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TRUE NORTH FOR THE TYRO

A friend said I'd never really see Alaska unless I was game enough to fly with a bush pilot. He introduced me to one named Grimby. Soon I was in the makeshift back seat of a biplane that looked like an early Wright brothers reject.

I was along for the view. The official passenger was a Mr. Clark who was going to join a pipeline survey team on the coast.

"Tighten your seat belts, we're goin' up fast," said Grimby. "We got us a williwaw, a sudden weird wind off the Aleutians. Full of silt and seal hair and rutting moose musk. One thing about a williwaw, you can take off downwind with just enough power to rise vertical like them fancy VTOL aircraft. A smidgen of runway is plenty-- which is good, seein' it's turned to slop we need to get shed of in a hurry." His next remark was: "Your innards'll catch up with you in a minute." He glanced at Mr. Clark, back at me, then stared at Clark.

"Uh--oughta be a bag in the door pocket," Grimby said to him.

We soon leveled out over a snowfield filled with as many shades of blue as a painter's palette. "It's more beautiful than I imagined," I exclaimed aloud.

"You ain't flown in a bitty bird before, eh?"

"No, we were always too high to appreciate the scenery."

"Yeah well, this little ole gal shows you ever'thing. Never had a

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designer crate, never will." He snickered. "Adam Adcock used to call my plane a bunch of spare parts flyin' in formation. Yeah, it's old, but dependable." Grimby glanced at Clark again. "First time out? Relax, you'll get there just fine." He grinned back at me. "Yep. Adam's the one used to intercept my radio calls for a pick-up. He'd beat me there then tell my customer I smeared up at Nulato. One far back night he even moved the flare pots so's I'd land on the worst of the muskeg, maybe turn turtle, and lose me the mail contract. I disappointed him, but when I hit them hare holes it dang near did bust the seat of my pants. Could've been bad, that's what I flew by. Still do."

The Grimby grin was contagious. Despite Clark's misery, I couldn't resist conversing, asking questions.

"Oh, I've got some real smart gadgets now, even LORAN," replied Grimby. "But up here where you can't believe magnetic north, here where you get six hours of light and sixty-below-zero, your gut is still your best instrument."

"Bet you could write a book about your adventures," I ventured.

"Maybe I will. Bush pilots ain't bad folk, just hungry. Always lackin' fifteen cents of havin' a dime. Weren't enough runs for all of us so we used to compete on the dirty side. Things're more polite now. Got my own little company. Jets ain't worth a damn for pipeline inspections, gettin' equipment to a leak, airliftin' an injury off a Bering Sea pressure ridge. Hey, we even ferry Dove Bars to one-lung villages and cognac to Denali climbers. —You okay, Mr. Clark? I'll shut up if you wanta hear a cassette."

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Clark muttered a question I couldn't hear.

Grimby nodded. "Did I ever forgive Adam? Oh, yeah. The night he joined a search party and landed on the Chena River where I was down in a whiteout, stuck in the cockpit, feet almost frozen."

Clark's adam's apple twitched each time he spoke.

"Naw, I didn't crash--just ran outa gas lookin' for a break," replied Grimby. "Ole Adam's pushin' 70 now, never lost a load, the best mountain flyspeck from Talkeetna to Selawik. Which is why I'll hire him to supply my new chain o' video rental shops. Funny, everything on TV used to lag behind the Lower 48. With cable and VCRs, an Inuit beaches his umiak, mushes home to watch tonight's news and a sitcom, then he wants the latest sci-fi flick."

Between the icescapes and Grimby's narratives, I wouldn't have traded seats with any nabob on a champagne tourist flight. I blessed my friend for suggesting this. Someone in the movie business could make a fortune on this man's life and the cinematography possibilities. Wish I had time to hear more.

Clark didn't look out the window until Grimby said, pointing, "There's your survey camp on the slope. Lotta new snow. Good to see that Marsten matting. Not that we couldn't put down anyways but it's not as dodgy. Aw, hey, don't be embarrassed. One guy used two whoopie bags and his cap before we landed."

Safely deposited on the tundra, Clark bid me a shivering, polite goodbye as I climbed into his seat. He didn't offer his hand which didn't offend me.

"Yeah, nice meetin' you too," Grimby told him. "Probably see you next week. Already know your team likes anchovy pizza. Extra cheese?"