

Rebel Airplanes

I.

Joyce swatted at the pine dust settling in her hair. She was sanding *The Etta*, a remote-controlled aircraft that would fly fifty miles above sea level. Once there, it would glide to the edges of outer space to record a clear view of the earth. Steve had shown Joyce a YouTube video of a plane with a similar mission that had failed to keep its video connection. “Shoot,” Joyce told Steve when she watched the video. “That’s my next project. I want one of my planes to travel to outer space and back.”

Of course, she and Steve had talked about this mission before her doctor’s prognosis. They’d chatted about it at Santa Monica Beach. Steve had spread a green blanket near the wharf where they sat and ate blueberry crumble and drank drugstore champagne. Afterwards, Joyce lay with her head in Steve’s lap and watched the video of the plane on his phone. She cupped her hands around the tiny screen. “You’re an inspiration,” he had said, which could have meant, at the time, that Joyce was a brilliant engineer. That he believed her planes could accomplish any feat. Those same words spoken today would mean something different. “You’re an inspiration” would not refer to her career but to how bravely she was confronting terminal cancer.

Joyce unplugged the DeWalt sander from her garage wall. She remembered the day she became interested in remote-controlled flying. She had just divorced Russell after his sixth extramarital affair. It was early spring, and she had been staring through the window of the county building where she worked as a civil engineer. She was supposed to be updating land-use maps, but instead she stood at the window plotting revenge fantasies about her ex. That's when she saw the red and blue drone. It did loops over the municipal lot. "Steve," she'd said, "Check this out. This little aircraft is making the most daring, sharp-angled moves." Steve looked over the desk that they shared in their open office floor plan. He was supposed to be numbering documents, putting numbers into a database, assigning a file number to groups of documents, but instead he was reading ESPN.com. They were one month into their relationship. Steve folded his arms and stared out the window at the tiny plane, now upside down over the grass, now flying right side up. "Expensive hobby," he'd said to Joyce.

Joyce moved closer to the window that day, her nose touching the glass and leaving behind a greasy mark. She saw the group of men operating the planes. She saw their brightly-colored aircraft zipping past the palms. Look at that, Joyce thought. Folks were flying in the middle of the day when she was trapped inside at work.

Days later, she and Steve built her first plane in Steve's backyard down in Lynwood. She'd build all of her planes at night after work or on weekends. It took forever for the spacers on the first plane to set, and they had to run to the store several times to buy more tubes of epoxy.

"Baby, I'm tired of driving for glue. This time can you tell me exactly how much you're going to need?" Steve asked.

Joyce stared at him. He was not the finest man in the world, but he made Joyce butterscotch pancakes each Saturday, and during their lovemaking her body moved in ways that it never had with her ex. This, she concluded, was love. The secret to love was not to have any expectations and to break all the rules you encounter. If the rules were church wedding, handsome husband, and fuck in a bed, these days Joyce Banks did the opposite.

“Alright, she’d said. I’ll run to the store. You watch this wing. If it starts to drop, hold it in place until I get back.”

The other challenge with her first plane was beveling the nose ring to make it fit. That had taken forever. But when she was done, her plane, which she named *The Koko*, was nothing short of spectacular. It was lavender and gold, five feet long, and had a wingspan of three feet. Joyce started naming all of her planes after badass blues women: *The Koko*. *The Billie*. *Ma Rainey*. The plane Joyce wanted to build now would be smaller than *The Koko*, and it would have a weather balloon that would take it to an altitude of 98,000 feet. That’s where the balloon would burst. After that point, the engine would keep her aircraft propelled for about half an hour before it would fall back to earth.



“You always tinkering,” the voice said, startling Joyce.

It was her neighbor, Kevin, standing in her driveway. The darkness of night framed him from behind as the light of the garage beamed on his face. Kevin, an enlisted Army soldier, wore a red shirt and camouflage pants. He had his thumbs hooked into his waistband and his head was tilted to the side as he watched her build the plane inside of her detached garage.

“It takes a long time to put this together, Kevin. You should come in here and help me,” she said.

“Nah,” Kevin said. “I just wanted to stop by and say what’s up.”

“How’s your mother?” Joyce asked.

“She’s alright. How’s Marquise?”

