

Learning to Fly

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Learning to Fly

Harry Delaney is a night janitor, and he is teaching himself to fly. As he works his way up and down the dim corridors of Waterville Public High School with his mop or his broom, he can feel what it would be like, floating, oh, four feet above the floor, moving easily through the air, though not fast.

This feeling is especially strong on the top floor, because when he gets to each end of the hall he can look out far over the fields, seeing shadow and light only, no color by moon or star. He remembers that he used to stand at those windows twenty years ago, a hopeful sophomore, his heart open to the fields during that brief hush of time just before each class bell rang. Now, in the intervals of silent work, Harry can see himself gliding over the crops in their graded rows, the trees lined up along the edges of the field, the occasional farmhouse below, stark like a black and white photograph. At first, when this feeling came to him, he would just stare out the window. That was in the winter, when the snow was an ocean of pearls under the moon. Later, in the spring, the feeling became so strong he found himself trying to make it happen.

He stands motionless at one end of the hall, and closes his eyes. Slowly his arms rise up to stretch out in front of him, hands relaxed, palms down. He is poised as on the edge of a diving board, ready to launch into the air, but not fast like a diver, more like a balloon released from a child's grasp. His weight shifts to the balls of his feet, rolling him forward to waver on tiptoe, testing that slight springing movement that will send him upward on a slant until his body levels out, gently pushing the air behind and past him, like Superman in slow motion. And when it doesn't happen, his arms fall back to his sides, and his heels settle onto the worn linoleum floor. Then he picks up his broom or his mop and continues his work until it is dawn and time to go home and sleep.

Each morning, he waits for a few minutes at the end of the sidewalk by the parking lot behind the high school. Soon a white Buick Electra comes into view, small at the top of the hill about a mile away, then gone behind a row of elm trees, then there at the driveway, crunching over the gravel. Emma, the school cook, is arriving to start the coffee for the teachers, bake the rolls and cookies for lunch, stock the milk machine, and line up the battered spoons and forks, the chipped serving bowls and platters. Harry watches as Emma steps out of her car, the long heavy door swinging out, opening up the clean blue interior, plush and soft, like the inside of a gleaming white box that holds a diamond ring.

Emma smiles with her whole face as she walks across the gravel, looking up at Harry as he looms tall and thin to her plump smallness.

“Hi, Harry.”

“Hi, Emma.”

“Want some coffee? It’ll just take a minute.”

“No thanks, it’ll only keep me up all night.”

This is repeated every morning like passwords that allow them to change places. They have known each other since they were children, have grown up attending the same schools, church, summer camp; their parents had been friends and neighbors. They even dated for a couple of months, in their teens. Now, almost twenty years later, they talk with an ease born of early familiarity. Emma married when she was twenty, but her husband, a boy from the next county whom Harry did not know well, died within the year of complications of pneumonia. They didn’t have time to start a family, and Emma did not marry again.

Harry wasn't around while all this happened; he'd gone into the Navy for four years, then lived in California and Oregon for some ten years after that. He only came back to Waterville about a year ago though he isn't sure why. His mother died about ten years ago from the cancer that struck her hard; his dad died when Harry was fourteen, and there is no one else left in the family. Harry ended up taking the job at the high school last summer when old Joe Thomas, the night janitor who'd been there for as long as any of them could remember, decided to retire. Now it's almost summer again, the last week of school for the year.

Harry silently takes a heavy grocery bag from Emma's arms. She nods her thanks, and opens the door for him. Her rubber-soled shoes squeak as she walks down the hall and into the cafeteria. He puts the bag on the cold metal counter next to the refrigerator as Emma clicks on the small light above the stove with its six black burners, clean but worn. The sun is just showing up in a cloudless sky that gleams light blue across the growing fields of corn. It throws a tentative light into the kitchen from the high windows facing east.

"Going to be warm today."

Harry nods.

"You doing anything special this summer, Harry?"

"Haven't thought about it yet. You?"

"Well, one thing, I'm not going to do much cooking!"

"Yeah, well, I guess I won't be doing much cleaning, come to think of it."

