



THE LAST FLIGHT OF N95382

June 1972, Rochester, New York

"There goes the Widgeon!" shouts Brant. Ray Hylan's personal plane, an antique tail-dragger Grumman Widgeon amphibian, is slowly moving backward and accelerating, blown by the wind. Brant and another guy run out the door. They are going to make a heroic effort. I remember that the Widgeon's door is locked and that we'll need to get inside to set the brake, so I grab the key from the board, and run out after them.

Thirty minutes earlier, Mark DeRensis and I take off from runway 24 in N95382 on the first training flight of the morning. Hanging motionless west of the field is a medium sized cumulonimbus buildup, dark and lumpy and unusual because thunderstorms don't usually form until the afternoon. We work on commercial maneuvers for about fifteen minutes before we notice that the cloud has begun to move toward the airport. I think. If I stay in the practice area, I'll have to wait until the storm passes and that will put me behind schedule for the entire day. But if I go back now, there is a chance the weather will be too bad to take the next flight and I can catch a rare hour relaxing on the ground, drinking coffee and acting like a normal human being instead of a pimp for these goddamn metal whores. I decide to go back to the airport.

As we get closer, we see dust kicked up from the ground below the cloud front. On short final the tower tells us we are the last aircraft cleared to land and advise that they are abandoning the tower cab. There is frenzied activity in the hangar area and we are denied the last hanger spot because a twin Comanche is being shoe-horned into the space. The tie-down area is full. I taxi into a shallow depression in the turf, kill the engine, lock the controls and we run for the flight office. There is no way we are going to fly the next hour so I grab a cup of coffee and join the rest of the crowd at the windows. Outside the building the wind is beginning to howl. The sky turns greenish-gray over the top of the hangar . . . the Widgeon weathervanes a few degrees . . . and starts to roll backward.

I round the corner of the building and am whacked in the back and lofted by the wind as though some giant has grabbed my trousers and yanked me forward.

Ahead of me Brant's feet look hardly to touch the ground. The wind force is unbelievable and we skip over the grass like corks. Big wet ice-cold raindrops pelt my back. The Widgeon has picked up speed and is rolling backwards almost as fast as I can run. I ram the key in the lock, fling open the top hatch and literally dive headfirst inside. I clamber on my knees through the narrow aisle up to the cockpit and into the left seat. Directly downwind in the path of the Widgeon is the Rochester Airport fuel farm - dozens of tanks of high-octane gasoline and jet fuel. I need to get this bird stopped. I look left, Brant is hanging on to the port pontoon, feet dragging, and then he disappears in a horizontal gray blur.

I can see nothing beyond the cockpit windows. Brant is gone. The field is gone. The Widgeon is bumping and shaking and there is incredible noise from rain peening like shot off the windshield. I don't have time to latch my seat belt. I jam forward on the toe-brakes and the yoke to keep the nose down and as much weight as possible on the main gear. If I let the nose rise I am going to fly up, stall, and crash. But if I am still on the ground I might be skidding backwards on the wet grass. I look outside and down and cannot see the ground. I fix on the artificial horizon, forgetting that it doesn't work unless the engines are running. I cannot tell if the Widgeon's tail is up or down but all my pilot senses tell me that I am airborne. The altimeter hands are jumping around and I could easily be hundreds of feet in the air. I can't tell. The airplane's noises say I have more than enough airspeed to fly. I am terribly busy and terrified at the same time. But I am also oddly detached, as though part of my mind is serenely observing, and I have a vision of individual blades of grass rushing straight in towards me up the wing as we crumple back to earth. It could happen, it might happen. I am frozen on the controls for I don't know how long. Metal sounds outside mix with all the weather noise. Maybe the Widgeon is breaking up.

The storm ebbs and the rain slacks to where it runs down the windshield instead of up. The windshield clears and I see pieces of aluminum spread out on all sides of me. The Widgeon and I are relatively untouched and about where we started but broken airplanes spread to the horizon. I climb out of the Widgeon and slosh through aviation fuel puddled deep on top of standing water. The storm yanked almost thirty aircraft from their tie-downs and scattered them across the field, crushing and twisting their fuselages like paper balled and thrown into a wastebasket.

Wreckage is everywhere.





Not far in front of me two wings lie almost undamaged in the grass, broken tie-down ropes still attached, each cleanly snapped away at the root from their airplane. Three hundred feet downwind their fuselage lies gently upright on the grass.



I find myself staring at a mangled wreck and suddenly realize with horror it is N95382. She is torn and twisted beyond belief. I should never have come back.



(R. Mansfield, first published in "West by Northwest" 2005)