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About 4202 Words

## FLIGHTLESS BIRD

By Greg Mollin

The call woke him just after nine am. The ring of the hotel phone ended a nightmare in progress. He brought the phone to his ear with a shaking hand. The voice on the line told him the package was en route from Washington and instructions were delivered in monotone without pause for retort. The Company didn't waste time or tolerate questions. Joe hung up and sat for a moment as sweat cooled on his chest and brow. The dream faded along with the fear it evoked. He was halfway to the bathroom before he realized the woman was gone.

He met her in the hotel bar the night before. She was alone, but her smile was the only invitation he needed to take the seat next to her. He bought her a drink. She was a gorgeous young blonde with brains and sophistication beyond her years. They had too much in

common for it to be anything but fate. They both drank whiskey. They both dug Dorsey and Glen Miller. He had served in the war and stormed Normandy on D-Day. She had lost someone on the beach that same hellish morning.

Personal history wasn't explored much beyond the surface. Their conversation moved to the point. More drinks eased the path. Chemistry overrode idle chat. They locked eyes and lips only an hour apart. They shared a bottle in his room and made love unrestrained. The connection felt cerebral and physical in equal measure. Those twilight hours seemed like the best he'd ever had. He'd been waiting for someone like her all his life. He fell asleep in her comforting embrace. Her sub rosa departure left him feeling abandoned and empty.

The previous night's overindulgence loomed large. He rubbed red eyes and combed a handful of pomade through bedraggled hair. His gray suit hung from the shower rod, the scent of her perfume still on the lapels. He'd try to locate her before he left Long Beach, assuming all went as planned.

He needed to focus. Company edict reined him in. Attachment is an anchor. Solitude is a necessity. He wiped her from his thoughts and finished getting ready before heading downstairs.

The lobby of the hotel buzzed. Reporters and gawkers crowded the bar and reception area. His head pounded as he pushed his way through and ordered a bourbon. The bartender glanced at the clock on the wall. He shrugged and poured two fingers of Four Roses. Joe knocked it back in one swallow and gave the chump bartender a chin flick to go with the crumpled buck he dropped on the bar. He walked out the door with a spring in his step.

The sky was cloudless blue. The sun warmed his face. It cut through the haze of the previous night and sharpened his senses. He lit a cigarette and walked toward the ocean. The tobacco

mixed with the bourbon and brought bile to his throat. He tossed the smoke and moved with the crowd down to The Pike.

The Pike was California's answer to Coney Island; a mile long amusement Mecca with carnival games, kiddy rides, and a giant rollercoaster called the Cyclone Racer jutting out into the Pacific.

Folks came from all over the country to play at the Long Beach waterfront. He wasn't there to enjoy the sights. In the bay not more than a couple of miles from here, Howard Hughes planned to fly his H-4 Hercules, nicknamed The Spruce Goose, for the first time. The Company sent Joe to clip his wings.

The midway was alive, a cacophony of aroma, sound and vision. Vacationing rubes and sailors ran rampant. Kids scarfed hot dogs and cotton candy. A group of boys gathered at the shooting gallery plinking bottles with pellet guns. Down at the shoreline, families frolicked in the foamy surf. He thought of a different beach in a different country. He noticed his hands were shaking. The idea of another drink swelled. Ahead of him, outside the palm reader's hut, a group of sailors joked and pushed each other around. They cut the chatter and eyeballed him as he walked up.

"You better shave those palms before you go in, jerkmonkey!" one of them said as he moved past them. The others guffawed. He fought the urge to acknowledge the taunt. His glare spoke volumes. The door closed behind him without another word.

He had little respect for the squids. During the war, he charged bunkers and dodged bullets. He put holes in Krauts and witnessed the deaths of men he called friends.

These pansies floated around off-shore and watched the fight. If it weren't for Pearl Harbor, he'd say to hell with 'em all.

