

Vanguard

by
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His wife stands in the doorway, red-eyed. Her brother is there behind her, protective in the shadows.

Henry Claiborne turns away and stares at the muted TV, wishing they would just leave so he can make a start on the Project.

"I just don't understand any more, Henry," she says. "You've got to get a grip!"

Henry smiles. She doesn't know about his project.

"Come on. Let's go," says his wife's brother, as he lifts her last case.

"Goodbye Henry," says his wife.

The front door squeaks and slams shut. Peace and quiet at last. Closing his eyes, Henry sits back in his reclining chair and savours the sense of relief that wells up and suffuses his whole body.

He will get a grip. He'll show them.

He flicks on the TV sound with the remote and the Red Arrows split in a shriek and he pushes the volume up high. With the stereo remote he turns the volume on that up as well, then surfs the cable channels with one hand and flicks from radio to CD to tape and back again with the other, relishing the random cacophony that fills the house.

The Project. What to do first?

Start collecting some of the smaller units, laying them out so he can begin the ergonomic analysis, or just make a list of the tools he will need for the later stages? Or both?

He feels a tingle of excitement.

The first visit to the aircraft museum focused something in Henry that he had been only dimly aware of for some years: disappointment at how mundane his life had turned out to be, and uncertainty as to how to turn it round.

He'd gone under mild protest, but surprised himself by finding the variety of old aircraft strangely intriguing; the pointy supersonic Concorde, for instance, and the skulking, vulture-like B-52 with its eight jet engines and tiny wing-tip wheels. And as well as older historical objects such as the war-time Lancaster bomber that he recognised

without even reading the information panels, the museum had a range of long-forgotten oddities that pricked Henry's imagination in ways he had not expected: the little propeller biplane Dragon Rapide airliner redolent of takeoffs at sunrise in the Empire between the wars, and the swept-wing Victor V-bomber of the atomic Dan Dare fifties seeming to point the way to the same lost future that Henry felt he had mislaid. Now mostly metal and rivets and rubber locked to the ground like weird sculptures, it was hard to believe these museum pieces were flying thirty or sixty years ago.

Most wonderful of all was the swooping, aerobatic Supermarine Spitfire which really could still fly, its propeller a halo of spun gold as it carved turns against the sunset with its trademark curved wings, the noise of its throaty Merlin engine clearly conjuring up for several of the audience a bittersweet memory of the summer of 1940. The announcer declared that the Spitfire was one of the most beautiful aeroplanes ever designed, and Henry had to agree; she looked like a whippy, one-man thoroughbred, the ultimate man-machine symbiosis.

Was this the vocation he had missed? To be able to fly like that you must surely have to live in the moment, focusing animal awareness on the task of feeling out the air currents like an eagle, reading the sky uncluttered by the junk of daily earthbound stress.

Get a grip, she says. OK, I'm doing it. I'm starting now.

He turns his recliner to face the patio doors and the view out to the rolling fields and the puffy clouds marching westwards across the sky. He pushes the sofa and the other armchairs out into sitting room, along with the coffee table and everything else irrelevant, leaving a big enough space in which to work.

He goes round the house, collecting up any easily portable appropriate objects. The radio, and the alarm radio for that matter. The computer, monitor and keyboard. And the printer. The video camera, and the still camera; and the video sound mixer he'd bought cheap and never used. Let's get it out and use it! The microwave. The iron, of course. Any calculators in the house. Both phones. His watch, and any other clocks and timers.

He brings them all into the sitting room and starts laying them down around the sitting room wall, next to the TV and stereo.

In the weeks after visiting the aircraft museum, Henry found himself looking up at every plane that flew overhead, whether a light Cessna pottering around Luton or some FedEx trijet letting down into Stansted. Initially frustrated at being unable to identify the types he

saw, he bought several books and in them found Amy Johnson, Antoine de Saint-Exupery, Brian Trubshaw, Chuck Yeager, Yuri Gagarin. He started watching flight documentaries on the Discovery Channel, marvelling at the jagged boomerang of the B-2 Stealth bomber, the fragility of the original Wright biplane and the barmy wonder of the nine-wing Capronisimo luxury flying houseboat from 1921 that encapsulated the aspirations of an age while simultaneously contriving to be one of the world's worst-ever aircraft.

