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Planes

Bob Abernathy didn't believe in ghosts, generally, even though the Bible discusses them, but someone lived in the shadowed corner of his basement. He read the word *visitant* once and that's how he thought of him. Yes, a man, a young man, at least half Bob's age, now. The visitant had been there since Bob and Marilyn bought the place, more than twenty years before, in '31—the year of the three blizzards, and the locusts in summer, and the Pruets' grain-bin fire. Bob and Marilyn moved in, and there he was in the corner, in heavy shadow, hidden and quiet. In fact, he'd never moved or made a noise in all these years. Bob hadn't spoken of him to Marilyn, to anyone. When Bob was in the basement, for example helping Marilyn tidy up after her beauty salon customers had left of an evening, he'd sense the visitant's presence, just standing, watching, in the corner where neither sunlight nor electric light could reach.

After a time the visitant had become a comfort.

Bob had a work area in the basement with a sturdy table, a high stool with a padded seat and back support, and on two walls pegboards crowded with tools. He wasn't especially handy, not like David Holcomb, who seemed the master of all odd projects, or George Dickson, the carpenter, or Randall Houndstooth, who made furniture—but Bob enjoyed tinkering in the basement (Marilyn called it *puttering*), which consisted largely of his listening to the radio,

drinking a warm Pabst and smoking a Pall Mall or two before it was time to go upstairs and get ready for bed. He had to rise early for his job maintaining the grain bins south of the village.

As Bob would walk up the basement steps he'd notice the visitant in his dark corner, the toe tips of his boots just at the edge of shadow, almost touching the light. At the top of the stairs Bob would pull the cord turning off the basement lights. Once he'd spoken to the visitant, a simple goodnight, but there was no response, as Bob expected.

November. Daytime. Sunless and already wintercold. Bob came home from the bins to find Marilyn on the couch in the living room holding a dish towel of ice cubes to her forehead. She'd lost her balance on the basement steps.

You're lucky you didn't break your neck. You need me to get Doc over here? Bob lifted Marilyn's hand holding the towel. Her head was scraped and red, and around her eye was swollen. You're going to have a nice shiner, Mother Goose, like you've gone a round or two with the Hurricane.

No need to call Doc. I'm fine, just clumsy.

Bob thought of the visitant. What if he'd had something to do with Marilyn's fall? It was a fleeting thought. Bob replaced his wife's hand and towel to her head. Are you hurt anywhere else?

Nothing serious. My tail feathers are ruffled I'm sure—may be sitting on a soft pillow for a while.

Do you have customers today?

Jean Reynolds and Dorothy, after supper.

You should take it easy, reschedule. I could run a note over to Carl at the shop. . . .

No, I'm fine—and it's Dorothy's first time. You know that's special.

Bob stood peering down at Marilyn for a moment. He hadn't really looked at her for a long while. She'd lost weight in recent months. The blue-checked dress, one of her favorites, hung loosely about her shoulders where it'd always been snug across the chest—her best asset they'd always joked in private. Her hairstyle was still highly beehived, but her head of hair wasn't as thick and it required more spray to form. It seemed grayer too. In fact, her eyes appeared grayer also, no longer movie-star blue, another of her assets, this one said in public.

You sure I shouldn't call Doc? He's probably at Owens' having his tenth cup of coffee.

I'm sure, Robert. You got something in the mail, on the table. Go take a look and leave me in peace for a spell. She patted the hand that he held lank at his side.

Bob went into the kitchen and on the table was a package just smaller than a shoebox wrapped in brown paper. The return address was stamped Calumet Models & Collectibles. It'd only been a few days but he barely recalled ordering it, from an advertisement in the *Joliet Rail Gazette*.

What in the world is it? Marilyn spoke from the couch.

A model.

A model?

It sounded interesting.

You're not going to get glue all over my kitchen table are you?