The inside of the place was dark and smelled of incense. He rubbed his nose and waited for his eyes to adjust. The small sitting room was decorated in Arabian chic. Pillow chairs and brass lamps over faded Persian rugs. There was a curtain in front of him. Voices emanated from the other side. He was looking for something to knock on or a bell to ring when a man strutted out. He was tall and wiry with a devilish black goatee and slick black hair to match. His pachuco suit and loud tie gave him a Mexican look. His features carried a hint of Eastern Europe. He noticed Joe and yelled back over his shoulder, "You've got a live one out here, sweetheart, time to get to work. They're waiting for me at the station. I'll catch you later." He winked and slipped out the door into the sunlight.

A moment later the curtain parted and a woman entered. She was big in every sense of the term. Her proportions were cartoon voluptuous, bomber plane pinup art come to life. She smiled at him and sleepy lids dropped over her big green eyes.

"Welcome," she said. "My name is Madame Satana, please follow me." Her voice was deep with a flicker of foreign trill.

She passed back through the curtain and he followed. The gypsy garb hugged her curves. She swayed over to a small table draped in silk and sat behind it. He took the chair across from her and sat down. He pulled the Luckys from his pocket and lit one. The smoke hung in the air between them. She leaned across the table and took his right hand in hers. Her cleavage tested the limits of her peasant blouse. "May I ask your name before we begin?"

He stifled smart remarks about psychics and ashed the cigarette onto the unfinished cement floor with his free hand. "Joe," he said.

"Joe? You are not Joe unless maybe you are Giovanni."

He said, "I doubt your driver's license says Madame Satana on it either, doll."

"It is not my intent to pry," she said. "I can address you in any manner you prefer." Her eyes looked into his. He fought the urge to turn away.

He took a last pull from the cigarette and dropped the butt to the floor. He twisted his heel on it and said, "Giovanni, then. How about we get this show on the road?"

She smiled. "Destiny does not work by your timetable, Mr. Mancuso."

"Bravo," he said.

She bowed her head slightly. "Shall we begin?"

He nodded. Her hands were smooth and warm. For a moment he almost forgot the reason he was there. She turned his hand, traced a long-nailed finger along the creases of his palm. Electric pulses shot wild up his arm.

"You have exhibited fearlessness in your life," she said. "You have fulfilled many important obligations in your past. Trials have tested your bravery. Another awaits you in the future." She looked up from his hand. Her full red lips gleamed in the low light.

He was drawn in by her words. Curiosity compelled him. "What else do you see?" he said. She looked back down at his hand.

"I see the ocean. I see the tide turned red with blood."

He laughed. "Not exactly a big feat to figure I fought in that damned war. Same as most guys my age."

Madame Satana looked up at him again. Her face was a somber mask. She said, "I'm afraid I am not viewing the past, Mr. Mancuso."

The dose of pomade kept his hair from standing on end. He pulled his hand away, knocked another Lucky from the pack and lit it. He took a deep drag and exhaled as he spoke. He said, "Don't screw with me, sister. This mystical gobbledygook ain't doing nothing but wasting my time. You know what I'm here for, so let's have it."

The red lips arced into a frown. She pulled back and said, "No need to be rude, pal. I'm just doing what I was told to do." The fancy accent had vanished, replaced by a sound no more exotic than Brooklyn or Queens. She stood from the table and walked to a small desk near the back of the room. She returned and extended her hand with a card held between her fingers. He took the card and tucked it into the inside pocket of his suit without looking at it. His hand brushed against the gun in his shoulder holster.

She was still standing there with her hand held out. "You have something for me as well? A tip, maybe?"

This time he was the one wearing a grin. He said, "Yeah, I've got a tip for you; drop the psychic hoodoo and head over to the burlesque tent. With a body like that, I see a lot of cabbage in your future."

He stood up and took a five spot from the clip in his pocket and held it out. She let it dangle there for a second before pulling it from his fingers and tucking it into her bra. He put on his hat and headed back outside.