Joyce put down her tools and walked to the driveway. “He’s good, Kev,” she said. “He had a game last week against Stanford where he scored twenty points and had six assists.”

Kevin stared as if lost in some memory. He did that often since he’d returned from his last tour. Kevin and Marquise had grown up together on this street in central L.A. The violence in the area had changed drastically over the years, but the homes had remained the same. The houses were square and immovable, what Joyce called apocalypse ready. They were

Spanish-style bungalows made with tiled roofs and premium stucco, materials that were too expensive to use in mass home construction nowadays. As boys, Kevin and Marquise ran between these structures, slamming the metal screen doors as they chased each other. That was back when both of their fathers lived with them. Today, only their mothers were here. Kevin would stay in his mother's house until his next combat tour in the spring. Joyce's son, Marquise, was at UC Davis on a basketball scholarship.

"Tell the baller to get at me next time he's here," Kevin said.

"I will."

Kevin looked around her and into the garage. "What's the assignment for this latest plane?"

Joyce put her hands on her hips and inhaled. Deep breaths helped relieve the throbbing across her back. During her last surgery, doctors sawed off one of her lower ribs, which left a nerve exposed.

"I'm taking this one to a state park," Joyce said. "She's 'bout to fly into outer space."

"No shit?"

"No shit, Kev. You wanna come when I send her up?"

"Nah," Kevin said. "Do your thing, Mrs. Banks. You can tell me about it when you come back home."



Weeks later, when the construction of her aircraft was complete, Joyce drove by herself to the edges of Rios de Los Angeles State Park. *The Etta* was rough in a few places—the wings were crooked, for example—but overall Joyce was pleased with the aircraft and with its radio system. She was less pleased with how long it was taking her to climb out of her truck once she parked. Harder still was walking a few yards away. And she shivered uncontrollably. She could never seem to keep herself warm these days.

She eventually made it to a clearing not far from the park river. Joyce stood there until she could control her movements. This required an intense focus, a turning inward and away from the world around her: the trees, the swarm of gnats hovering over the grass. It's not that she couldn't see these things,

but that she tried not to think about them. She would only think of quieting her mind and relaxing her body. Soon, she was standing without moving.



Once her nerves settled, she sent up her plane. *The Etta* rose above the park at a steady clip. Joyce watched the aircraft until it faded into the clouds. Then she watched the FPV. This equipment gave her a view of the plane's trajectory as if she were sitting inside. At 98,000 feet, her weather balloon burst as predicted. She clapped her hands together one time. "Yes! That's how we do it!" she said. Then the plane was in the stratosphere continuing its ascent. Joyce followed its location on the viewer and watched the streamed images. Her plane was flying beyond the heights occupied by commercial aircraft. At seventy minutes after takeoff, Joyce looked at the FPV, saw the curve of the earth against a black background, and she cried. The video connection was crystal clear. She'd done it! Joyce watched the video for several seconds and then began guiding her aircraft back to the park.

She had control of the plane until about 60,000 feet. Then the picture and radio signal went dead. "Shit," she said. Her back hurt, so she bent forward to rest her hands on her thighs. Minutes passed where she did nothing, the pain placing her in a stupor where she couldn't move. This is how her doctor said it would end. Dr. Tutihasi, or Doc Tootie, as Joyce called her. There would be pain, but more significantly, there would be fluid that would slowly leak and rise inside her lungs.

"Basically, I'll drown from within?" she'd asked.

"That's not how I would describe it. Not precisely," Doc Tootie had said.

Joyce would not recall how long she stayed there hunched over like a rock gnome. She would only remember that it seemed like an hour had passed, at least, before the pain in her body finally eased. Chronic pain altered time and space in ways that Joyce didn't fully comprehend even though she recognized that moments were stretching as if elastic. When the pain subsided, she tried again to recover her plane, but the signal was still lost. She packed up her equipment and went to the truck.

"I lost the damn plane," she told Steve when she arrived home.

He was standing in the yard with a garden hose. He was watering grass she'd over-fertilized and burned to a crisp that spring. Her lawn looked like she'd planted hay.

He turned off the water and looked at her.

"That's okay, Joyce. The thing is—you got her up there."

"But I didn't bring her back."

"That's okay."

"No, it's not," Joyce said. She went into the house and slammed the door.