Of course not. He came back into the living room. I'll put it together in the basement—Marilyn began to speak—after your goslings have been fully fluffed, Mother Goose. I'll go set it on my table. Bob was anxious to go to the basement: he wanted to see if the visitant had moved at all, had somehow contributed to Marilyn's fall, perhaps even tripped her or pushed her off balance himself. Wild notions but he couldn't help thinking them.

The basement lights were still on. Bob stepped down the stairs more cautiously than usual. He walked across the concrete floor and placed the box on his worktable. Bob shifted his view to the darkened corner . . . and there the visitant stood, quiet, staid, watchful.

Bob thought he should say something to him but held his tongue. He left the model on the table and turned off the light at the top of the stairs.

In the night Bob dreamed of a snowfield strewn with wreckage, smoking and steaming. A propeller blade stands out of the snow almost perfectly perpendicular, the oakwood cracked in an arc at the tip but not split. Upon the white palette is a pattern of diesel lubricant, yellow, alternating with half-dollar drops of darkly scarlet blood, as if thrown there in a fury of artistic rush. There's a wing piece as large and as hinged as the engine-hood of a Model A. The snap of fire fades in and out with the solace of wind across the site, which will be capped in new snow by morning.

Bob woke before dawn, as he always did, and felt a heaviness upon him—that's how he thought of it, as if gravity had increased overnight. He was reminded of something he'd read, that scientists believed astronauts returning to Earth would be able to actually feel gravity—perhaps this is what it would be like. Marilyn lay next to him, gently snoring, her beehive angled to one side in its net. Bob sat upright, with effort. His eyesight still blurry, he stared into the dark corners of the bedroom, and it occurred to him that the visitant had come upstairs. It was foolish—the visitant had never moved from his place. It was just that his dreams unsettled him, and this peculiar sensation of heaviness.

Bob dressed in his work clothes, and was quick about his breakfast of plain oatmeal and black coffee. Marilyn normally prepared his breakfast of course but he told her to stay in bed

and rest. He was hurrying because he wanted to stop by the library on his way to the bins. He maintained the ones on the northwest corner of Old Man Stevenson's fields.

Mrs. Heartwood was just unlocking the library when he stepped from his pickup and came to the door. My, you're up with the birds, she said, pulling open the door with one hand and adjusting her eyeglasses with the other. I don't think you or Marilyn have any books in. Bob liked books about history and biographies of statesmen and military leaders, while Marilyn preferred mystery novels, especially Conan Doyle and Wilkie Collins, and she also enjoyed Poe.

I'm in the market for something else, said Bob, and he went directly to the book he wanted (meanwhile, Mrs. Heartwood switched on the one-room library's lights). He'd noticed the book for years but never checked it out: *North's Illustrated Encyclopedia of World War I Aircraft*. The heaviness that he still felt seemed to slow him down but he was relieved *North's* was there on the shelf.

The grain bins were a hive of activity throughout the fall but by November the fields had been reaped, except for the winter wheat, the short green stalks of which waved against a cold and colorless sky. So the bins stood apart from the stubbled fields that stretched south and east waiting to be covered in snow and kiss completely the color-drained sky. The bins were cylinders of stone and sheet metal as tall as a tall house, with black scaffolding that rose up in support of the structure, and a conduit arm which hung down like a cripple's. Even though each bin's single arm was securely tethered with thick cable, they rocked somewhat in the persistent wind and gave the impression of animation, like large machines that have arrived from another world. The bins had names that added to the impression of animation; they were Sadie and Katie and North, who took the wind most directly and his arm moaned and winced against the tethering cables.

After checking out the book, Bob had felt that someone was following him on his way to the bins. He noticed the unfamiliar truck in the rearview mirror of his own Ford. It got close at times but there was something about the way its windshield glass reflected the colorless sky that prevented Bob from seeing the driver. Bob turned onto the side road that led to the bins, and the pickup, black with a dull gray fender, very similar to his pickup, continued down Highway 12. Still, it made him uneasy. As he pulled onto the graveled patch near the bins, he realized he thought it was the visitant behind the wheel of the strange truck. He'd never been anywhere except the dark corner of the basement, but Bob felt that he was becoming bolder, perhaps causing Marilyn to hurt herself and now this. . . .