The Navy boys were gone. He was glad not to have the trouble. He walked over to a popcorn cart and bought a box. He sat down on a bench across from the carousel and munched a

few handfuls. He watched happy kids going round and round on brightly painted wooden animals. Calliope music warbled. He wondered whether he had ever been that carefree.

He finished the popcorn and pulled the card from his pocket. The white paper rectangle was embossed with one black word: Icarus. He checked his watch. He still had time to kill.

He walked around the backside of the carousel and cut into a small alleyway. It stunk of piss and decomposing trash. He thought of the walk up to the hotel. He unzipped and was about to go when he heard footsteps behind him.

He turned to see the three sailors. They looked drunk and dangerous. The two on the outside were good sized. The one in the middle was rail thin. They all wore smiles. Skinny held a beavertail sap and a pint bottle of hooch. He said, "Hey, look who it is. It's Mr. Businessman from the psychic place. I bet she didn't tell you this was gonna happen." His buddies laughed. The sound was nervous and excited. The man tipped back the bottle and then smashed the empty at his feet.

Joe zipped his fly. He balled his fists. He grinned and said, "What are you kids doing roaming the alleys looking for thrills? Don't you know there's a rollercoaster out there?"

"You're pretty funny, buddy," Skinny said. "Let's see how that smile looks with no teeth."

He lunged forward and swung the sap. Joe ducked the swing and gave him a low shot to the ribs. He palmed the back of the squid's head and drove his face into the brick wall. There was a sickening crunch. The man hit his knees spitting blood.

The others moved on him. He took a blow to the side of the head. Stars filled his vision. He drove a blind elbow into a groin. He felt an arm go around his neck. A judo throw sent the third man onto the ground. Joe dropped back fast and pulled his gun.

Man number two went fetal. Skinny was hunched over groaning. The last man lay mute. Joe said, "Against the wall, all of you." They scrambled to their feet. All three men backed to the wall with their hands up.

Skinny said, "Please don't shoot." His nose was split bridge to nostrils. He was missing teeth. Blood soaked his shirt. Joe pointed the gun at his head. The man let out a squeal. Joe watched the crotch of his trousers go dark with urine. The other two kept quiet.

Joe caught his breath, he said, "I should plug you all right here and leave you for the rats, but I'll let you three morons live if you get the hell out of here and forget you ever saw me." They all nodded. They all said, "We never saw you." Joe pointed toward the other end of the alley.

He said, "Beat it before I change my mind." The squids scrambled before he finished his sentence. He picked up his hat and straightened his jacket. He tucked his gun into the holster and started walking.

He made his way back up to the hotel. His jaw was stiff and he was sore all over. He needed to go to his room to clean up. Instead he went to the front desk to check for messages. The clerk said there was nothing.

Joe said, "Could you tell me if there's a woman staying here, a knockout blonde about five nine? Real classy looking? I met her here at the bar last night."

The clerk sucked his teeth. "Hmm," he said. "I really couldn't say. You have this lady's name, by chance?"



Joe said, "I don't have a name."

The clerk put on a pouty face. He said, "I'm sorry, sir. Without a name, I really can't help you. Have you asked Michael, the bartender?"

Joe turned around and looked toward the bar. The jerk working back there hadn't been the man from last night. It still might be worth a try. "Thanks for your help," he said.

At the bar, the bartender was chatting with a couple of old folks in matching golf attire. Grandpa had a beer. Grandma nursed a bloody mary. Joe sat down and fished an olive out of the tray in front of him. The bartender noticed him, pulled the bottle of Four Roses on his way over. At least the chump remembered him. He put a glass on the bar, held the bottle. He said, "Ready for another?"

Joe nodded, took off his hat. The bartender poured. Joe picked up the glass, took a swallow. He said, "I'm looking for someone. Maybe you might have seen her; blonde, late twenties, classy. I met her here last night. I was wondering if she was staying at the hotel."