Later that night, as Steve slept in the bed next to her, Joyce sat upright going over each step of constructing *The Etta* in her mind. How could her plane just disappear? Where did it go? She thought back to the first person viewer system and the wiring of the video transmitter. What could she have missed or done differently? Maybe it wasn't the transmitter, but the video downlink or the on-screen display. She'd been suspicious of how cheaply the craft store priced the display. She could handle the idea that she'd made a mistake during the construction, but what she couldn't handle sitting there in her dark bedroom in the middle of the goddamn night was that she'd lost the entire airplane. She had no idea of where it had landed and she'd been too exhausted to search for it when she was at the park. Now, she couldn't even inspect the aircraft to figure out what might have gone wrong.

She called Marquise on the phone. His voice was muffled at first. "Ma?" he answered.

"Honey, are you awake?"

"Yeah. Everything okay?"

"No, honey, it's not. I lost my plane."

"Huh?"

"Joyce, who are you talking to?" Steve asked. He was blinking his eyes as he tried to pull himself out of sleep.

"I'm talking to Marquise. Honey? Marquise, you still there?"

"Ma, what'd you say?"

Steve pushed himself into a sitting position. "Baby?"

"I said I lost the plane. All that time and money I spent and I don't even

know where the damn thing landed. I'm thinking about going back to the park to search for it, but to be honest, I don't know that I even remember where I was and I didn't keep track of things. That's what's upsetting to me. My methods were really sloppy this time—"

"Baby?"

"What, Steve? What?"

In the silence that followed, Joyce became aware that her right boob had sprung from her nightclothes. It, too, stared at Steve as she turned to face him in the bed. At the same moment, she heard Marquise say in hushed tones, "*It's my mom,*" which meant he had been lying next to his own beloved when she called. She was interrupting his life. Like that time when he was a teenager. She had been complaining to him about using up all of her expensive lotion. Then one night, she thought she heard someone in the house and she came out of her bedroom and went into the hall. She heard a noise again in Marquise's bedroom and when she opened his door,

she saw how he had been using lotion to rub himself through the night.

"What is it? I'm talking about *The Etta,*" she said to Steve.

She knew she was ridiculous. What sane woman wakes people up to discuss a toy drone with her boob hanging out like some sorry flag?



Her disruptive phone call resulted in one good turn of events. Marquise purchased a train ticket home. He rode the Amtrak to visit her that weekend. He spent some time with Kevin next door. Mostly, though, he followed Joyce around the house. He was there as she washed and folded his clothes, as she looked in the bathroom mirror at her thinning hairline. In every room Joyce entered, Marquise soon followed with his chatter. "Then coach said twelve more laps," he'd say to her, or "We beat them by thirty-five points," or "O-Chem is hard as hell, Ma, but I get to retake the test after our next game." Joyce was thrilled by all of his talk. For years, she suspected that Marquise had so little to say because he hated her for divorcing his dad. His father was an actor who was starring, back then, on a popular network series. Joyce was never able to compete with that. Her work required her to

photograph highways and to measure the muddy sewers beneath L.A. She worked underground. She might as well have been a mole, or better yet, a hater, as her son's early social media postings had always reminded her. "Can't wait 2 leave my mama house" he had posted when he was in high school. So it was nice to have him return home as a young man who was unafraid to show her affection. He had not done this since he was little Marquise, the boy who would need orthodontia for overlapping teeth, the one who despised brushing his hair.

She turned from folding his bright pink athletic socks to look up at him. He returned her gaze. "How is Auntie Irma doing?" he asked.

"The same. We should go see her while you're in town."

For years, her aunt Irma had been giving folk hell inside a nursing home that was across the street from a noxious oil field.

"Yeah, we should," Marquise said without a hint of sarcasm.

She decided they would visit the nursing home on that Sunday, before Marquise returned upstate. As they walked into Irma's room, a nurse was handing Irma her medication.

"You're being very nice today, Irma, I appreciate that," the nurse said.

"What did you say? I can't hear you, young man," Irma yelled.

The nurse bent over and raised his voice. "I appreciate that you're cooperating today."

"What did you say? I can't hear you."

The nurse laughed and handed Irma a plastic cup which she took. She lifted it to her lips and dropped a large orange pill into her mouth. The nurse handed her a cup of water which she drank. As Joyce watched this interaction from the doorway, she could feel the nerve in her back jump like a live wire.

