



Flying Lessons

H. Lovelyn Bettison

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by

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Prologue

Two months after her mother died, Chandra Melken jumped from the top of the bleachers after a school pep rally. She landed with a thud. Her neck lurched back and her feet stung through the tops as if giant had stamped on them.

Chandra waited for an hour in the school nurse's office for her father, Henry Melken, to pick her up. She was lying on the cot in the corner of the office holding her throbbing neck when she finally heard his footsteps in the hall. Although Chandra wondered why it took him so long to get there, she didn't complain. At least he had come.

The school nurse, Ms. Dillon, stood when he entered the room. She put a strained smile on her drawn face. "Mr. Melken?"

"Yes." His voice was higher pitched than expected when compared to his statuesque frame. Henry Melken was a tall honey colored man with a broad build. Most people assumed he had played football in college, but he hadn't. Bookish by nature, he was hard pressed to even name any football teams, let alone know the rules or actually play the game. He had light brown eyes and wore his black loosely curled hair slicked back with pomade. The top button on his short-sleeved white shirt was undone and his blue striped tie loosened. His slacks were gray and he wore a shiny black belt.

Chandra rolled to her side and pushed herself up slowly to a sitting position.

"She had a bit of a fall. She probably has whiplash," Ms. Dillon said. "It's really not serious. She'll be fine." She acted as if the whole event was somehow her fault.

"I'm sure she'll be. Thank you for calling me," he said. Then he turned to Chandra, "Do you have everything you need?"

"I have to go to my locker." Chandra stood up holding her neck and grimacing to make sure her father noticed that she was really in pain.

"Tell me what you need and I'll go get it."

Chandra didn't want to stay in the nurse's office any longer. Her locker was on the other side of the school. It would take a little while for him to get there. "It's too complicated and I'd have to tell you the combination and the locker number and sometimes it sticks. There's a secret."

"A secret?"

"To opening it. We can go together."

"Okay then, lead the way." He smiled slightly.

"Good-bye, Ms. Dillon," Chandra said and walked past her father into the hall.

"Good-bye," she said.

"Thank you again," Henry said before he turned to leave.

Their footsteps echoed in the hallway. Dingy, dented army green lockers lined the walls. Chandra linked arms with her father as they walked beneath the glow of fluorescent lights. She didn't look like him at all. She resembled her mother, Ava, but Chandra was fairer with her father's brown eyes instead

of her mother's green ones. Her mouth curled up the same way at the corners and her cheekbones sat high on her face just like her mother's. Chandra's hair hung just below her shoulders in looping black curls.

"So, what happened?" her father asked, "How did you fall?"

"I didn't."

"What do you mean you didn't?"

"I didn't fall. I stepped off," Chandra confessed.

"Why would you do such a stupid thing?"

"I wanted to see what would happen?"

"What would happen?" Weariness sank into his voice. "You knew what would happen; you'd fall, that's what would happen. Chandra ..." he trailed off.

She felt ashamed, if only her mother was there. Her mother would understand.

"You're thirteen years old. You don't need to do experiments with gravity anymore. That kind of thing should stop once you're a toddler."

"I know."

"Why did you do it? You weren't trying to kill yourself or something, were you?" He knew it had been hard for her. It had been hard for him too. Since Ava died, he'd actually thought about taking his own life. Why wouldn't his daughter have thought about it too? Henry glanced over at her—her looks so strikingly like her mother that it made his heart ache. Sometimes he just wanted to cry, but he would never do that in front of her and not here in a middle school hallway.

She slowed her pace. "I just wanted to see." Her brown eyes bored into him.

"See what?"

"You know how Mom used to say that you don't know if you can do something until you try?"

"Yeah, she always wanted to encourage you to try new things." Henry remembered that Ava was always an adventurer herself. That was what drew him to her. She was so unlike him. He thrived on schedules and routines. "So what were you trying to do exactly?"

"I was sitting up there at the top of the bleachers and I was thinking, 'What if I could fly and I just never tried?' So I decided to try."