Harry watches Emma as she fills the coffeemaker with measured grounds, pours water into the top, then punches the toggle switch to start it brewing. It occurs to him he might tell Emma about his wanting to fly. He doesn't think she'll laugh. He opens his mouth, but the words that come out are the same ones he says to her every day of the week.

“Well, time to go. Have a good day.”

“Okay, Harry, see you tomorrow. Sleep well.”

Above the hardware store in town is a small apartment, accessed from the street by an aluminum and glass door with a wicker blind on it that flaps and clacks when the door is opened or closed. Harry parks his car around the corner in the alley behind the store, and, walking to the front, takes a small pleasure in the stillness of the town at this hour. It's too early for any of the merchants to be in their stores yet, although the diner down the street is open as usual for morning coffee, eggs, bacon, French toast, hash browns and donuts, plain or frosted. He trudges up the long straight flight of steps to the second floor.

The apartment is clean, all the dishes from his evening meal washed and dry now in the white plastic drainer on the sink. Today, later on, or maybe tomorrow, he will take some clothes to the laundromat, a chore he rather enjoys. It feels good to sit there with the warm, humid air filling the small space, the whirring of washers in their endless cycles, the constant hum of the dryers. Harry likes the warmth of the clothes on his arms and hands and chest as he pulls them from the dryer into the four-wheeled cart. He always feels a little cold, even on a warm day. Sometimes he thinks his skin is too thin to cover him properly.

Now he closes the blinds and draws the curtain against the opening day. Outside is the sun, and he will sleep in the darkness of a darkened room. Later, he will go out in the fading light, and work while the rest of the town eats dinner, and watches the news, and makes love and sleeps.

One of these nights, though, he will fly.

The night before school lets out for the summer, Harry stands again at the end of the hall on the fourth floor. It is half past three, the time when, a nurse once told him, if people are going to go, they go, when everyone else is sleeping and they can slip away without anyone bothering them, their souls flying up to heaven with the angels, she said. The nurse who said this had been on duty at the hospital the night Harry's mother died. He was in the room with his mother when it happened, and had wakened from an exhausted sleep only when the absence of breathing had changed the sound in the room. He had not seen her soul take that last flight.

Standing now at the school window, his thoughts turn from his mother to the day his father died. It was the day after his fourteenth birthday, and his dad had given him a new bike, shining black and silver. Harry had ridden it to school that day, racing across town, flying down the small hill that led to the school parking lot, skidding to a halt in a whirl of dust and gravel. What fun he was going to have on that bike all summer.

Word came to him at school that afternoon, just before history class. Harry was standing at the window, looking out at the corn shooting up in the fields, thinking about his bike, and marking the seconds before the bell would ring and send him racing for the door just before it would close. He looked away from the window, checking the clock, and saw Mr. Sawyer, the principal, walking toward him with a serious look.

"I'm just going to class now, Mr. Sawyer!"

"That's all right, Harry, that's fine. I ... need to speak with you about something, son, something that has happened."

Harry felt something cold creep into his chest, like an ice cube in his heart.

"What's the matter, Mr. Sawyer? Is it my mom?"

“No, Harry, your mom’s okay. Look, why don’t we just walk down to my office for a minute. I’ll explain everything there.”

There had been an explosion, and a fire, at the canning factory, where Harry’s dad was a supervisor. He had been a brave man, everyone kept telling Harry, he had saved people from the fire, but then was overcome by the heat and the smoke. The firemen had tried and tried, but all their efforts to revive him had failed. A neighbor was there to take Harry home.

Harry stares out the window at the black and white June night. Though it is warm, he shivers. The ice cube in his chest rivers through his veins and arteries, his muscles and his bones; he can see the blue coldness through the thin covering of his skin.

“Whatcha doin’, Harry?”

After the first start of surprise, Harry recognizes the voice. He doesn’t turn to look.

“I’m wishing I could fly out over the fields for once and for all,” Harry says.

“Yeah, well, you were always wishing that, back when we were young,” the voice says.

“What’re *you* doin’ here?”

“Talking to you, what do you think?”

They are silent together, looking out the window.

“Are you thinking about Dad?”

“Yeah, yeah I am.”

“What’re you thinking?”

Harry doesn’t answer for a bit.