Bob looked forward to the quiet and calm in the office, a single-story brick building with a tin chimney. He could drink a cup of coffee from the vacuum bottle which he'd packed himself and thumb through *North's Illustrated Encyclopedia*. He'd ordered several models of aircraft from the Great War, but their catalogue numbers gave no indication which airplane they were. He wanted to be able to identify them. Without their correct names the models would seem incomplete, no matter how much care he put into building them. He wanted to know what sort of engine propelled them, how fast they could fly and to what altitude, what sort of armaments they carried, and how well they maneuvered in dogfights. Knowing everything about them was important to him.

The bins required daily inspections. Bob would remove the access panels to check the drying motors, the belts and gears and diesel lines, the ignition chamber and the ductwork. Then he'd climb the scaffolding to make sure the vents were clear, that no animal had nested inside the venting hoods. The routine took longer than thirty minutes for each bin, but the thoroughness was necessary to prevent catastrophes like fires and even explosions, or mildewed grain. While

he went about his business, his sense of being watched returned. It seemed there was someone at the edge of the cylindrical bin, spying, who would step back out of sight the instant Bob glanced his way; and several times, on the scaffolding, Bob peered over his shoulder at the empty fields expecting to find the visitant standing among the stubble, staring up at him, but each time there was no one. Only a chill wind met his squinting gaze.

At lunchtime Bob went home to check on Marilyn, and on Highway 12 the black pickup truck came up behind him. Again Bob strained to see in the rearview mirror who was in the driver seat but the beclouded sky moved across the truck windshield glass obscuring the interior of the cab.

An oncoming car honked at Bob, Wilson's mint-green Galaxy—Bob was crossing the center-line. He steered back, overcorrecting, and his passenger-side tires kicked up gravel and dust from the shoulder. Bob checked the mirror, and the black truck was gone, turned off, though he couldn't think where. Regardless, Bob felt relief with the truck no longer following him. He clutched and geared down to first to turn onto Main.

Marilyn wasn't resting on the couch as he'd expected. He went into the kitchen—another model had arrived and the box was on the table. Bob heard a voice, Marilyn's, coming from the basement, muffled by the closed door. At first he thought she was singing to herself, which she did sometimes, but, no, she was speaking, as if in conversation. He never knew her to talk to herself, not in nearly thirty years.

He had difficulty making out her words. It wasn't the same voice she used with clients, warm and chirpy, welcoming. Marilyn's voice was low and somber, like the voices at the visitation. When Robbie had died. Neighbors used the voice to express their condolences and reference God's mysterious working. Bob and Marilyn never mentioned Robbie, as if they'd

never had a son, for two years and sixty-two days, as if the photograph in the plain wooden frame in the curio wasn't of a real child they'd held and loved.

Robbie now would be the age of the visitant, a young man, old enough to have a family of his own—old enough to die and leave a widowed wife and a fatherless boy of not quite three, not quite old enough to remember him, so that the vacant space in his memory could be filled only by anecdotes and fantasies. Myths that the boy created: a father who died bravely in battle, a father who was piloting an amazing air-machine. Robert Abernathy, captain. Not Robert Abernathy, farmer . . . husband, father, churchman, victim of pointless accident.

Bob was startled when Marilyn opened the basement door.

I didn't know you were home (startled too). I was restocking the towel cabinet.

How's your eye?

Marilyn had powdered around the eye more heavily. A bit tender but not bad. I was going to toast a cheese sandwich. Want one?

Sure.

Another model.

He'd forgotten he was holding the box and *North's Illustrated Encyclopedia*.

What book is that? It doesn't seem your normal fare. Not some stodgy biography.

I ordered several.

Books?

Models. They're arriving one by one. They may be hard to identify. I'll put it on my table.

I can call you when your sandwich is ready.

O.k.