"Chandra, you can't fly. You didn't need to risk hurting yourself to find that out. Anyone you asked could've told you."

Chandra ignored her father and continued, "So I concentrated really hard on flying and then just stepped off the edge." Her neck throbbed. She reached her hand up to rub it again.

"You could have hurt yourself more seriously—broken an ankle or something. For what? You know you can't fly."

Chandra unlinked her arm from his and stopped walking. Henry stopped too. He turned to look at her. Her jaw tightened. She dropped her other hand from her neck to her side, wrinkled her forehead at him and said, "But what if I could and I never tried?"

Chapter One

By the time Chandra turned twenty-nine, she had given up on the notion of flying. She had to concentrate on more pressing matters—like pleasing her always unsatisfied boss and caring for her father. Henry was sixty-six, and while most sixty-six-year-olds could take care of themselves, Henry was a different story. He wasn't sick. In fact, at his last checkup his doctor said he was as healthy as a horse.

"You have the heartbeat of a twenty-six-year-old," Dr. Vivas had said with a smile, revealing the gold plated canine tooth that always made Henry wonder if he could trust him.

Henry definitely wasn't sick. He was lonely and sad, but not sick. Ever since retirement, he'd been trying to figure out how to fill up the void in his life that seemed to be swallowing him whole. Work had filled it for a time, but now that work was gone, space was opening up all around him and he was realizing just how empty his life was. If Chandra wasn't there, he'd lay on the couch all day watching television in his pajamas, wasting away to nothing.

The phone rang. Henry knew it was his daughter before he even answered. She always called to check up on him around lunchtime. "Hello," he said confidently into the receiver.

"Hey, Dad! What're you up to?" She always sounded so cheery when she called.

It was almost twelve thirty and Henry sat on the couch with the newspaper in his lap. He was still in his dark gray cotton pajamas and his white terry cloth bathrobe. The robe was worn and thinning under his right arm, but no matter how bad it looked, he couldn't bear to throw it away. It was the last gift his wife had given him before she died. "Just reading the paper." He made an extra effort to sit up straight, like good posture would make him sound busy.

"Did you eat the breakfast I made for you?"

The runny scrambled eggs and potatoes still sat on the plate in the microwave, where Chandra had left them. "I was going to eat that for lunch."

"What did you have for breakfast?"

Henry hated these questions. He really appreciated what she did for him, but sometimes he wished she'd just take care of herself and stop worrying about him.

"Dad, you need to eat breakfast. It's the most important meal of the day."

"I know, but my stomach felt upset when I got up . . . I had some yogurt." That was a lie. He hadn't eaten anything that morning, but he knew he shouldn't admit it. He'd never been a breakfast person, but he didn't want her to worry any more than she already did. "You take such good care of me."

"I try."

"I know you do. I'll eat the eggs and potatoes for lunch. I'm sure they're delicious. Thanks."

"You're welcome," Chandra sighed. "What are you going to do today?"

Henry hated this question too. He didn't much feel like doing anything. "A little of this and a little of that. I'll probably go for a walk later."

"Good. It's important that you get out. I'll see you when I get home."

“Okay. See you then.” Henry hung up the phone.

He got up and went to the kitchen. The kitchen had always been his least favorite room in the house. The walls were covered in pink flowered wallpaper that Ava had picked out. He remembered thinking it was so unlike her. “It’ll be a nice change,” she’d said. “A kitchen that reminds us of spring.” It stayed all these years even though Ava herself eventually admitted to hating it. Henry had just never gotten around to taking it down and repainting. What color would he paint? Ava had always made those decisions. Chandra had offered to help, but he didn’t think it was her responsibility. He wanted her to spend time doing things she enjoyed, not redecorating this old house.

Henry started the microwave and leaned against the counter watching the plate spin round and round. He wondered if he could get hypnotized this way. He wondered what it would be like to be hypnotized. He’d seen it done in movies and on television, but never in real life. Would he suddenly start barking like a dog, or acting like a chicken every time someone clapped their hands or rang a bell?