“Well, I’m thinking about how he died in a fire, and how I’m cold all the time.” He pauses, then looks over at the other man. Harry sees he is wearing his favorite sweater, a boat-necked navy blue cotton pullover with a white stripe across the chest. He looks calm and ruddy, even has a little more hair. “What do you make of that?”

The man thinks a moment, then shrugs.

“You’re the one who started it,” he says. “I’m always plenty warm.”

“What do you mean? How come?”

“How come I’m warm?”

“Well, that too, but, okay, let’s go with that.”

The man thinks again.

“Okay, the first thing I did was, I kept riding my bike.”

“So?” Harry says.

“That whole summer, I rode over to Dad’s grave every day. I talked to him there. I told him how much I missed him. I talked to Mom too.”

“I don’t understand,” Harry says. “How does that make you warm now?”

The man eyes him, not unkindly.

“Because I never let myself stay cold in the first place.”

Harry just looks at him, then looks away.

“It hurt,” he says in a low voice, staring out the window. “It hurts now.”

“I know,” the man says. “You think I don’t know?” He pauses, then speaks again.

“Then I married Emma Sallinger.”

“You *what*?”

“Well, not right away, after the Navy.”

“We were both in the Navy?”

“Well, we did most things the same, up to a point.”

Harry thinks about this.

“So what’s it like, being married to Emma?”

The man smiles. “Great. She’s just great.”

Harry nods slightly.

“You still think it’s your fault, don’t you?”

Harry is silent.

“Well, don’t you? Just because he went to work that day, his usual day off, because he’d spent the day before with you, you and that damned bike, right? So that makes it your fault, right?”

Harry grips the windowsill tightly, glaring at the night fields rolling away across the land.

“Why are you here bugging me?” he says.

“I came here to teach you to fly.”

“What?”

“You heard me. You do want to fly?”

Harry turns to look again into the eyes so like his own, but without the regret. Then he nods.

“Okay, watch me, then. I’ll show you.”

“You can fly?”

“Just watch.”

The man who looks like Harry stands very still, his eyes closed. Slowly his arms rise up, stretch in front of him, palms down, relaxed. He rolls his weight onto the balls of his feet, and

with a slight spring he launches gently into the air, travelling slowly, leveling out about four feet above the floor. Harry feels a soft whoosh of air flow past his face as the man moves forward, gliding smoothly, like Superman in slow motion. He opens his eyes, looks back at Harry and smiles. With a turn of his wrist he floats first to one side of the hall, then the other. Harry watches him as he gains the far end of the hall, turns gracefully, and makes his way back until he is again on his feet, standing in front of Harry.

“Now you try.”

Harry starts to protest, but the man shakes his head and gestures for Harry to take his place. Harry steps away from the window, facing down the long hall. He takes a deep breath, letting it out slowly. He closes his eyes. His fingers are cold and his chest feels exposed and icy. Arms raised, leaning forward, he loses his balance and catches himself before he falls.

“It’s no good. Forget it.”

A warm hand gently grips his shoulder, and shakes it slightly.

“C’mon, son, you can do this,” and this time the voice is Harry’s dad.

A flush of heat bursts from Harry’s heart and travels to the top of his head and the tips of his fingers.

“I don’t know if I can, Dad,” he whispers.

“Sure you can, Harry.” The strong fingers scrunch the back of Harry’s neck and ruffle his hair.

“But, Dad...”

“I know, Harry.”

Harry is quiet for several minutes.

“I’m sorry, Dad, I’m really sorry.”

He feels the warm breath of a long sigh blanket his shoulders and his back, down through his legs and into his toes.

“It wasn’t your fault, Harry. It was my choice. I did what had to be done, I knew what I was doing. Don’t waste any more time with this,” his father’s voice takes on that firm quality that Harry remembers so well.

“C’mon, close your eyes, and raise your arms again.”

Harry does as he is told. He leans forward into the warm air, and he feels his father’s hands, one on his chest, the other on his back, like when he taught Harry to swim. He looks up and sees the long window, open at the other end of the hall, coming nearer. When he reaches it, he can see the rows of corn under the night sky. And with a rush that almost breaks his heart, he flies out the window and up into the stars.