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Cloud Dancing (Final 4/1/10) (sold 8gg in 1995)

Sometimes life gives me a gift, a moment when I can actually enter my fantasies and smile when they become tangible wonders that I can taste, smell, see and feel. It happens when, at the age of ten, I smile from high atop my first horse ride. At sixteen it happens again on my first day alone, driving the family car with my brand new driver's license. I proudly notice the red needle on my speedometer and see it matches the speed-limit sign on Route 22. I feel like a real driver. Years later another fantasy gift happens with my first night in bed next to the intimate warmth of my lovely sweetheart.

And now I will set out to enjoy my Superman fantasy, to go up in my own airplane and zoom around the clouds simply for the fun of flying. No lessons, no practice, no mindless bug-smashing, no missions, just go fly where my nine-year old childhood dreams went years ago.

The windsock hangs limp. Usually, it moves fretfully, indicating wind direction and speed. But today, the air is inert at Dutchess County Airport. The orange nylon tube hangs lifeless, as if exhausted by the pressing heat.

It's the hottest day of the summer, a sweaty ninety-seven degrees. I walk across hot grass to the parking spot where my little airplane, an orange and red striped Cessna, is tied to the ground and baking in the early afternoon sun. The nearby, doors of small private hangers are all closed, protecting the expensive electronics inside from the damaging temperatures and discouraging birds from building nests in the darker recesses of engines. I hear the hum of auto traffic on Route 376, a mile away at the end of the runway. The heat has driven passengers, pilots and fuel truck drivers indoors to drop quarters into the soda machine. It's eerily quiet, without the angry sounds of pistons and whining jet engines.

To the west of the Hudson River, colossal cauliflower-shaped cumulus clouds blossom, born as prevailing winds swoop up the western slopes of the neighboring Catskill mountains from the rising heated air to finally cool and condense. As the day gets hotter, the clouds will grow; if the air is unstable enough, they will mature into evening thunderstorms. Seasoned Hudson Valley pilots pride themselves on their ability to predict when the Catskills will deliver a "good boomer." Right now, the clouds are just airborne cotton candy.

The sun seems stalled overhead. Heat rising from the brown-tipped grass at the parking spot swirls around my ankles. The humidity makes marching around my small plane, for the required pre-flight examination, feel like I'm wading through hot soup.

Following my checklist, I flip the ailerons and check for loose bolts, run my fingertips across the propeller looking for nicks, wag the rudder back and forth testing for tightness, and examine the antenna wire fastened at the top of the tail. Salty sweat stings my eyes. I scan the July sky, dense with haze that mutes the dazzling blue that I know lies in the upper altitudes. In fifteen minutes I'll be there, cooling off.

I climb up into the cabin and sit, scorching my thighs on the blistering leather seat facing the pilot's controls. The inside thermometer says the air trapped in the cabin is 140 degrees. The cockpit smells of sweat, old leather, electrical wires and the last faint remaining molecules of some old first-time passenger's scrubbed-up vomit from somewhere in the back seat. This baked aviation potpourri fills my nostrils and stirs vivid memories of past trips aloft.

I fasten my seat belt, open the tiny window and twist the starter. The big engine swings the propeller once with a lazy "whump" and then roars to life, filling the cabin with a perfume of green grass and exhaust fumes. It's too steamy to close the window just now. I scan the instruments, slip on my headset and prepare to talk with the tower. It was Charles Lindbergh who started the tradition of a pilot referring to himself and the airplane as "we."

I reach for the microphone. "We will be departing overhead," I tell the tower controller. Not north, east, south or west. I explain that we're not going anywhere today except 12,000 feet above the airport. "Just

to cool off for an hour," I tell him.

The customary formality is absent from his response. "Got an empty seat?" he asks. "The air conditioning is broken in here."

With the engine rumbling, I taxi slowly off the grass onto the white concrete following the yellow centerline to the departure end of the runway. The heat makes everything in view wavy. Closing the window, I see crows standing in the shade of the limp windsock. It's too hot for the birds to fly.

The controller, now in a more official tone, clears me for take-off. I push the throttle all the way in and release the brakes, and the airplane comes to life. It moves us forward, gaining speed. It charges forward with the engine roaring. We gracefully leave the jarring runway. Our airplane-shaped shadow follows below and gets smaller as we climb. It dashes along the runway and into the trees at the end. We begin climbing out of the sweltering lowlands of Dutchess County. The air is sultry but smooth, no bumps today.

As a rule, air temperature cools as you go higher. Textbooks say it gets about four degrees colder every thousand feet. I am headed from sea level to what pilots call "twelve grand," or twelve thousand feet, where, according to my calculations, it will be forty-nine degrees. What a treat.

The lush dark green of the Hudson Valley swings into my field of vision.

I see combed cornfields, highways and dirt roads that hide in the woods and serve some purpose that always leaves me wondering. A soaring hawk, its wings spread, flashes past my windshield a few feet away. Bright turquoise swimming pools dot the landscape like jewels hidden behind houses. My view is unlimited, almost godlike.

At 12,000 feet we have left the haze below. The sky is so suddenly clear and blue that it makes me smile. Looking down I can barely see the airport. Everything but the twinkling of the sun's reflections on lakes and rivers is muted.

As the engine churns, I scan my new world. It is so beautiful that my heart rises in my chest. It is cold and dry here. I can see my breath. I'm shivering.

I look forward through the invisible arc of the propeller and find, in front of me, the tops of the rising cumulus. Puffy white billows, a mile wide, create thousand-foot valleys between their fluffy outcroppings. I am the soaring Superman of my childhood dreams as I bank the airplane to the right and circle this water-filled white and grey giant. The dark side is cooler. Canyons of clouds are changing shape as they move past my eyes. I see a deep canyon between a giant pearl pillow mother cloud and its small baby outgrowth. I point my Cessna into the valley between the wall of white and the little tendril tower it has released. I'm a tiny airborne bug approaching a mountain of

whipped cream.

I see my airplane shadow, no bigger than a pimple on the neck of this majestic form.

For fun, I turn and plunge into the finger cloud in front of me. A tiny bump greets the plane as the blue sky disappears and I am engulfed in solid grey. Water droplets streak across the windshield and the temperature drops another eight degrees. The outside fog is sucked into the cabin and chills me. Then I pop out the other side, into bright sunlight that warms my legs. I push the nose down and start a descent back into the hot stew that is simmering below.

As I float downward, the brilliant sapphire sky once again becomes sandy grey and the faded earth below transforms into a deep green. The gathering wet heat fills the cabin. The tires chirp their arrival onto runway 24. As I roll back to my parking space, a rivulet of sweat trickles down my chest and is wicked up by my shirt. It is now insufferably hot but I don't care. I've been cloud dancing like Superman and have waltzed for a few minutes, from July into January.

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