

WITTY, STYLISH,  
SOMETIMES BIZARRE...



# Wingwalking



SHORT STORIES BY  
BARRY WESTBURG



# WINGWALKING

BARRY WESTBURG



*All characters in this book are  
entirely fictitious, and no reference  
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# WINGWALKING

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Let me be frank. I don't want to tell this story. I'm afraid it doesn't reflect very well on myself . . . or on my father. It concerns the time my father tried to establish my brother and me in a useful trade. Unfortunately the trade he chose to initiate his two sons into was — wingwalking.

“Wingwalking?”

Correct.

“You mean, like, uh . . . walking on the wings of an airplane?”

Uh-huh, particularly when it's in flight, at around five thousand feet or so. But — normally — nothing to worry about much! You use a slow old biplane, with lots of struts and things to hang on to.

You've got to understand the context. Just after World War II ended, the Midwest of the United States was crawling with fanatics of all descriptions. But certain fanatics were inflamed by something technological that was just coming on, they were crazy about *flight*. In the late 'thirties the craze was airplane racing. Then, come the late 'forties, it was stunt flying, and gee-whiz airshows. We had one in Des Moines about every month or so.

Maybe your family goes to the beach for the weekend, or maybe

you play a little football. Well, my family would be out at the local “field” by dawn, and we’d all be tinkering with aircraft and taking them up for “spins”.

Cessnas? Piper Cubs? — those were for the impossibly wealthy, or the expense-account businessmen with corn-meal mush instead of poetry in their veins. Our planes — namely, the planes flown by our hordes of suicidal enthusiasts — came in outrageous shapes and sizes. They were mostly locally designed and assembled and bore unique brand names.

You see, another symptom of the flight fever of the times was the springing-up, all over the Midwest, of colleges of “aeronautical engineering”. These were about as common as Kentucky Fried Chicken franchises are now. “Farley/Pratt Institute of Aeronautical Engineering”, “Curtis/Starkweather Flight Institute”, “McCubbins Aeronautical College”, and so on. Most of them were shopfronts with a patch of landing strip behind. Usually a couple of planes partly assembled would be out there in a shed — the “hangar”. These were being built as student projects. It was like doing a thesis, except that you had to *fly* the completed project before you were awarded your BA in “aeronautical engineering”. In special cases, posthumous degrees could be earned.

My father’s buddy, “Buzz” Curtis, who had gone through most of the war with him, took his GI Loan and founded the “North American Aeronautical Institute”, which was a couple of sheds behind a subsidiary taxi-strip of the Des Moines airport. That’s where we picked up our own family biplane. The price tag was a steep five hundred bucks, but the idea was that we could paint it ourselves...and of course do the “air-testing” — the “North American Chickenhawk” had never been taken up. The neurotic genius who designed it had dropped out of college, so a few first-year students were trying to finish it for him, following as closely as possible the absinthe-stained sketches left on his drawing board. This stormy petrel of aeronautics had in fact migrated to Paris, to join the



flocks of poets and writers who were presumed to be roosting in exile there. Paris, Ohio, I mean. He was woefully off course.

We took delivery of the North American Chickenhawk as soon as it was finished (or very nearly so). Buzz Curtis towed it over to my father's hangar behind a reconverted International Harvester threshing machine. My father paid him three hundred dollars on the spot and gave him one of his characteristic post-dated checks for another seventy-five.

In those days, the disease of flight had infected even our names. Everybody had an onomatopoetic nickname like "Buzz" or "Speed" and the common form of greeting was "Hey-y-y, Ace!" Even though I didn't learn to fly until I was eight or nine or so, I affected many of the mannerisms of airshow fliers who, in those times of peace, were the true knights of the air. You had to wear your hair long, creating a mane effect, which could then be "windblown". I wanted to change my name to "Buzz", or at least to "Chazz", but this met with resistance from my mother who claimed to have taken pains in choosing my original name. But my given name (Norbert) seemed woefully lacking in heroic overtones. My brother's name — Ron — seemed to have the proper flier's ring to it.

