out a yelp. "Yo-ho! We're up. And away. How do you like it, Catherine?"

Like it? Like what? Why--she looked up. Wait. What is this? Oh, my goodness, where is the ground?

"Hee-yah," she heard, coming from the front cockpit. "We're aloft!" And so they were.

Catherine kept her eyes on the back of Charles' head. But it was moving back and forth, leaning left, then right, as he began to break into song. "I've been workin on the railroad, all the live long day, I've been workin on the railroad, just to pass the time away..."

She couldn't believe this. Charles was such a sober man. So upright. And here he was, acting like a drunken teamster.

"Charles? Charles?"

"Yes, Cathy?"

Cathy? Nobody calls me Cathy. It's Catherine, or goodbye.

"I mean, Catherine."

Good. He's still capable of self-correction.

"Catherine, all you have to do is look over the edge of the cockpit. Don't look down yet. Just look straight out or up. We're up with the clouds, and it's wonderful!"

Ever so slowly, Catherine shifted her vision from Charles to the edge of her cockpit--familiar territory--and then up. She saw a cloud. Not a cloud. No, it was a cloud. But it had a top and a bottom. She could make out a fuzzy space in the cloud and then, she was suddenly wet! It was raining!

"Sorry, Catherine. I didn't mean to fly us into that little cloudskie." Cloudskie? What's gotten into Charles?

"It's really so beautiful. You can see the river. The falls look like puffs of cotton from up here."

"The falls, Charles?" The wind hurtling past her ears must be tricking her.

"Sure, the falls in the middle of town. Oh, we're past them. Here, I'll make an adjustment."

Catherine suddenly felt a change. It was as if her sense of balance had suddenly disappeared, as when she fell off a bicycle for the first time. "Charles! WHAT ARE YOU DOING?"

"We're going back to the falls. You'll love it. This time, try looking down."

She did. Why, they weren't going fast at all! Maybe five, ten miles an hour. And she could see all of Potsdam. She had no idea of what she was seeing, though. Must be houses. Maybe the post office. Silver lines to the north and south of town. Why, that's the railroad! Where's Papa?

Where's Papa. He was not at work on a Sunday, so the question was more of a muffled cry for help, uttered to her inner self, than a legitimate question.

"Can you see them? Like cotton, no?"

"Why, yes, Charles. They do look like cotton. And over there, isn't that the College?"

"It sure is, in all its red brick grandeur. And over there"--he pointed--

"Uh, Charles, could you not POINT?"

"Oh, sorry." The plane dropped a few feet as he put both hands on the control wheel.

My God! He's TRYING to make me sick!

"There. Well, Catherine, we've circled the town, as I said we would. How do you feel?"

Wonderful, Charles! Can we go down now?

"Why, yes. It's called 'landing'. We go down to the land."

On the land, I hope. Not in the land.

Very slowly, they began to descend. The land began to grow, to become more detailed. Buildings, trees began to have distinct, sharp shapes. Their familiar color returned. Catherine was relieved. Then she began to feel sick. What if...?

Charles was singing again. "Home, home on the range, where the deer and the antelope play..."

Catherine decided to look at her lap again. It was so close, so real, so reassuring. She counted violet leaves, then, BOOM--dud-duh-duh! They were bound to the earth again.

But she had flown! In the sky! With the eagles and the clouds--and even the angels...The aeroplane came to a halt. Charles stopped the motor, then stopped singing. He jumped out of his cockpit. Catherine looked up. He was smiling at her, his hand extended. She let him lift her to her feet, but then climbed over the edge of the cockpit unassisted.

"My," she said. "My, Charles. That was some ride."

We call it a "flight," Catherine. And you did all right. You're a natural."

A natural? I'm not sure I know what he means by that.

"You've got the goose, the juice, the hoombah."

Huh? Has he lost his mind?

She began walking to the edge of the strip. Her bicycle was lying where she'd left it. She was a little woozy, for sure, but a bicycle would be nothing. She had flown!

"But Catherine, where are you going?" said Charles, puzzled.

"Oh. I thought I'd ride home."

"Well, I suppose you can. But I've got the Packard parked over by the flight shack."

Oh, yes. The Packard.

"Well, if you don't mind, Charles, I think I'll ride home on my own."

"Have it your own way. I'll see you again soon, won't I, dear Cathy?"

"I think so, Charles. But it's Catherine."