"What's the matter with your face?" Irma said to her.

"A back spasm."

"Are you alright?"

"I'm fine."

"Don't lie to me."

"I'm not lying," Joyce said. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

When the nurse left the room, Irma bent over and spit the pill into the palm of her hand.

“Auntie!” Marquise said bending down to kiss the older woman’s cheek. “You know you were supposed to swallow that. You have to take your medicine so you can feel better.”

“That won’t make me feel better,” Irma said, “but this will.” She got up and slid her old feet across the linoleum floor until finally, after several long minutes of walking, she stood in the bathroom next to the toilet. She dropped the pill in the water. It made a plunking sound right before she flushed.

Irma laughed as she slid-walked back to her chair. Within seconds of sitting down, she bowed her head and fell asleep.

Joyce went to the window and looked out at the bobbing pump-jacks. She knew that crude oil didn’t come easily out of the ground. It took complex machinery with levers, engines, drills, and suction tubes to force the poison out of the earth’s rock.

Irma lifted her head and opened her eyes. “Where’s the baby?” she asked. “Is he walking yet?”

“The baby’s right here, auntie. He’s in college now. Third year,” Joyce said.

Irma looked up at her nephew. “Well, I do declare,” she said.



On the drive home, they stopped at Wong’s for carryout. Joyce had forgotten how much Marquise could eat. Back in her kitchen, she watched him start on his second carton of General Tso’s chicken.

“You want to talk about the plane?” he asked.

“I’m working it out in my mind,” she said.

“You should take a vacation, Ma,” he told her. “You and Steve should go somewhere nice.”

Joyce watched as her only child spoke to her. He acted as if this was normal in their relationship, as if he was the one who always thought through their lives and made the wise suggestions.

“That ain’t a bad idea,” Joyce said. She placed her chopsticks down on her plate. “Hand me your tablet and reading glasses,” she said, pointing.

As they ate, she searched online to get a feel for how much a vacation might cost.

But that evening, Joyce had second thoughts about leaving the country. Steve and Marquise double-teamed on her as the three of them drank beer and watched a cable sports channel.

“Joyce, you’ve been saying you want to get away, and imagine how much good it will do for you to be in another country—a totally different landscape. Different language,” Steve said.

“No, I get that part,” she said, “believe me I do. But the cost. And what if something happens to me while I’m there?”

“What if something happens to you while you’re here? And you never see . . . Norway,” Marquise said.

“Norway?”

“Or wherever, Ma. You deserve to get away. You’ve been working your whole life.”

“Why don’t I go to Norway?” Joyce asked as she stared at her son. When she looked at Steve, he raised his eyebrows in a silly gesture of agreement.

“Oh, fuck you,” she said to Steve. She wasn’t convinced. “I’ve been working my whole life?” Joyce mocked Marquise. She sipped her beer. “Don’t bury me yet, boys,” she said.

II.

Steve and Joyce arrived in Venice, Italy during *acqua alta*. The flooding was so extreme that year, the water reached mid-shin on Joyce and came up past Steve’s ankles as they walked through the city. They carried their shoes in their hands.

“Well this is crazy,” Joyce complained. “I can’t believe people put up with it. Man, what kind of city planning would you call this?”

They were passing the Basilica di Santa Maria della Salute. In addition to carrying his shoes, Steve had their Nikon camera around his neck. He stopped now to take a photo of the building. Joyce looked down at the water

where they, along with several other tourists, stood snapping pictures. One woman accidentally dropped her cell phone into the stream.

They were standing in a reflection of the cathedral that was cast across the floodwater. Joyce thought how weird it was that they were taking a picture that the sea had already replicated for them. And weirder still, they were standing right in the middle of the church's reflection, disrupting the watery image with their bodies and foreignness. And she felt foreign. She made this clear to Steve as they walked. She was a foreign creature to the sea. In fact, the sea was making her legs itch. And the tide water's constant motion and smell were making her feel sick.

"I need to go back to the hotel," she said.

A flock of seagulls circled and called overhead. It felt like a sign to her, though of what she wasn't sure.

"Let me get a picture of you first. Walk up the cathedral stairs," Steve said.