My father's hangar, truth to tell, was the property of the US Air Force. Because he was the leader of the local Air National Guard Squadron he felt entitled to park the North American Chickenhawk alongside the Dauntlesses, the Corsairs, the Mustangs, the Thunderbolts — all the obsolescent fighter planes we spent our waking hours tuning up and flying.

So the Chickenhawk arrives and we finish her up, painting her an autumnal pumpkin colour. (Rather like the camouflage on the old World War I English Spads, which she vaguely resembled — her designing genius was, in respect to bodyline, a kind of aeronautical Tory.) Then one gusty afternoon the old man takes her up and tries every stunt in the book with her, just testing her out. She does most things a plane can do in the air, but not without feminine protest:



she squeals, spits, hisses — with sometimes an eerie, eldritch sigh. For she is something of a Frankenstein's Bride among airplanes, built up out of several generations of spare parts. She's neither a lass nor a hag, but a little of each.

Next the old man (actually he's not yet thirty) takes Ron and me up in her and we fly over the farmlands, upside down, for half an hour or so to see if, with added payload, anything will shake loose, as all the groaning struts portend. We fly over my grandfather's original homestead — a haunted, scenic place now known as Devil's Backbone State Park. My Great-aunt Kate Newberry's old house is still down there, three storeys high, Victorian style, where she still keeps three of four "girls", including — of most interest to us boys — a cook.

We fly over at an altitude of about five hundred feet, still upside down, and spot the cook herself, a black woman who looks like the original Aunt Jemima. She's on her way to the chickenhouse to wring a few necks for dinner. We whiz past, eighty miles an hour, upside down, fanning our ears and thumbing our noses. With a stuck-pig squeal she runs for her mistress. She knows the reaction we want. Our first mission seems somehow . . . accomplished.

And so, if *flight* was the thing now, perhaps *beyond* flight was — wingwalking. "You boys will have to do something to *distinguish* yourselves," the old man said. "We'll have to do something at the airshows that nobody else has the *guts* to do. Something that takes skill, too, because any jerk can risk his life. It's *how* you risk it that makes other people take notice of you."

My brother and I — or at least I — pondered this wisdom (sententious, like all parental utterances in America) though we knew that once Dad had made up his mind there was no arguing. Nothing could save you from one of my father's schemes if he thought it would combine profit with education.

And, by the way, why was it good to have folks "take notice" of you? Why should you *want* folks to take notice of you? My father assumed that life was all display and competition. It was not until



we heard the wingwalking proposal that we (or I) began to question certain of the old man's — uh — values.

All this brings me back to Ron and me and the awful burden that was being strapped on us by a father who had spent a life of hair-raising adventure — including some three military and two civilian plane crashes — in a state of perpetual (and some would say maniacal) cheerfulness.

Ron was always his willing slave, as a nine-year-old who has formed few lasting opinions can be. But I was a year older and beginning to question the old man. This caused acute embarrassment to Ron, who was coming to regard me as a monster of filial impropriety.

The day we were to begin wingwalking was in August. The seasonal hurricanes would hopefully not give us too much trouble. There was just the oppressive humidity to deal with, but once we got aloft in the North American Chickenhawk this would not bother us quite so much. I have a tendency to perspire easily even in the calmest of circumstances but I was soaked with sweat when we took off. Even though the open cockpits exposed us to a comfortable airflow, the sweat was still whipping off my flier's mane into my kid brother's windburned face.

Prior to takeoff each of us had been tossed a little chute-pack by the old man — but contemptuously. A chute was a useless prophylaxis. What *danger* was there? What danger, for chrissake, *could* there be?

Thus Dad scorned showing us how to use it. Come the crunch, any intuitive boy would be able to figure out which cord to pull (there were three or four cords in a tangle). And any boy of *his!* . . . well! And so he idly flipped us the chute-packs — which he had picked up at an army surplus sale. He had never tested them anyway.

