

Learning to Fly

Emma Wunsch

I'M SITTING at my kitchen table, doing physics homework. "An airplane whose air speed is 200 km/hr is supposed to fly in a straight path 25 degrees North of East. But a steady 50 km/hr wind is blowing from the north. In what direction should the plane fly to reach its destination?" I can't do this problem. It never works out. I can't do a lot of physics problems. So many, that I think physics is becoming a problem.

In the living room, my mother is making my ten-year-old brother practice piano. She wants so badly for him to be talented. To be good. Over and over again he plays his scales: C, A minor, G, E-flat minor. He plays the scales so well that it is almost mechanical. He never makes a mistake. He used to; he used to hit wrong notes. That was before he went to Mrs. Paulie for lessons. My mother thinks Mrs. Paulie is amazing because after only two lessons my brother's scales were flawless. My father doesn't think Mrs. Paulie is worth sixty-five dollars an hour, but since my mother seems to like her so much, he doesn't push it. My father doesn't push a lot of things. That's why I told him about the physics test I got back, instead of my mother. My mother would have been hysterical . . . calling tutors, my teacher, and helping me make flash cards. She's very big on flash cards. My father said he wanted me to do better, signed the test, and dropped it.

I asked my brother how he learned to play his scales . . . what was so magical about Mrs. Paulie?

"She made me practice over and over," he said.

Deep. But I'm hoping that this advice will work for physics. Maybe if I keep doing the problems over and over, it will sink in.

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My mother comes into the kitchen. I hope she's going to start dinner, but instead she starts opening and closing drawers. I ignore her and read over my plane problem.

"Have you seen the nail clipper? Sammy's fingernails are too long and they click on the keys."

I have not seen the nail clipper. Why would it be in the kitchen anyway? My mother looks annoyed with me, as if I'm purposefully withholding the nail clipper, so she'll go crazy listening to Sammy's nails click.

She calls my father up from refinishing the basement. She wants us to call it the "family room." Sammy and I will not. We're not a "family room" family. My father has not seen the nail clipper. He asks if my mother is going to make dinner. She does not answer. The scales stop. We remain still; my mother calls for Sammy to continue. There is another moment of silence before the reassuring notes are heard again. My mother is deep in thought. She reaches for the phone and makes a call. My father gets a beer out

of the fridge and looks at me. We wonder what my mother is up to. She hangs up the phone.

"I want you to go out to the pharmacy and pick up a pair of nail clippers. You can get a pizza for dinner, too."

My father looks at her. It is January and 13 degrees outside. The pharmacy is twenty minutes away. I hold my breath.

In the end, the nail clippers win. My father and I climb in his '77 Chevy which takes awhile to start. We drive in silence. It is too cold to speak, even with the heat on. There is nobody else in the pharmacy. My father spends ten minutes picking out the best nail clipper. Which one is the cheapest? Which one is made in America? In the end he buys two. And a pack of Lifesavers for me.

In the car, I turn on the radio. Bob Dylan is singing "Positively 4th Street." Bob Dylan is my father's generation.

"Why do you kids keep listening to this old music? What's wrong with your generation?"

Sometimes I think my father can read my mind.

"Nothing's wrong with my generation, I just like this music better," I say.

"Something's wrong with every generation."

He gets deep and cynical when he's hungry. I offer him a Lifesaver.

"I like Dylan. I think he's cool. Didn't you ever listen to him when you were growing up?"

We've had this conversation before.

"No. I was at college."

"That's no excuse, Dad. At college. Does that mean you couldn't be cool?"

"I had a lot of work to do. I studied hard."

"You didn't study ALL day. What did you do in your free time?"

I know the answer before he even says it.

"I read."

My father always reads. He's an editor for a small publishing company. Even when he doesn't like what he's editing, he's always, in some way, excited by it. I like to read, too. But I do other things. I explained this to my father; he smiles at me. We stop at a red light.

"Why couldn't you have been into your generation: I don't understand. The one thing we could really have in common is the Sixties and you read through the decade. Didn't you even go to one hootenanny or Be-in, just to see what all the excitement was about?"

"No. I didn't care about tie-dye or pot or peace. I was happy just sitting in my dorm, listening to Mozart, thinking."

"You're such a nerd, Dad." We turn into the driveway.

"Groovy," he replies.

We forgot the pizza. For dinner we have tuna fish on rye bread with mayonnaise. For dessert we have raisins. I'm depressed. Dinner was gross, and I still haven't done my physics. My mother is depressed. Mrs. Paulie telephoned to say she is retiring; she's moving to Florida for her arthritis. Now what is Sammy going to do? Without Mrs. Paulie, my brother will be lost. Forever. Sammy is depressed. He doesn't seem to care about Mrs. Paulie, but he wasn't invited to Adam Green's birthday party. He doesn't know why. My father is not depressed. He is happy to go into his study and edit.

After dinner my mother makes several phone calls about finding a new piano teacher. I'm still figuring out exactly where I have to fly. My mother tells the woman on the phone that Sammy is gifted. Gifted. What an odd word. I'm not gifted. Especially not in physics. Sammy is a gifted pianist, but he's not as talented as my mother hopes and thinks he is. My father is a talented editor and nerd. My mother is a talented mother, enthusiast, nag. I'm not particularly good at anything. I don't even listen to music from my generation.

Yet, I am only sixteen. Sammy is young, too. He will probably not be a musician. He will never figure out why Adam did not invite him. He will probably learn to hate the piano . . . my mother will make that happen. That will be too bad. I'll miss his songs. My father is not young, but he is happy. My mother is not young either, but she will continue to pride herself on being a concerned mother. So concerned that she will continue to buy index cards by the gross so her children will not go without flash cards; so concerned that she insists her husband build her children a "family room."

I can't do physics. I stuff my notebook in my bag, grab an apple, and head up to my room. I want to finish a novel I'm reading. I want to write a novel. Maybe I'll listen to Sammy play. Maybe I'll listen to Dylan; maybe I'll listen to music from my generation. I'm no longer depressed about my physics. I realize that it's not so much where the wind takes me, but that one day, I'll fly.

Emma Wunsch grew up in in Westchester County, New York. This story first appeared in Smart Like Me (1993), a collection of high school writings.
