

Prologue

In the Beginning

IN THE BEGINNING was Arcadia, a land so vast that its ends were mapped only from the sea. Caught between ice and independence, its middle was largely empty, hospitable only along a southern fringe. Competing conquerors vied to prise the land and its riches from the custodian tribes.

Centuries passed in parochialism as the conquerors remained aloof from revolutions and from each other. Arcadia's Backward Party finally patched together this uneasy family of loyalists with steel rails and spikes, proclaiming a monopoly for private enterprise. A half-century later the Forward Party echoed their achievement, stitching the patches still closer with airplanes and radio beacons, and proclaiming the rightful place of government.

To this day adherents to disparate faiths, fatherlands, mores, and mother tongues sit uneasily together in parliament, struggling to frame the issues of the day in terms of Backward and Forward, public and private. The story of Arcadia has been and still is a story of technology sent forth to link the unwilling. Railroad and telegraph, aircraft and radio range, radio and television: these are bribes which tempt the tribal children to travel and listen.

This is the story of a particular Arcadia, as she is known to herself and her people. To the wider world she was Trans Arcadian Air Lines, later known as Air Arcadia as she morphed from public to

private and still later passed from publicly held through bankruptcy to privately traded. Is it any wonder that we are confused? She herself is confused.

But do not be put off by trying to comprehend financial arrangements to which only the gifted are privy: there is plenty here for our unremarkable intellect, plenty to engage our limited attention. This is a story of how technological wonders – the original aircraft and radio ranges urged on us by the Forward Party – were forged in the crucible that is our Arcadia, with its mountains and lakes and ice and plains but mostly its weather, its extremes of heat and cold, water and ice and snow, clouds and fog in undreamed-of combinations, winds of a strength only associated with the open ocean; how these technological baubles, thrown into the crucible and sparked into a life of their own, continued to develop along with the other Arcadia, the airline they made possible, and, as life itself so often does, moved in directions not predictable in their genetic code.

It is also a story of Arcadia's pilots – one, I would venture to say, that we might rather not know. As we sit for hours in a space too small after surrendering our human dignity in a full-body scanner, we would rather think that the worst is over, that all we must do is endure until our arrival at the gate. And usually this is so. But the reality is that we are packed into a small aluminum tube hurtling through space, held aloft by forces created when the wings divide the atmosphere into separate paths. We are breathing air that enters through the engine intakes and is packed together by thirteen or more successive compressor stages. Our aluminum tube is kept separate from others like it by the pilots' collaborators and colleagues, the Air Traffic Controllers. Finally, our fragile tube, after hundreds or thousands of miles in the clear and in solid cloud or rain or snow, shrugs these trailings of atmosphere off her wings and emerges at that exact point where the runway is there before her, her energy and her velocity vector in three dimensions adjusted

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so she can flare and land and dissipate the remaining energy with drag and braking and reverse thrust within the confines of the runway. This feat of navigation is accomplished – and here I am going backwards through history – with the help of GPS, IRS, INS, ILS, VOR, ADF, and the Radio Range. To this day our orientation in space is maintained with the help of gyros, both mechanical and now with those which to all appearances are virtual: beams of ruby laser light are the only movement as they race in opposite directions around a triangular crystal racetrack, their interference patterns speaking to us of minute accelerations.

Yes, you may say. That is all well and good. But why should we dwell on these matters? Do we have to know anything about the protocols involved? And do not the airplanes these days land themselves?

You are right of course. Many of them can – in the right conditions and on certain runways – land themselves. Some airplanes are even designed to be pilot-proof. This knowledge is reassuring, because we are human and we understand what it is to be human and we would rather not trust our lives to something as fragile and fallible as humanity. We would rather put our faith in impenetrable technology. But just as your cellphone occasionally drops a call, so from time to time there is a crash and people lose their lives.

Perhaps we would rather not know. Certainly the management of airlines and aircraft manufacturers would rather we do not. A yellow tape goes up around a crash, in every sense of the word. Move along. Nothing to see here. But every real pilot understands and accepts that the job, the job he loves, is to keep that crash from happening. The responsibility is his and his alone. Should he (or she) survive his career he also understands that it is not just his superior skill but also luck that bore him here.

And so, dear reader, traveller, trusting passenger, beware. Do you really want to know how sausages are made? Do you really want to shed your illusions and see those who are, for those hours in

the aluminum tube, your last line of defense against an untimely death? Do you really want to see them in the context of their messy humanity, a humanity not unlike your own?