Lighting one of his beloved Churchillian stogies he said that all the air force had to do was to find “one moth in a warehouse” and they



would condemn the entire contents. That's how come the chutes were sold so cheaply (to be used for making curtains and pinafores and the like) and that is why they had stamped on them: CONDEMNED.

With that word on our backs Ron and I took off, with Dad up forward at the controls. It was heartening to recall that Dad had never had to bail out in any of his mishaps. He had always gone down with the ship and hobbled away with — hardly — a scratch.

Dad would turn around every few minutes and shout instructions, but he might as well have been in a silent movie. His hand gestures were easier to read but still ambiguous, perhaps because he was also waving his cigar. The blowing ashes (as usual) were scorching our eyes but we got used to that when we travelled with him, be it by car, train, speedboat or balloon.

He had as yet no finalised plan as to how we would stage the actual, definitive wingwalking. He would work it out during the climb to five thousand feet and announce the details once we made our . . . uh . . . rendezvous.

“Rendezvous?”

Well, yes . . . Buzz Curtis was going to take up his cropduster (a plane of similar pedigree to the North American Chickenhawk) and “rendezvous” with us directly over Des Moines. My father was no conscious symbolist but the exact point of rendezvous was to be over the Equitable Life Assurance Society offices, the highest building in Iowa (ten storeys). We would then fly in a triangular path using the Swedish Cemetery and Mercy Hospital as our points of reference.

What we were supposed to do, as I say, was not worked out in detail, since we were doing something relatively novel, for which the script had not been written — yet.

So now we see a biplane with a redheaded, woody-woodpeckerish man flying it. My father waves his cigar, again showering his sons with hot ashes. Buzz waves back and clasps his hands vigorously over his head — the old salute. Dad starts giving us orders then. He turns



and points at one of us, but I decide he means Ron, not me. He shakes his head and points again. Age before beauty? Perhaps he does mean me, but I play Dopey the Dwarf for a few more seconds. He shakes his head disgustedly and points and shouts again. This time Ron stands up. Okay, okay the old man seems to be saying. Ron points his finger at his chest: "Me, Dad, is it me you want, huh? huh?" Moving like an octogenarian my kid brother stands up in his seat. We take a few spar-shuddering turns over Mercy Hospital with Ron still standing, trying to balance himself. Then, at a further shouted (but still ambiguous) command, Ron gingerly puts his right leg out of the cockpit. Buzz and my father grin tolerantly at this tentativeness in the young, who are so inexperienced in doom.

Within a few minutes Ron is clear out on the wing. He turns and shrugs, awaiting further instructions.

At this point I am trying to hand Ron the chute, which, in his haste to be obliging, he has left behind him in the cockpit. Ron is a bit too far out on the wing by now to retrieve the chute easily, unless . . . unless *I* am willing to take it out to him. I wave it at him, trying to coax him to come and fetch it. I remain seated all the while. It is clear he will have to come all the way back down the wing to get the chute and, what with the picking up of the wind (the usual harbinger of the hurricane front), to do this now seems even more of a bother than just going on without the chute.

Ron still doesn't cotton on: WHAT AM I S'POSED TO DO? (he's out near the wing tip) so he tries a few tentative gymnastics and dance steps. His shifting weight keeps us dipping and swerving to trim the craft, but in a little while we get the knack of making adjustments for that unpredictable moving weight out on the wing tip. We never know what he will try next. Charleston, jig . . . half-gainer?

Now Buzz moves his craft into position, tip to tip with the North American Chickenhawk. This is rather hard to do with the increasing gusts of the hurricane front buffeting us, but Buzz

manages to close the gap to six or eight feet or so, which seems like enough space for Ron's final stunt. The old man winks at his old buddy and gives his boy the high sign.

And . . . uh . . . then . . .

“And then *what*, for chrissakes?”

Well, what do *you* think happens?



# SILVER EARRINGS IN COLORADO

---

In our observation of the world around us we are continually discovering *relationships* among the things that are familiar to us. For example, we notice that old jacaranda trees can be short while young ones can be tall. That people with big noses might pay high taxes while people with small bums might pay no taxes at all. That the postage required for a letter might be determined by the weight of the postman. That a baseball thrown into the air rises to a height proportionate to the integrity of somebody's grandmother. That the price of an article is determined by the venue of sale. That the tangent of an angle depends on the mood of the angler.