The bartender smiled, said, "I'm not sure. This girl have a name?"

Joe felt his jaw clench. He took another sip of the bourbon, relished the burn. He said, "I don't know her name. Have you seen her or not?"

Michael got the message. He said, "I might have seen someone like that this morning, maybe an hour or so before I saw you."

Joe said, "She wearing a black and white dress? Little black sweater?"

"Yep, that was her. I don't think she was staying here, though. She got in a cab out front."

Joe finished the drink. Michael gave him another on the house. He finished it fast and waved off a third pour. He took a pen out of his pocket. He looked for a napkin. The tray in front of him was empty. “You have something I can write on?”

“Sorry, pal. I told my boss we were out of napkins two days ago. Nobody listens to me.”

Joe searched his pockets. The only thing he found was the card from Madame Satana’s place. He wrote on the back of it. He said, “If you see her again, will you give this to her?” He handed him the card and a ten dollar bill to go with it.

Michael took the card and bill, tucked them into his pocket. “I’m off at five. If I don’t see her I’ll pass this on to the next guy before I leave.”

Joe said, “Thanks.” He put a couple of bucks on the bar and took the elevator back up to his room.

He used the bathroom and washed his face and hands. He combed his hair and straightened his tie. His hands were steady.

The booze always tightened him up, locked him in. He had to ride the line. Not enough and he shook. Too much and he wavered. It bolstered his courage and eased his denial.

As a sharpshooter, he’d killed more than fifty Germans, all with head shots, all at more than four hundred yards. He stormed the beach at Normandy and ended lives on the end of his bayonet. Killing was never easy, but he’d done it. Duty had demanded it. He killed for his country. He killed for his family and his brothers in arms.

Now he murdered for money and drank to forget. He shacked with lonely women and wished for more.

He didn't sleep much. He dreamt in horror when he did. He thought of quitting. He daydreamed retirement and weighed the option of a disappearing act.

The Company would find him.

They'd send someone just like him, some other ghost with no name that would track him down and snuff his flame without a second thought.

He pulled the gun from his shoulder holster. He ejected the magazine and checked the cartridges. He pushed it back in, chambered a round. The gun oil smelled rank. He wondered how it would taste. He pushed the thoughts away.

He would do this last job and when it was done he'd tell them it was over. He'd find that beauty from last night and get to know her. Maybe he'd even let her get to know him— whoever he really was.

Joe caught a cab out front and had the driver take him down to the port. He got out and went to the docks. There was commotion just north of him at Terminal Island. Naval ships and civilian boats cut the channel at full throttle. Photographers in dinghies weathered wakes and popped pictures. Something very big was out there on the water.

He walked down to the slips. A row of small sailboats bobbed against the dock. He read boat names in ornate script: The Sea Saw, The Nauti-Bear, The Frayed Knot. He found The Icarus and climbed aboard.

The sails were tucked and tied down on the masts. The boat was winter wrapped and empty. He marveled at the big bird in the distance. Airborne it just might eclipse the sun. He pulled back the tarp and went below.

The cabin was cramped. Small striped couch cushions on each side of him, a closet and bathroom, a junior size stove and range top. Four small windows port side, four windows starboard. He could see the Spruce Goose. The enormous flying boat dwarfed the watercraft around it.

He lit a cigarette, looked at his watch. He took off his suit coat and tossed it onto the couch. He went into the small bathroom and pushed the curtain aside. An Enfield P14 rifle fitted with a scope was wrapped in a towel leaning against the tile. A box of .303 cartridges sat in the soap tray.

He took the gun and bullets and brought them over to the window. He pulled the bolt and loaded one into the receiver. He set the gun down and worked the porthole clamps. He lifted the glass and looked out. Ocean air opened his sinuses. He finished his cigarette and dropped it out the hole. He picked up the rifle. He put it to his shoulder and checked the distance. The Spruce Goose was out there at about six hundred meters. He scoped the cockpit. There was Howard Hughes in a big fedora squinting out the window. Reporters behind him looking giddy. He could take the shot now and be done. He'd made kills twice as hard at further distances under fire. Orders were to wait until the big bastard was in motion but not in flight.