She sloshed through the water in her bare feet. The cobblestone loosened in the water and she could feel the sharp grit pressing against the soles of her feet. She noticed, too, the difference in her body's equilibrium and in her mood when she was able to walk out of the water onto higher ground, ground that the tide had not yet covered. This is what evolution must have felt like to those fish that figured out how to leap onto the shore.

She stood on a step in front of the cathedral. "Here?" she asked Steve.

"Move a little to the left," he said.

A woman in a straw hat approached Steve. The hat drooped theatrically about her face. "I'll take the picture. You join her and I can get both of you," she said.

As Steve bounded up the stone steps, the birds circled and swooped closer. Joyce stood there and watched. She felt the sun beat on her scalp and she saw how the light broke into dozens of bright points on the water's surface. The glare was almost blinding. "Let's get this over with," she said to Steve as he joined her on the steps. He wrapped himself around her. She moved into his armpit where she felt warm.

"How do you zoom?" the woman yelled at them.

“The silver button!” Steve shouted back.

“Domani l’acqua sarà più alta,” a man standing in the water was saying. “Tutto questo sarà sott’acqua. L’acqua sta salendo. I nostri giorni sono contati!”

“What did he say?” Joyce asked a stranger.

“He said, the tide will be higher tomorrow and all of this will be underwater. The water’s rising. He said that our days are numbered.”

“Oh, I see the button,” the woman said. She stood in the water like a lighthouse. Joyce’s lips trembled as she tried to steady her smile for the shot. She was having a horrible time.



That afternoon, they had lunch at a waterside bar, but Joyce’s mood remained dour.

“I love your hair,” the waiter said to Joyce. He was clearly flirting with her but even that didn’t change her disposition. “Where are you from?”

“We’re from Los Angeles,” Steve said.

“Ah! The city of angels,” the waiter said looking at Joyce. “Then let me recommend for my friends from Los Angeles, the *garusoli* as antipasto. It’s very, very good.”

Joyce looked at the menu and then at Steve. “It’s sea snails,” she said. She wrinkled her nose.

He shrugged. “When in Venice?” he asked.

“Har-har,” Joyce replied. “You so witty.”

Steve turned to their waiter. “You said it’s good?”

“Very good,” the waiter replied.

“Alright, bring us *garusoli*,” Steve announced.

When their food arrived, Joyce was less concerned with tasting a slug than she was with the stinging pain from tiny sores around her mouth. They had first appeared two days before. This morning, in the hotel room, she kept turning her head as Steve tried to kiss her on the mouth.

“Kiss me,” he’d said, either because he was blind or just so horny he didn’t care. But she insisted that he do other things with his mouth and she offered

her neck, and clitoris, and toes as substitutes. They ended up having sex while standing. Steve entered her gently from behind, careful not to bend or place too much pressure on her back. At one time, this position made Joyce feel desirable, but this morning it made her feel that she might break.

“To sea snails with my beautiful woman,” Steve said. He raised a glass of red wine.



Joyce first noticed her shortness of breath in the gondola. It was the day before they would return home. They were in a canal passing a row of crowded cafes. Joyce felt the tightening in her chest. She felt lightheaded as well. *Aggressive* is how Doc Tootie had described her lung cancer during Joyce’s last office visit. But in spite of her onset of breathlessness, Joyce felt oddly at ease. Maybe it was the rocking of the boat or the wind. Or the sight of so many attractive people sitting at tables outside of cafes. Whatever the cause, Joyce felt like she had adapted, momentarily, to her watery surroundings. The irony was, after days of feeling uneasy, it was time for her to return home.

That’s how her timing had always been in life. For example, once she’d gotten used to marriage, that shit fell apart.

“I’m thinking of filing for divorce,” Joyce had told her auntie Irma years ago, before they both fell sick. It had taken her a while to get it, but Joyce finally understood that her marriage was done. Without missing one beat, Irma suggested that they hold a wake.

“Why not?” Irma said, “and I’m not talking sad or Pentecostal. Think New Orleans–style funeral. I’ll bring some Hennessy.”

They chose a weekend when Russell was in the valley filming a pilot episode. The ceremony, “Free at Last: A Farewell to Russell in Three Acts,” took place in Joyce’s living room. They placed programs on dining room chairs that they had lined into neat rows. On the cover of the program were awkward photos of Joyce and Russell throughout the years, their expressions ones of boredom or hunger, except for one photo taken in Puerto Vallarta. In that photo, they smiled. On it, Irma drew curled bison horns over Russell’s head.