Today, I'm rather reflective.

My thoughts have been returning to my birthplace, the Northern Hemisphere. The Northern Hemisphere invented deep thoughts: if we have any deep thoughts here in the sleepy Southern Hemisphere, it is because they have been imported.

For instance, how many great Fijian philosophers or scientists have there been? I can think of only one Fijian Reflective and that is my old friend Carbon Man.

And Carbon Man got that way after we took a little trip up North together, travelling on my credit cards.

We started out in Cambridge, Massachusetts, with the intention of following the old wagon trail to the West Coast, and so to end up in my birthplace, San Francisco. We started out the very night we struck set at the Loeb Theatre in Cambridge, where we had been playing in *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*. I had played Ui. Carbon Man played my henchperson, Rosenblatt. Not an incongruous bit of casting: Carbon Man was a terrific gunman. At one point he would jump down into the audience and fire several blank cartridges into the faces of bejewelled dowagers — to great effect. When we were doing *All the King's Men* the week before, Carbon Man was cast as Sugar Boy, another gunman, this time one with a stutter. He developed a terrific stutter, which wouldn't let go. He still has it. I of course played the lead once again, though I forget the name of the character at this moment. I had been the stand-in for my friend Brad, who died of a stroke on stage during dress rehearsal.

My kid brother Marc had driven from California for the occasion in a racked-up Pinto. He had picked up Mandy and Gary in upstate New York. And so we all set out for the West. Carbon Man had borrowed an old Caddy convertible from a girlfriend and he followed us. He can easily pass for a Chicano in the North, which gives him a certain mileage as a Latin Loverboy type. To support this mild deception he had teamed up with a guy named Ricardo Corrado who was genuine Mexican and they would find a lot of common interests: Anglo women, primarily. And, eventually, deep philosophy.

Every time our little caravan got to a rest stop on the endless turnpikes of the East and freeways of the Midwest we would permutate the seating arrangements, Gary and Mandy and Ricardo floating from car to car as the whim moved them.

Mandy and Gary were married but getting ready to split up; this was to be their last trip together. Gary a geologist wanting to see the Great Divide and especially the Rockies where they begin in



Eastern Colorado. Mandy eager to explore the silver mines up in Cripple Creek. So our initial objective was Colorado.

Ricardo, smoking his Montecristo panatella, didn't care where he was going so long as it was conducive to deep philosophy and shallow Anglo women.

At this time, possession of a Montecristo (Havana, Cuba) cigar was more serious than possession of marijuana or heroin. Try getting one in over the Canadian border! It makes a nice little experiment for a would-be revolutionary.

I had smoked them, but like a snivelling coward I went to Canada to do it. This was some years before Carbon Man and the plays in Cambridge: several of us were up in Ottawa on the Peck Farm. That was a Poetical Farming Experience. In fact my kid brother Marc wrote a few poems about it, which were later published in the *Atlantic Monthly* (May 1977).

Up at Peck Farm we got a sampling of the simple non-urban earthbound sunsoaked life. We got the hay in our hair. We went up as a favour to my old friend Doctor Peck, who wanted to lounge about in Majorca (or was it Minorca?) and to forget about his cows and chickens along the Bonnechere River in the lush Ottawa River valley.

This was when my third wife Madge was still with us and hadn't freaked out and turned into a bitch and thereafter a slut. Sluttishness was in her blood and the taint of it began to show under the stress of primitive earthbound sunsoaked poetical farming conditions. Actually all that we did there was to sit on the banks of the beautiful Bonnechere River drinking Jack Daniels Black Label and target-shooting with a .22 rifle and feeding the livestock — we didn't do any farming — I'm still not even sure what farming is. *And* talking a lot of deep philosophy.

And so we would all sit around and smoke those forbidden Montecristo panatellas until we were green in the gills.

At night the local beavers would topple the local trees and chew