He bought plastic models and spent hours exploring their structure in miniature, hoping to find the key to their essence in some commonality of design. And he found that his waking hours were increasingly preoccupied with powerful images of flying, the ground barely distinguishable below as he banked across the cloudscapes and pitched up to arc across the sun. A half-seen silvery glint in the air was enough to send him into a reverie of freedom, projecting his mind and soul into the sliding currents of the atmosphere, the wind fierce in his hair and the tears running from his squinting eyes, riding the turbulence in his open-cockpit Tiger Moth like Saint-Exupery finding suddenly he had slipped beyond the confines of this world.

His subconscious was clearly trying to tell him something. In London to investigate flight displays in the Science Museum, he came across the Apollo 10 command module and wondered if this was the key. As he peered into the cramped interior, he found it hard to believe that the little cone had actually carried three men around the far side of the Moon. Maybe it was the seed of something new.

Henry contemplated staying in the museum after hours and clambering into the capsule to spend a night with the wax dummies of Stafford, Cernan and Young. Would he wake from sleep to find himself weightlessly circling the Moon with them, watching through one of those tiny windows as the lunar landscape rolled past below and the Earth rose lonely and distant into the eternal blackness of space?

There's other stuff, too, less portable. The dishwasher. The cooker.. now, that's a challenge. The washing machine. Oh! The bathroom scales! Mustn't forget them. And then there's the light switches in every room, not to mention all the plug sockets, and the water system: taps, the mains, the gas boiler, the radiator thermostats. Gas and electric meters. Cable TV box. Fridge thermometer. Car dashboard. Rip it out!

On one day that had started not much differently from many others, Henry sat in his grey office in Hemel staring out of the window

at a high jumbo's pure contrail drifting westwards, far above the dull rooftops of the industrial park. Amazing that some jumbos were in the air more than the were on the ground. "I wonder if the passengers realise what they're doing." He closed one eye. "Building the foundations of the future..."

There was a knock as the door opened and Stefan Pierson came in, carrying a printout. "Henry?" he said, calm but wary, noticing Henry's phone off the hook, "what's going on?" He put the printout on the desk. "Lizzie Bryson said you'd have BP3 revised. It's been a month, but what do I see? no change, and I have to get the figures to the States this afternoon!"

Henry glanced at the spreadsheets. A grid of numbers, purporting to predict sales in all territories for the next fifteen months. But how could anyone really tell? It was meaningless, an attempt to claim the future by imposing spurious form on it.

"Stefan," said Henry, scrawling a signature across the numbers anyway, "don't you just dream of flying away sometimes?"

Stefan pursed his lips, thoughtful. "Umm... Lizzie also said you were talking about flying a lot. Daydreams."

Henry looked up at Stefan, eyebrows raised. "It's more than that; it's a gateway to something I can't see yet."

"We're..." Stefan hesitated. "Henry, do you think you need some kind of break?"

"What?"

"This is a cry for escape?"

Henry laughed. "Maybe! But it's a bit obvious. I think I'm on the verge of something new." He waved his arm vaguely, indicating the office cubicles and the business park generally. "Suppose this is a reaction to the scheduled, mass-produced way we live and work and shop now?"

"What's wrong with it? We've all got targets. We get incentivised to exceed them. We get to go home at nights."

"But what about the long term view? I think I'm somehow tapping into a future where humanity lives off-world, flying continuously weightless in a three-dimensional environment, as our ancestors lived in the oceans. This two-dimensional land existence must be just a blip on our upward path..."

Stefan closed his eyes. "You've not been taking any hallucinogens have you?"

"What?"

"For fuck's sake, Henry, you're a regional sales manager in a publishing company! What the hell are you talking about?"

Henry could feel himself blushing. "Something more of us should be doing - mapping the future. And a damn sight more usefully than your 5-year corporate strategies."

"Henry. You're letting me down."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Stefan looked at Henry's untidy desk, and his e-mail flag blinking, and the unrevised BP3 spreadsheets. He sighed. "You need to make things happen, Henry. Now. It's about being proactive, taking control. Not escaping over the horizon."