Marilyn closed the basement door after him and listened to his heavy steps go down. She went about greasing the iron skillet and preparing the bread and cheese, then lighting a burner on the stove with a match. Even this simple operation tired her. Bob was quiet in the basement anyway, and with the rush of the burner flame and the sizzle of the sandwiches she couldn't hear him at all. He was as quiet as the haunt in the corner, the fellow who just stood there day upon day, as silent as Saint Benedict.

Marilyn knew the word *haunt* from the Negroes who worked in her daddy's fields when she was a girl, laborers who came certain times of year. The women prepared food in the backs of their old trucks, which seemed to barely run, and in the stone firepits Marilyn's daddy had around the place for just that one purpose. Marilyn liked to watch the women and hear the songs they sang while preparing their men's food. Sometimes they would stop singing and tell Marilyn stories, their white teeth and eyes flashing with mischief. They spoke of haunts who attached themselves to places and people, who watched with stone-dead eyes but never uttered a word. Marilyn wondered if the Holy Ghost was a haunt but didn't dare to ask her daddy; he wouldn't have liked her talking with the Negroes.

Marilyn hadn't thought of haunts for years, until she and Bob bought the old Keeling place and then one was in the basement, just standing in the shadowed corner, a young man mutely observing, the toes of his boots nearly touching the light that angled near him. Very soon Marilyn took comfort in the haunt's presence. She found it easier to talk to him about certain things than to Bob, who was prone to overworry. Like her spell on the stairs. It wasn't the first time she'd become dizzy in recent months. She thought of seeing Doc Higgins about the spells and the fact she just didn't feel quite herself. Her clothes fit more loosely, and there was the hair in the bathroom basin when she was doing it up in the morning, long dun-colored strands looking

as dull and waxy as castoff thread. But if she saw Doc everyone in the village would know by noon, and by nightfall Pastor Phillips would be selecting passages to read at her service and the busybody wives would be selecting recipes for casseroles to bring to Bob.

She could always use some supplies from the beauty warehouse in Crawford. She could drop Bob at work, take the truck and see one of the Crawford doctors.

What if you become lightheaded while driving?

The question seemed to come from beyond her own thoughts.

Marilyn turned and looked about the small kitchen. Of course there was no one. It occurred to her it was the haunt who questioned her, though he'd never spoken before.

The smell of charring nipped her reverie. Marilyn turned off the burner and used the wooden spatula to lay the cheese sandwiches on plates. Before cutting the sandwiches, she opened the basement door to call to Bob—

but she was startled by his standing there at the top step—

Marilyn clutched at her chest with the hand that held the knife. For Pete sake, Robert. You almost gave me a coronary.

Sorry, Mother Goose, I was already on my way up.

I didn't hear you. She cut the sandwiches and set the plates on the kitchen table.

Bob seated himself at the kitchen table. Maybe we should have Doc check your hearing while he's at it. He smiled but his tone didn't sound joking.

Marilyn opened the icebox, removed the bottle of milk and poured two glasses. Her hands were unsteady and she had to concentrate not to spill some milk on the table. Fortunately Bob was already looking at a page in his airplane book and starting to finger his sandwich, though it was still too hot to eat. He didn't notice her trembling.

She gave him an opportunity to eat part of his sandwich. She played at reading her book while she nibbled at her crusts. It was a collection of Poe's ghost stories, and she looked at one titled "Morella," which turned out to be about a daughter that eerily resembles the mother who died giving birth to her. Meanwhile Marilyn snuck looks at Bob. She didn't so much see the man that sat adjacent to her, absently eating his sandwich, a small piece of cheese clinging to the stubble on his chin, but rather she imagined the man he would become in her absence. His face grew thinner, the beginning of jowls receding. His hair, streaked in silver, blanched completely white and grew past his collar. The sprouts of hair on his rough-knuckled hands turned white as well, while the age spots expanded and stood out more prominently. Overall there was a shrunkenness about him, like a heaviness had come upon him, stooping him, determined over time to collapse him altogether. She thought of the story of Bob's father crushed beneath a tractor when Bob was just a child, a toddler, not quite three. Marilyn hadn't thought of that for a long time. It was as if Robbie's death had eclipsed all deaths, before and after. No other loss mattered placed beside the loss of their son.