But if you would know more about Arcadia – the airline Arcadia – you have no choice. To know her you must know something of her world, her airplanes, and especially her people. For what is she without them?

I am thinking especially of the pioneers, the legends whose stories were passed around as we flew the line in the early days. Knowing the stories added to the surprise when you would occasionally run into one in the flesh, say on a Sunday layover in Calgary where Cicero would command fine repast of chips, carrot and celery sticks and whatever else could be negotiated and brought to the table so beer could legally be consumed, or on a half-hour ferry flight from Ottawa home where, the airplane safely put to bed, Cubby would drag you to a grubby tavern in industrial Dorval that you never knew existed.

It was exciting to meet them, and more exciting to fly with them. Nevertheless, retaining a degree of caution was a good idea then and is a good idea now. For example, if you choose to read on, it might be as well to ask that you reserve judgement on these assholes. You see, in those days the rules for instrument flying were being written, and the assholes were the authors. Their instruments were basic; their radio aids primitive. So they improvised their own Standard Operating Procedures, their own Minimums, and their own Minimum Equipment Lists. Instead of Approach Plates they likely had headings from Farmer Jones' barn.

But they didn't always share their knowledge. It was still, to some extent, every man for himself. You built your own trade brick by brick. No one could tell you how to do it. You did it your way, the right way. You were the captain, you were God, and your word was the law.

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Arcadia – 1954

The sun is just up on what promises to be a fine, hot June day. The 1950 Mercury convertible has cleared downtown Montreal and is heading west toward Beaconsfield and eventually, Hudson. Aside from the gang of four men weighing down the Merc, only the birds are awake. Cicero, the driver, has been holding forth as only he can.

“... and to cap it off, my good man, my landfall was within inches of the plan.”

Cicero is wheeling the Merc around the Dorval circle. He looks like Thor the Large discovering Iceland: his long blond hair and matching moustache blow in the wind; his six-foot-six frame, still mostly muscle in those days, holds his head well above those in the back seat. Beside him Big Bob, almost his equal in size, is slumped slightly sideways so he can hang his arm, and occasionally his head, out into the breeze.

“My navigator, although an amiable enough chap, was I must say nevertheless far from my equal in intellect, and I could see plainly that in his recommended heading from forty west he had failed to consider the gyroscopic effect of the earth’s rotation . . .”

In the back seat Cubby’s blood begins to boil.

“You’re so full of shit Cicero your eyes are brown.”

“Did I hear a voice of dissent from the cheap seats?”

“You couldn’t navigate your way out of a wet fucking paper bag.”

This is not just talk. Cubby is known for carrying his own sextant.

“Those in the peanut gallery would be wise to be seen and not

heard, like the small children they are.”

That wakes up Roy the Boy. Beside him Cubby keeps needling Cicero.

“After some of the stunts you’ve pulled, Cicero, I’m surprised you still have a driver’s licence, let alone a pilot licence. I’ll bet the only type endorsement you have is for the Salt and Pepper Shaker at Belmont Park.”

Looking at Cubby, you wouldn’t give him the longest odds against Cicero the Bulk. He is five-foot-eight and wiry. But Cubby is Basque; uncompromising smuggling outlaw ancestors have been honing their fiery temperaments for centuries so they can pass their secrets on to Cubby. He always claims he can’t help it: he doesn’t want to make trouble but sometimes his blood just starts to boil.

“My good fellow, you have had a snootful. You would be well advised to keep your opinions to yourself.”

The Mercury kicks up dust as Cicero runs wide coming out of the circle.

“Yeah, and who am I afraid of, you pompous assholes up front? Look – you can’t even stay on the road. If you were an F/O worth shit, Bob, you’d have taken control by now.”

Cicero’s neck is turning red. The Merc weaves as he swings his right arm, trying to clip Cubby in the back seat. Cubby ducks and Cicero’s swing continues further than he intends, finding Roy the Boy’s temple as he sits up to see what is going on. Now the Merc is on the shoulder, running through gravel and grass. Cicero stomps on the brakes, bringing the car to a stop with a buck and a wheeze, stalling the flathead V-8. He has forgotten the clutch.