"I'm a middle manager in a bureaucratic corporation." Henry pointed angrily at the spreadsheet. "What kind of control is that? Now, these pilots I've been researching, John Glenn and the others, they're taking the human race to a higher level; the kind of people H.G.Wells says have the right stuff to rule the world!"

Stefan laughed. "Because they fly untrammelled, and look down on us who noodle along in offices pushing paper around?"

Henry nodded warily. "There's something spiritual about flight that's the key to our next stage-"

"Slipping the surly bonds of earth, to touch the face of God?"

"Yes! - exactly!"

"Well, go hang-gliding then!"

"You're not taking me seriously..."

"OK. On your terms. Your pilots: think, man! It's not the 20s and 30s! They're part of a closely regulated industrial complex. You've been on airline flights - it's a competitive service business delivering a value-added transportation product! And dull men in suits like you are in charge of it, making budget projections-"

Henry stood up. "You're wrong!"

"No! Pilots are white collar workers! Middle management administrators of an integrated technical system!"

Henry picked up his jacket and walked out of his office as Stefan stood up and shouted after him: "Even the military! It's not scarf-and-goggles types punching a Hurricane into the wide blue yonder any more!"

All this will take a lot of wiring. And more plugs and power points. More things for the list. Wood: two by four, and one by one, and plywood. Some glass. Some new tools, too. Nothing but the best! A jigsaw, screws, hammer, drill. And copper tubing. And bricks and mortar. Welding equipment. Soldering equipment. Sketch a design, and then I'll know better what I need. This is fun!

At the Three Horseshoes Henry sat out by the canal, nursing pint after pint and thinking that there was something in what Stefan said. The pub itself was at a transport nexus where several strata of the industrial archaeology of motion could be seen from where he sat. Here was the old Grand Union canal, barges drifting among the ducklings at four miles an hour, while a couple of hundred yards behind the occasional train thundered past on the mainline rail from London to Birmingham and beyond, whipping up a corridor of wind. And above, at the pinnacle of the transport network, silently massive Boeings and Airbuses wheeled in stacked circles like enormous gulls, waiting for clearance to descend into Heathrow after flights from Munich and Kuala Lumpur and Seattle and Baku.

All this was going on every day, all the time, routinely, repetitively, organised, controlled, automated. As Stefan had indicated, modern pilots were not adventurers fighting the night flight mail through cracked-tooth Andean passes in thunderstorms, they were cogs in a vast transport machine that practically ran itself, travelling routes they were allotted far above the weather, obeying air traffic control and constrained by accountants who pored over load factor reports. Flying? No, just a dehumanised business operation shuffling units around like any other. Plug in the guidance data and the jumbo could get to Bangkok by itself, its so-called pilot second-guessed by fly-by-wire systems and global positioning satellites.

Maybe events had taken a wrong turn and the era of the Tiger Moth was dead, but Henry suspected it was not yet time for humanity to give up everything to automation.

He's got a new security system, with CCTV and intercom on the front gate and lots of nice shiny switches to operate it. And instrumentation for the greenhouse windows. It's getting there. He has plans, not just a plan for plans. He has the tubes and the cables and the hammers and nails. He knows where things will go and how he is building it. He's maintaining visibility, he knows he can reach everything. It's all tickety-boo, it floats his boat.

Henry felt it unnecessary to go back into the office. He reduced extraneous personal clutter and ramped up his programme of research, to get himself into a position where he could see clearly how to take the next step forward.

The journey took him back to the aircraft museum, still uncertain what he was looking for but sure he would find it eventually, buried somewhere in the design assumptions of the grounded aircraft

dispersed around the airfield as if waiting for the call to scramble one last time.

Wandering past the chubby Sunderland flying boat and the shell of the cancelled TSR-2, Henry found himself inexorably drawn to the elegant Vickers VC10, the high-T tailplane, rear-engined British airliner from the optimistic sixties. Undersold by comparison with the blocky 707 and DC-8, it had long since been superseded; evolutionary design convergence had resulted in the indistinguishably dull high-bypass twin-jets that proliferated like rats in the modern air system. A commercial failure, the VC10 looked to Henry like a real aeroplane: the Spitfire of the airliner world.

That gave him an idea.