“To spare us from having to look at this tragedy,” Irma said, “this marriage has requested a closed casket.”

Joyce disrupted her auntie’s speech with drunken laughter. “I thought we said my marriage would be cremated.”

“Or annulled,” Irma said, “let’s have your marriage annulled.” She turned to face the empty chairs. “This shit never happened, people. Thank you for coming. End of service.”

Oh, how clever they had felt. How clever and how pissy drunk.

What a different perspective Joyce had about it all today. Those years with Russell were just a blip, and had not been worth the time she’d spent grieving. She stared now at the masonry on the bridge as her gondola approached it. This was the oldest bridge in Venice, the gondolier was telling them. Built in 1181.

“Made out of stone?” she asked.

“No, the first bridge was wooden,” the gondolier said. “It received fire damage in the revolt in 1310. And then it collapsed from the weight of crowds in 1444 and 1524. Then when we rebuilt it, we made it strong with stone.”



Her breathing became shallow and more labored on their flight home.

“I think I know what went wrong with The Etta,” she said to Steve between quick breaths.

“Save your breath, you can tell me later.”

“I’m fine,” she said. She took a sip of her airplane water.

“Did you call Doc Tootie to make an appointment?” he asked.

Joyce nodded. “I see her on Wednesday afternoon.”

She continued. “I think next time I’m going to use something that pulls the space tighter in the cavity that holds the battery. There was a gap there. That could have caused the deans connectors to disengage from the power source. And I’m going to put a GPS tracker on my plane the next time,” she said.

“Sounds like a plan,” Steve replied.

Sixteen hours after they boarded a plane at Marco Polo Airport, they

pulled up to Joyce's house in central L.A. Everything was as she'd left it. The houseplants were wilted, but still alive. The mail, mostly bills, had accumulated in the mailbox on her front porch. Seeing the bills reminded Joyce that she needed to make a payment to her doctor and to check on her sick leave from work.

Her garage was in remarkable disarray. She'd never straightened up from her last plane. She stepped around a cardboard box to look at her aircraft. Three out of the four planes she'd built over the years were sitting there on the garage floor.

Kevin walked up her driveway as she stood out there looking at her work.

"Welcome back," he said.

"Thanks, Kev."

"I know you just got in and everything, but I wanted to be the first one to say hello."

"I appreciate that."

He looked at her messy garage-turned-hangar.

"Let me know when you get back in here. Maybe I can help before I go overseas," he said.

"It's a deal, Kev. I'm tired right now, but probably in a day or so I'll be out here at night and I'll come get you. Okay?"

"Cool," he said.

"Kevin," Steve said, "could you help me carry Joyce's bags inside?"

Steve and Kevin carried her luggage in the house and then Steve moved back toward the door.

"I'm just gonna show Kevin out," he said to her.

"Go ahead," Joyce replied.

She couldn't believe how much energy Steve had when she was feeling so depleted. And hot. Her body burned as if on fire. She went to her bedroom and struggled into her nightclothes. Through the closed window, she could hear Steve's laughter as he talked with Kevin. They were discussing remote-controlled aircraft. Soon, she heard them dragging her work table across the garage floor. Then she heard the scrape of metal and the slap of wooden planks.

She turned on the television and climbed slowly into her bed. A while later, Steve walked into the room.

“You feeling okay?” he asked.

The fever hummed inside her ears. “I’m alright,” Joyce said.

She lay in her bed, her chest rising and falling in a rapid motion. She watched the newscasters talk their silly news jargon. Why did they all enunciate the exact same way?

Steve sat on the bed next to her. He lifted her head and placed it on his lap. He smoothed his hand over her tight curls.

“What were you and Kevin doing?” she asked.

“We were cleaning up the garage so you can get back in there.”

“You mean *if* I get back in,” she said. She closed her eyes and breathed through her mouth.

“You will,” Steve said in a small voice.

“Oh, I know,” she lied.

As she drifted off, she thought about the fact that Steve could discover, hours from now, that she no longer cleaved to the body in bed beside him. She hoped that discovery would not destroy him. She hoped he would remember that impermanence was essential to their work. The materials and then construction. Then the weather. Then time.