The doorbell rang, interrupting his thoughts. He wasn’t expecting anyone. It rang again. Henry stepped out of the kitchen. “Who could that be?” he said to himself. He looked at the front door and cocked his head. The microwave stopped and beeped a few times. He dragged his slipper-clad feet to the door—their papery bottoms scraping the tile. The doorbell rang a third time, but when he looked out the peephole he saw no one. “Who is it?” he called making his voice sound deeper and bigger than it really was.

“Rosa. You know me,” the voice called back.

Rosa Alvin lived two houses down. She was short and round without being fat. Straight, dark gray, shoulder-length hair framed her round face. Her large eyes bulged slightly. They contrasted her small nose and mouth in a way that made her seem cartoonish. Her voice always seemed to be exploding out of her. Henry opened the door. Rosa stood before him in red Bermuda shorts and a white T-shirt. She carried a bulging black garbage bag.

“Good morning.” Henry put on a cheery voice.

“Actually, it’s afternoon.” Unable to hold the bag any longer, she dropped it at her feet. “Are you sick or something?” She narrowed her eyes at him.

Remembering he was still in his pajamas, Henry pulled the loose ends of his belt to make sure his robe was secure. Then he adjusted the V of the neck closing it as much as possible. “Uh . . . yeah. Just a little bit of a cold,” he lied.

“I just made some homemade chicken soup. I can bring some over.”

“Oh no, I’ll be fine. Chandra takes good care of me.”

“I’m sure she does, but she’s at work all day.”

“What brings you over?” He looked at the bag at Rosa’s feet.

“John doesn’t wear these things anymore. You two are about the same size. I thought you might want them.” She leaned down and pulled a white button-down shirt from the bag. “See, it’s just like new.” A price tag still hung from its sleeve.

“I see.”

Rosa’s husband John had died of a heart attack almost a year ago. He keeled over in the driveway one morning. Rosa sobbed and cried and did all of the normal widow things at first. Then one day, about three weeks after he died, Henry saw her carrying groceries into the house. He stopped to make small talk and to find out how she was coping.

“Great!” she responded, her stubby arms wrapped around a paper bag overflowing with groceries. “John just got back. I’m making his favorite meal tonight.” That’s when it started. Ever since that day

she talked as if he were still alive. Henry used to try to explain to her that he wasn't—everyone did. They had all given up now. She seemed to be taking care of herself okay. Her house was always in order. Her bills were paid, and she had a part-time job at a local clothing store. If thinking her husband was still alive added to her happiness, who were they to interfere?

“You think they'll fit?” she asked him, shoving the shirt back into the bag.

“I think so. Thanks.”

“No problem. John will like seeing someone else wearing them. He hates to waste things, and he likes you.” She picked up the bag and handed it to him.

Henry reached out and took it. It was heavy. The plastic stretched over his fingertips. “Thanks again.”

“I'll bring that soup by later.” She smiled a toothy smile. Her front teeth were large, square, and very white.

“You don't have to do that.”

Rosa pushed some stray hairs from her face and tucked them behind her ear. She stared at him blankly and blinked a few times before saying, “Umm.” With that she turned and walked away. She waved her hand in the air over her head and said something in Spanish that wasn't good-bye. Henry didn't speak any Spanish, but he recognized good-bye when he heard it.

“Thanks again,” he repeated, not knowing what else to say. “I'll be fine.” She was still walking away from him. She had left the driveway and was crossing the neighbor's front lawn. Even though she wasn't paying attention to him, Henry couldn't seem to stop talking. “Have a good afternoon,” he called.

Rosa disappeared into her house without even looking his way again. Henry put the bag down just inside the entryway and closed the door.

He took his plate out of the microwave, set it on the table in the dining area of the living room, and clicked on the afternoon news. He covered his food with a generous portion of ketchup, salt and pepper. Chandra would've complained if she were there. She hated it when he started adding condiments and seasonings to his food before he'd even tasted it. She wasn't a great cook, so the food usually needed something.