At the VC10 cockpit doorway he smiled. Through that aging, faintly scratched windshield the crew would once have looked down on the Alps, the Atlantic, the plains of Africa and the deserts of the Middle East. This was it, the old-fashioned complexity of a utilitarian, pre-computer flight deck, complete with a vast array of eight hundred or nine hundred controls and dials and buttons and knobs and switches and rockers and levers, all marked with cryptic, functional lettering. The control columns were well-used, polished by twenty or thirty thousand landings and takeoffs. Henry took his time to let his gaze wander over the dusty instruments, dark now, that had once been the apex of flight technology: the needled dials that showed the engine states, the electrical buses and circuit breakers, the trim wheel, the R/T panel, the de-icers, the engine fire extinguishers, the PA phone, rudder pedals, the weather radar, flap controls, and the shiny-topped throttle levers that had been thrust forward and back and forward and back in Cairo and Johannesburg and New York and London and Bombay and Sydney and Singapore.

This was all concrete, protuberant, mechanical, tactile engineering with switches that clicked, a solid gun-metal grey environment that a real person could interact with and understand, not some ghastly modern virtual cockpit of beige carpeting, fly-by-wire hand controllers, autoland and VDU screens providing a flickering, flaky cyberglimpse of the plane's conception of the real world.

This really was it. The VC10 was at the turning point, its heyday at a time when men were going to the Moon and looking forward to the stars, but built when people who'd trained in open cockpits still had to use physical force to push those controls around. It was the link between low-flying, cold and unreliable prop planes of the early days and modern mass-produced airliners that everyone pretended was not a travelling aeroplane at all but some sort of waiting room, a restaurant, a cinema, a place to rest after going shopping in the glittering retail departure mall.

He was keen to start exploring his own prototype, to put himself on the first steps to building the skills necessary to navigate the turbulent currents of futurity.

Get a grip, get a grip! Put your hands on the levers of power. Step by step and line by line, suck that puppy and make it shine! Brick by brick, set goals for success and achieve, make things happen, build the future, hit your targets! Turn that tap, punch that key. Take charge! Be aggressive, look forward, and set the controls for the heart of the sun!

Henry Claiborne's wife is increasingly worried that no-one has seen or heard of Henry for several days and decides one bright morning to go back to the house. She can hear music blasting out loud over the radio even as she parks in the driveway.

As she pushes open the sitting-room door she is surprised to find the room transformed. A complete mess of plywood offcuts and piles of cement and tools and wires surrounds a wood-and-brick building not much smaller than the sitting-room itself, hulking like a misshapen spider amongst a web of what seems like hundreds of stretched power cables and copper pipes shining in the sunlight.

Her first inclination is to ring her brother, but she can't see the phone. She reaches for a light switch, but finds that it has been removed, wire running from it to join others heading into the back of the shed. Looking round more carefully, she realises that every light switch she can see has been adapted, and every central heating radiator has been replumbed, the valve and thermostat controls removed and new copper pipe welded and snaking into small entry ports built into the new brickwork.

Warily stepping through the web, she moves closer. There is a wooden hatchway on the left hand side of the structure, so she gingerly pulls it open.

And there on his recliner lies Henry, surrounded by empty Chinese cartons and every last conceivable control, monitor, switch, button, keyboard, dial, valve and tap you can find in the domestic or work environment, re-engineered to be easily accessible from his command chair. The electricity meter is whirring round patiently, the tape deck and CD and tuner/amp lights blinking as the music plays, the TV is on but showing only static, the computer monitor displays a screensaver of gulping fish. The two telephones are easily to hand; all the sink and basin and bath taps are plumbed into one overhead panel; there's the speedometer and odometer from the car; radiator thermostats are clustered on the right, next to the house light switches and the

security camera apparatus; remote TV controls fixed into handy units on either side of the main seat; the gas meter, all the electric plug sockets, the barometer, greenhouse thermometer and car altimeter and the fusebox and bathroom scales and all the door handles in the house; and the cooker and microwave and kitchen implement controls, ripped from their proper locations, are fixed into a panel across the front of the cockpit, just under the glued-in car windshield.

And Henry. He's smiling, clutching the car steering wheel, staring out through the windshield, out through the patio doors to the scudding clouds and beyond, into the light of the morning sun.

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