Joe wondered how something so large could actually fly. It had a wingspan of almost three hundred and twenty feet and even with four huge prop engines on each wing, it still looked too big to lift off.

It was a colossal bird that The Company wanted to remain flightless. Hughes's giant wooden mistake had siphoned money and resources marked for other high priority programs. The

eccentric millionaire had pushed his weight around and stepped on toes that he shouldn't have. Joe's bullet would put an end to an embarrassing and costly lapse in judgment.

Out on the water, The Goose fired its propellers. Mammoth engine noise battered his eardrums. He lit another Lucky. The Zippo shook in his hand.

He brought the rifle to his shoulder. He rolled the cigarette to the corner of his mouth, pressed his eye to the scope. He'd spent many days in France in the same posture. Memories flooded in. He concentrated and closed them out.

The plane picked up speed. He found Hughes in his sights. The man gripped the yoke with a shit eating grin. Joe exhaled slowly. His finger hugged the trigger. He felt the boat shift slightly. The stairs creaked behind him. A familiar scent came to him. He kept the rifle trained on his target and swiveled his head to look behind him.

She was there. She was wearing a yellow sun dress, her blonde hair was pulled into a pony tail. She had a small caliber pistol aimed at him.

"Put the gun down, Joe," she said.

He ignored the gun. He said, "How did you find me?"

She held up the card. "I guess I just missed you." Her voice was a weapon of it's own. Her blue eyes matched the ocean outside the window. The engines roared. He put his eye back to the scope, followed the path of the plane.

He pulled the cigarette from his mouth and tossed it out. "So what are you? German Secret Service? KGB?"

"It doesn't matter, does it? Please put the gun down. I don't want to have to shoot you," she said.

Joe said, “Then don’t.” He acquired his target again. Anger welled up. He said, “You really had me fooled. I feel like an idiot. I actually thought I felt something with you.”

She said, “I felt something, too. If I hadn’t you wouldn’t have woken up this morning, Joe.”

“If I don’t do this, I’m as good as dead. The Company doesn’t allow changes of heart.”

She kept the gun on him. She said, “My chief has probably already learned of my failure last night. Operatives are being dispatched to end my life as we speak. I will most likely be killed no matter the outcome of the next few seconds.”

Any second the target would move out of range. He thought about the night before; the love making, the taste of her flesh. The way he felt when he realized she was gone. Joe felt his finger relax on the trigger. He pulled his face from the scope and lowered the gun. He turned to look at her. He said, “I guess we’re both dead then.”

He got up and moved toward her. She flinched. She dropped the pistol on the floor and met him. They stood there looking at each other as the noise outside grew. She took his hand. His trembling ceased with her touch.

They walked together up to the deck. They embraced. He felt her body against his, her lips and tongue on his. Her bare skin was warm and soft. He felt like he could stay there forever.

Six hundred yards across the channel, the engines of the Spruce Goose roared and lifted the behemoth seventy feet above the Long Beach harbor.

The noise of the eight propellers muffled the gunshot.

Joe stumbled back, holding his stomach. Blood covered his hands like red gloves. The woman held his .45. The sea breeze dispersed the smoke coming from the barrel.

The plane continued to fly. She had to yell above the racket, "I'm sorry. They really would have come for me if I hadn't done this. I didn't have a choice. Please...forgive me." She fired again. He felt a hammer blow to his chest.

Joe stumbled backward and fell over the side. He couldn't move. He couldn't breathe. His body began to sink. He looked up through the waves. The water was red with his blood. In the end, there was no pain or fear, only relief. The last thing he saw was her face looking down at him as he sank deeper. He thought he noticed a tear running down her cheek.

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