Before he retired, Henry hardly watched television at all. Now he had it on most of the time, to fill the empty air with sound.

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The mall was a good place to walk, before school let out. During the day it was relatively empty, just a few housewives with round-faced, chubby-legged babies in strollers and senior citizens getting in some exercise. Henry liked the sound of his rubber-soled sneakers squeaking on the shiny, white tile floor. He still had an hour to walk before the place would be overrun with teenagers.

The mall speakers played soft rock classics. Henry liked the music at the mall because it took up space in his mind distracting him from his usual thoughts about how empty his life had become.

He liked to walk two laps around the mall, passing the Piercing Pagoda, the cell phone kiosks and the clothing stores. He walked quickly, but didn't hold his arms up like the old women he often saw doing laps around the mall. They dressed in exercise pants and carried small hand weights, their gray hair concealed by baseball caps with bills that were just a little too big.

Henry passed a young woman with beaded cornrows and an even cocoa complexion. She stood at a clothing store entrance contemplating whether or not to go in. Her hands firmly gripped the handles of a stroller. Inside was a toddler with a puff of thick, black hair that stuck out from a ponytail on top of

her head. The toddler wore gold studded earrings that seemed particularly large on her small ears. “Hi,” she said in a small voice. She raised a dimpled hand and waved.

“Hi,” Henry responded.

The mother didn’t notice this interaction. She continued to gaze into the clothing store. The girl watched Henry intensely as he walked by.

“Hi,” she said again.

Henry turned back to see her twisted around in the stroller, her small face still peering out at him. “Bye.” He waved.

The mother finally decided to pass on that particular clothing store and continued down the expanse of the mall. Her flip flops slapped the soles of her feet in a steady rhythm.

Henry often wondered if people on the street could see how out of sorts retirement made him feel. He wasn’t the type to busy himself with projects around the house. He never owned any tools. If something needed to be fixed, he called a repairman. Now he fidgeted a lot, and when people asked him what he was up to these days, he was never quite sure what to say. He had considered taking up golf, but he wasn’t a big fan of the heat, and he was too cheap to pay the fees. He didn’t consider himself golf people—the kind that frequented country clubs and had a wife named Kitty.

Henry walked through the food court to the mall entrance. The teenagers were just starting to stream in with their loud voices and brightly colored clothes. And just like that, the mall was officially crowded. It had quickly become a different, younger world.

Chapter Two

Chandra stared blankly at the computer screen. Her head pounded. She put her head in her hands, her elbows resting on the desk next to the keyboard. It was only Tuesday. The week had just started, but it already seemed to be lasting forever.

“You okay?” a voice asked.

Chandra spun around in her chair to see Renee standing at the entrance to her cubicle. “Just tired,” Chandra responded.

“It’s best not to party too hard on weeknights,” Renee chuckled.

“Thanks for the advice.” Chandra turned back around to face her computer. She didn’t want to talk to anyone; she just wanted to go home.

“Anytime.” Renee ran her fingers along the side of the cubicle as she walked away. Her fingernails made a zipping sound on the rough fabric wall.

Chandra didn’t expect her life to end up like this. As a girl, she’d imagined a life full of adventure and possibilities. She’d pictured herself having traveled the world by now, not sitting in some office doing work she didn’t care about. In these tired moments at work, it really sank in.

When she’d taken the job, she never thought it would last this long. She’d been working in this same cubicle, sitting at this same desk for roughly five years now. She placed her aching head down on the desk to rest for just a few minutes.

A thud on Chandra’s cubicle wall jolted her awake. “Quitting time!” Renee called out as she passed. She didn’t even bother to look in at Chandra this time. Chandra sat bolt upright in her chair. At first, her surroundings seemed unfamiliar. Then she realized she was at work. She looked at her slim watch—the oval white face attached to a gold chain. It was already five minutes past five. How could she have slept for over an hour at work without anyone noticing? She rubbed her eyes, smearing her eyeliner up from the corner of her right eye all the way to her temple.

“I’m leaving for the day,” she announced to Sharon, the receptionist.

