

Brenda Miller

BALSA

Yesterday evening, my friend Karl went up in a flying machine at sunset. He had told us about it for weeks: a glider, he said, that would swoop low over the Virginia countryside. I'd been up in a glider myself, years before in Seattle, right before moving out of town. We had gone out to an airfield near Issaquah, and it was early evening then, too, the sun just setting over the Olympics; a small jet roared off with our small glider attached by what looked like quite an insubstantial string. We spiraled up and up into the clear sky, and before we knew it we were set free, just floating, gliding as the plane's type had announced. But I guess I hadn't really understood, or grasped, that there'd be no motor propelling our craft; all we had was the momentum from the mother plane's flight and the careful, ultralight construction of our wings to keep us afloat.

I couldn't help thinking about those balsa wood planes we had assembled as kids: gingerly sliding the ink-stamped parts out of their slim plastic package, the wood light as Styrofoam and so thin it felt like an insect's wing. Inevitably, when I slid tab A into slot A, I would crack the body or the wing just a bit, a subtle snap that made me hold my breath as I connected the rest of the plane. Somehow it all held, but most often, when I took the fuselage between thumb and forefinger and steadied it, then let go with a slight push, the way I had seen my brothers do, it made one sad little loop-de-loop, then went crashing to the ground. Those small cracks, the ones I tried to ignore, turned out to be important after all.

But my older brother somehow made his plane float a long time, the body hovering mid-air, then coming to a gentle landing on the patio, skidding across the concrete with a swish that tickled the ears. He was good at such things: he could be careful and precise when necessary, a disposition that would serve him well when it came to executing plays on the basketball floor. He could send a basketball through the net as if the ball, too, were weightless. He could negotiate the exact arc necessary to make the net flutter as if only a phantom had passed.

Balsa wood: even the words seemed light and insubstantial, full of air, and I liked to murmur it to myself, balsa, balsa, as if such an incantation would make all of it—the planes, my brother's care, the flight—lasting and real. I found it hard to believe such wood really came from a tree, but my father insisted it was so; I imagined the balsa tree rising flat from the South American plains, its limbs infinitesimally thin, shaped like wings. Such a tree would shiver in the slightest breeze, its roots strained, always on the verge of flight.

Those planes, no matter how carefully we followed the directions, never lasted more than a few days, like all those creatures I would eventually read about in school—mosquitoes, say, or certain varieties of flies—who are granted only a week or so to do their life's work, and then they're gone. My brother's finesse with the basketball would gradually fade, as he drifted into adulthood, with adult responsibilities: a job, wife and children, a big house in the desert with swimming pool. When I visit him now, we watch basketball on his big screen television, the players magnified, and we applaud together the ethereal flights the big men can take, hanging in midair as if charmed.

So on that day long ago, above an airfield outside of Seattle, I couldn't help thinking of balsa wood as I circled hundreds of feet in the air. It felt like we were, indeed, seated in a balsa-wood plane just let loose from someone's hand. We were that fragile, and that transitory. Not only this particular flight—circling east of Seattle, seeing first the Cascades all lit up in tints of rose, and then the wide circle back to glimpse the sun setting over the Olympics, and in the foreground Seattle itself, the modest skyline that had become so familiar to me over the years—but the plane in which we sat, gazing at it all. And beyond that: our own bodies, flimsy, really, as balsa—and our lives, which always pass in an instant.

In a few weeks I would be moving east, to Montana, and my friend Sally said, kidding, trying to get me to stay: “There won't be any sunsets in Montana, you know, you're too far east,” and in a way she was right. There would be sunsets, sure, and some of them would turn out to be spectacular, splashy affairs, with light flung all over the place, lapping up against mountains and sky— but there wouldn't be any days when you could actually see the sun extinguish itself in the water, with the skyline of a small city angled toward it as if in applause. I would no longer live in a place where people slowed on the bridges leading back into town just at the moment the color intensifies before it dies. Years later there would be a popular show on television, *Frasier*, and the opening credits would involve a quick hand sketching the Seattle skyline, and I watched that show not only for the antics of Frasier and Niles and Roz, whom I loved, but for that brief thrill of the Seattle skyline evoked in just a few, quick lines of chalk on the screen. *Good night, Seattle!* I mouthed along with the jazzy theme song, *good night!* Saying good night not only to that skyline and that city, but also to the person I used to be in that city, a girl who

would go up in a glider for no apparent reason, just to see what could be seen. A girl who knew that everything's made of balsa wood, anyway—flimsy, the tabs squeaking into place, held together for as long as it takes to fly one round—so why not take a chance?

My friend Karl, the Karl in the present day of my story, wanted to go up in a low-flying plane before he left Virginia, and it turns out it wasn't a glider at all, but some fantastical flying machine. Someone came running in to the dining room and yelled *Karl's up in the air!*, and the room cleared out, our dinners left steaming on their plates, and there he was, just a few feet above our heads it seemed, perched in what looked like a hybrid of a bicycle and a plane—with wide cloth wings striped in red and gold, a propeller churning off the back, and bicycle pedals going around and around: like something out of *Mary Poppins* or *Yellow Submarine*. The flying machine swooped up over our heads, and we waved and waved until Karl finally waved back—his helmeted head looking down on us as if he were some wise insect on his last round in the sky, his blurred hand a distant semaphore of farewell.