Cubby is out first, leaping tidily over the side. Big Bob opens his door with a heave, almost nailing Cubby, and then lurches out of his seat, leading with a left. Cubby dodges, feints, and taunts:

“Can’t hold your liquor, Bobby. Now you gonna take on the little

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guy?”

Cicero, red-faced with the effort to retain some dignity, gets out and stands up. As he turns he comes face to face with Roy the Boy.

Roy earned his moniker in sports. He especially liked contact sports; although hockey was his main love he played football and rugby as well, and earned a reputation as a good player and a fair player. He is one of those large men who, rather than taking perverse pleasure in beating up those smaller than himself, instead became a stickler for fairness: a check or a block has to be legal; sneaking in an extra move out of sight of the referee is anathema to him. Indeed, Roy has no need to go beyond the legal. If an opponent's nasty move comes to his attention, he is quite capable of sidelining the miscreant while keeping within the rules. In the Air Force the name Roy the Boy stuck because as his team-mates grew older and wiser in the ways of the world, Roy maintained his boyhood faith in the natural justice of things. Still, he never seems quite aware that the agent of justice is himself.

Roy's face still smarts as Cicero turns, obviously enraged, and looks him in the eye. Beyond his throbbing temple Big Bob is a peripheral shadow, struggling to move fast enough to lay a hand on Cubby. One on one there. Fair enough. He holds Cicero's gaze, waiting him out, even though it is obvious that Cicero has already lost control. Cicero lunges, trying to pin Roy against the side of the Mercury. Physical contact can not be avoided, but Roy ducks and pins Cicero's knees against the rear wheel well. The momentum of that large upper body and that swelled head takes charge, rubbing the blond moustache along the rear fender and down into the gravel.

Cubby runs around the front of the car, staying clear of the drunken Big Bob and determined to come to the assistance of his team-mate. Roy holds up a hand to stop Cubby, nodding toward the big blond on the ground.

“Time out!”

The Merc's left taillight lens, which had looked like half a smile, is broken. So, it appears, is Thor the Bore's nose, which is distinctly lopsided and bleeding profusely. Cicero rises tentatively, feeling his nose, mumbling sonorously.

"Fucking bunch of goons! Cretinous sons of bitches! Brawling bastards!"

Meanwhile Big Bob is earnestly trying to hold his end up. He circles the other way around the convertible, appearing behind its rounded rump and taking in the blood on his buddy's moustache. He looks up at Roy.

"You!" he accuses. "You!"

Roy the Boy holds up his other hand.

"Time!" he commands. "Easy!"

But Big Bob is beyond imprecation. He is in the La-La Land of the very drunk, each breath of cool air a gift, each successful movement a surprise. He advances steadily, ponderously toward Roy, his sleepy gaze trying to focus on the task at hand. When he feels he is within range he begins to concentrate, the effort plain on his slack features.

Again Big Bob leads with his left, lunging with the effort of the hard punch. Roy steps to the right and then as the punch goes by pivots to the left, wrapping his arms around Bob from behind in a bear hug.

"Easy, I said."

Big Bob grunts, trying to dislodge Roy by simply stomping around in a circle. Roy's toes are dragging in the gravel, but he is not a rider to be dislodged easily. Still grunting fiercely, Bob trips and falls face-first into the gravel, Rider Roy still attached. Although his arms hurt, Roy knows he has to watch his back and shoots a glance over at Cicero.

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The Big Blond is still trying to get up. He has almost succeeded, but he has a rider of his own: Cubby has Cicero in a two-arm headlock and is still needling him.

“Oughta get you to a doctor, my good man.”

Cubby’s voice takes on a smarmy sincerity. He twists his head back and forth as if examining the damage.

“That patrician nose of yours is in danger, Cicero. In fact you look like a fucking bum. No one is going to listen to your bullshit now.”

For a few heartbeats time seems to stop. Cubby gazes speculatively as blood drips from the big blond’s chin. Wearing an ironic smile Cubby takes his left hand from the headlock and grabs enough hair to twist Cicero’s head around for a better look. Their eyes lock. Another few heartbeats go by and the big Viking suddenly relaxes, slumping into a sitting position. He starts to laugh.

“Truly this is a fine morning,” he pronounces.

Blood is still dripping from his chin and being shaken loose from his moustache as he laughs. Through the magic of booze, brotherhood and a night on the town – or perhaps it is just Basque trickery – the tension of a week of flying has been released.

“A great day for a ride in this fine vehicle. Anyone for breakfast?”