Sharon was on the phone, but she nodded and acknowledged her with a wave.

Chandra pushed the glass door open and stepped out into the heat. She slipped out of her gray suit jacket as she walked across the parking lot to her car. Her white silk blouse was already starting to stick to her skin in the humidity.

Barney, the security guard, rolled up next to her in his sky-blue golf cart with the word “Security” written on it in black block letters on the side. “Quittin’ time?” he asked.

“Yep.”

He pulled his cart up in front of her blocking her path. Chandra stopped walking abruptly and sneered at him.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

He took off his hat and rubbed his hand over the bald spot in the middle of his head. He looked at his hand for a moment, as if checking to see if he had rubbed something off on it. "So where you headed now?" His mouth was barely visible under his overgrown mustache. Chandra often wondered how he ate, but didn't have the nerve to ask. She didn't want to talk to him any more than she had to.

Usually, she'd peer out of the glass doors of the building to make sure Barney's golf cart was out sight before heading for her car. Today she hadn't done that, and now she was regretting it. She found Barney to be presumptuous, pushy and just plain gross. "Home."

"Really? You don't have a night out planned?"

"It's Tuesday." Chandra draped her jacket over her forearm and folded her arms across her chest.

"People go out on Tuesdays too."

"Not me." Chandra walked around the back of his cart.

"What happened to your eye?" Barney asked.

Chandra turned back around to face him, "What?" She touched her face.

Barney pointed to his own eye. "You have black stuff on your face. You should probably take care of that before you hit the town tonight," he winked and pulled off. The loose stones on the blacktop crunched under the golf cart's tires. He waved his hat over his head triumphantly as he drove away.

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Chandra didn't like driving with the windows down, but the air conditioner in her car had stopped getting cold two weeks earlier. Sometimes she could drive in the heat with her windows up and not even notice until she felt the sweat slipping down the back of her neck. Today wasn't one of those days. Today, she regretted not getting the air conditioner recharged last week like she had originally planned. Somehow, the week had gotten away from her and before she knew it, it was Monday again. She turned on the air-conditioning just in case it had started working again. Lukewarm air blew out through the vents, just adding to her discomfort. She turned it off and rolled down the windows.

Traffic crept along the southbound lanes of the Howard Franklin Causeway. It always did at this time. Her daily commute between Tampa and St. Pete always took almost twice as long as it should've. Chandra watched the cars on the opposite side of the bridge whiz by. She wondered who lived in Tampa and worked in St. Pete. She could tell from the traffic that not very many people did.

Country twang blared from the giant silver pickup truck next to her. A straggly, blonde woman in narrow, black sunglasses tapped her steering wheel in time to the music. Chandra sighed loudly and rolled her window back up.

She kept her eyes fixed on the yellow SUV in front of her. It was a color that she thought should only exist on toys. During the past several months, she had seen four SUV's turned over on the side of the highway and they were all this same shade of toy-dump-truck yellow.

Last Thursday she passed one. It was turned over on the median just after the causeway. She had stayed at work late that day missing the rush hour traffic, which was good. The sun was setting and a misty darkness was starting to fill up the places where light used to be. Just before she rounded the curve after the bridge, she saw the SUV's black tires stuck up in the air like legs. It lay upside down on its giant yellow back. A woman stumbled through the grass toward the shoulder of the road. Chandra was driving too fast to stop or even really see her, but she thought the woman had blood streaming down her face. She regretted not stopping to help the woman, but as she played the scene over again and again, she didn't see how she could've. She was nearly a quarter of a mile down the road before the scene even registered.

She saw that woman stumbling out onto the shoulder of the road in her mind now. She eased back off of the SUV, leaving a gap big enough for another car to fill. A dinged-up black sedan slipped into the space in no time.

The sun glinted off the roofs of the cars inching forward. Chandra didn't notice the clear blue water of the bay, the cloudless blue sky, the sun positioning itself to set, the pelicans gliding just above the water's surface. She noticed the cars, the noise, the pollution, and the slightly spongy feeling of her steering wheel.