The current Bob, the for-the-time-being Bob, sat before her, one sandwich-half gone, the other being worked on. She said, I need to go to Crawford, to Standard Beauty. Can I take the truck tomorrow? Drop you at the bins?

He stopped chewing and looked up from his book.

Will that work all right?

Yeah—I'm just trying to think if I could use something from Crawford, from the hobby store. I could take the day—

You don't need to do that. I'm perfectly capable. Make a list and I can go by the hobby store too.

I . . .

What is it, Robert?

He chewed his sandwich a bit more. Nothing. That'll be fine, Mother Goose. I'll pack a lunch.

That evening Bob puttered in the basement longer than usual. Marilyn went to bed intending to read long enough that Bob would finish with his models and come upstairs. She could hear the voice of Bob's radio traveling through the ductwork, emitting from the floor register, sounding broadcast from a distant world. Marilyn became so sleepy the words on the pages of her book swam and bled together, implying an alien script. The book, with its strange language, slumped on Marilyn's bosom as her eyelids fluttered on the edge of a dream. The otherworldly voice became the minister's monotone at Robbie's service, his monotony adding to the pain that threatened to crush her. The words, intended to provide some sort of solace, only drew the grief down upon her like a heavy, blinding, suffocating hood.

Dreaming, she sees Robbie as a young man, dressed in work clothes ready for the fields. Dark diagonal bars of shadow fall across him obscuring his features. She wants him to speak, to account for his long absence, but he stands staring at her mutely, a stripe of saffron light across his empty eyes.

She woke with a start. Bob was next to the bed looking down at her. What in the world, Robert. You frightened me. He had switched off the bedside lamp, and only light from the hallway came into the room. Poorly backlit and standing there soundlessly, Marilyn thought for a moment it was the haunt, finally come up from his basement corner.

Sorry, Mother Goose. I'll get ready for bed.

Bob turned and went into the bathroom in the hall, shutting the door.

The strangeness of it all, especially the dream, clung to Marilyn—and she felt it even more palpably the next morning. Normally Bob was up before her but he lingered in bed. When she was dressing, he informed her from the pile of blankets and quilts that he didn't feel well and was staying home.

What's the matter with you?

He didn't respond. Marilyn thought he only acted as if he were asleep but she left him be and finished dressing for her trip to Crawford. After her breakfast of toast and coffee, she took the extra keys from the peg by the back door. It was a gray day threatening rain. Marilyn hadn't driven for more than a year and it felt strange to climb behind the wheel. When she shut the heavy door, its hinges cringing with rust, the scent was a mixture of Bob's Pall Malls and machine oil. The potent smell comforted her. Marilyn didn't want to make the trip alone but it was best. If the doctors at the clinic had bad news, this way she would have control over it—when to tell Bob, how to tell him, and how much.

What a comfort Robbie would be if he'd lived to grow into a young man. A comfort to her and to Robert.

In a few minutes Marilyn was maneuvering the Ford onto Main Street, then onto the shortcut to Highway 12. The narrow road ran along Old Man Stevenson's property. It was a road she traveled often as a girl, riding with her daddy. It was a roundabout way to the village from their place but spring floods sometimes cut off the usual route.

The gray light played tricks on Marilyn's sense of time, and she had the impression it was the gray twilight of dusk, not dawn—that the world was growing darker, not lighter.

To the west, Marilyn spied the shapes of Robert's bins, like natural formations dark against the dark sky. Perhaps she also saw a solitary figure in the field near the bin they called

North. In her mirror Marilyn noted that she wasn't alone on the obscure road: a black truck much like Robert's. Though the pickup was unfamiliar she sensed that she knew the driver, or at least would come to know him.

Before steering onto the highway Marilyn caught a final glimpse of the grain bins, and from this angle they appeared to be giant machines, giant machines aligned in military formation. The single figure in the field was now lost from view.