Flight Club

To Jackson and back with my son, the pilot.

by Whit Hill

CIBELE VIEIRA

Getting on a jet at Metro is one thing; this was a two-seat Cessna, and we were about to take off from tiny Ann Arbor Airport.

On a warm afternoon late last summer, I stepped onto an airplane, took my seat, and put my backpack on the floor in front of me. I wish I could say that the flight attendant closed the door with a satisfying, solid thud-chunk and that the reassuring voice of the pilot came over the intercom advising me to fasten my seat belt. Instead, I closed the flimsy door myself, in a way that rather reminded me of closing a yogurt container. As for the pilot, he was seated right next to me, checking some figures on a laminated card. Looking quite dashing in his aviator sunglasses, he turned to me and said, "Mom, fasten your seat belt."

As I fumbled with the clasp, I encountered an interesting thought: Ten years ago, the pilot was nine years old and enjoyed building huts for cats. The license in his jacket pocket had come in the mail about three hours before.

I don't like to fly. I don't like loud noises. I don't like the smell of fuel. I don't like small, enclosed spaces. Plus, I get motion sick and I'm afraid of heights.

That said, like most people, I've flown all my life. But getting on a commercial jet at Detroit Metro is one thing; this was a two-seat Cessna, and we were about to take off from tiny Ann Arbor Airport.

Sam put on a giant blue headset, designed both to dull the noise of the plane and to serve as a kind of walkie-talkie for both passengers and ground control. Then he handed me a set to wear. I put it on. The earpieces fit snugly around my ears; I found them comforting. A tiny microphone wrapped around to my mouth, touching my lips. I spent the next few minutes wondering how many members of the Michigan Flyers had had their mouths pressed up to our particular microphones.

The dream begins: two boys, a Mystery Trip, and a first flight. Jesse and Sam prepare for takeoff.

And what kind of diseases they might have had. And whether those diseases might impede a pilot's midair decision making—or consciousness.

The dashboard was a sea of buttons, dials, knobs, and switches. Sam pushed something, and the propeller began its unimaginable whirl. I pictured the windshield somehow disintegrating and the propeller flying backwards into the cockpit. I took deep, calming breaths as Sam reviewed his checklist. Oil temperature. Oil pressure. Altimeter. . . . Check. Check. Check.

Sam then began an incomprehensible dialogue with a friendly-sounding woman in the control tower. This conversation involved words like "niner" and "uniform-Mike." I listened closely and learned that we were "cleared to taxi." Our tiny Cessna rumbled bumpily down the eastern edge of the runway to the "run-up area." Across a chain-link fence, people drove down State Street. In cars. Cars that looked really good. You know, low to the ground.

"Okay, Mom, I'm going to run up the engine—to test it. It's going to get loud," he said. I nodded cheerfully, clutching my camera, stretching my mouth in what I hoped looked like a calm and cheerful mom-smile. He was right—it got loud, then louder, then almost unbearably loud. Then normal again. It was time.

"You okay?" my son asked, solicitously. "Are you nervous? Do you think you're going to be sick?"

"I'm fine!" I said. "Really I am. I'm having fun." And I was so, so proud of my son.

Sam had another inscrutable chat with the lady in the tower, and we were cleared for takeoff. He deftly drove the little plane to the very end of the runway, which stretched away from us like a rolling river, shimmering slightly in the late afternoon sun. Sam pushed the throttle in. We were off.

I should tell you that I asked for this. Twelve years ago—even before the era of cat-hut construction—I was a single mom struggling to raise my kids on alarmingly few dollars. In order to keep a spirit of fun and adventure in my meager household, I instituted Mystery Trips, in which my blindfolded kids were driven to some unusual and free (or very cheap) destination. One spring day Sam's best friend, Jesse, was visiting us along with his mom (and my good friend), Marian. Dinnertime loomed, the kids were restless, and a plan was born. We threw together a picnic, tied scarves around the boys' heads, and threw them into Marian's old red Volvo. Then we drove to the Ann Arbor Airport.

Oh, the mirth, the delight, when the blindfolds came off.

Our local airport is a lovely place—wide spaces and green expanses. Cute little planes are scattered like toys all over the place. If I were much bigger, a giant girl, it's a place I'd want to play, rolling the planes in and out of the metal hangars, lining them up, and flying them into the clouds while intoning, "Rrrrrrrr!"

FLIGHT CLUB

continued

While we spread out our sandwiches, chips, and spritzers on the grass, the boys gamboled about, waving at planes as they took off and landed. Soon they began a chant: "We want a ride! We want a ride!" Marian and I looked at each other. And a short time later, we were at the counter of the Aviation Center plunking down money—money we needed to pay our bills—to buy a twenty-minute joyride.

Our good-natured pilot said there was room for only three, so I gladly stayed on the ground. They flew north, searching for our houses, school, Michigan Stadium, and other familiar landmarks. They circled Whitmore Lake and headed back to town. And when Sam emerged from the plane, his future—or at least one aspect of it—was written.

For the next few years, his fascination with planes blossomed. It soon became important that he—and, if possible, every member of his family—be able to identify planes on sight. He had a plane book with which he quizzed us regularly.

"Mom, what kind of plane is this?"

"I don't know."

"It's a Lockheed TriStar. What kind of plane is this?"

"I don't know."

"It's a Boeing 757. What kind of plane is this?" You get the picture. Video games were banned in our house, but flight simulators seemed educational, and Sam spent hours navigating on the computer.

When he was twelve, he had his first official lesson—it's recorded in his logbook—and for the next seven years Sam flew, and studied, and flew. Sam's dad caught the bug too and started taking flying lessons. He paid for their membership at Michigan Flyers, the flight school at the Ann Arbor Airport where they both studied and practiced.

It was expensive (he paid his first instructor by vacuuming her stairs), it was hard (there were hundreds and hundreds of rules, instrument names, and procedures to memorize), and it was, it seemed, everything he wanted.

But, to be frank, it scared me silly. Sometimes—frequently, in fact—a lesson would involve flying out to the Daimler-Chrysler Proving Grounds near Chelsea, getting really high up in the air, and then putting the plane into such a sharp angle that it would stall—on purpose. My understanding is that when a plane stalls, it begins to fall out of the sky, and indeed this was the objective. Time after time, he would wrangle that plane out of its free fall—how I do not know—and then fly home and relish telling me all about it. "Mom, you want me to know what to do in an emergency, don't you?" he'd say, in a voice both patient and just a tad challenging. "Yes," I'd say, weakly. But why not avoid emergencies altogether? I began to question my long-standing ban on video games.

Earlier last summer, while our family

CIBELE VIEIRA

When Sam emerged from the plane twelve years ago, his future—or at least one aspect of it—was written.

was vacationing on Lake Michigan, Sam stayed in Ann Arbor to fly. His license was so close he could taste it. One night he called to announce he'd be flying to Harbor Springs the next day for his solo cross-country requirement. I hung up and pondered what this meant: that my tender progeny would be spending several hours way up in the air alongside wayward birds and unpredictable gusts of wind and potential hail and evil, obscuring, perspective-bamboozling clouds. Again, deep breathing helped.

The next day came, and the trip was postponed because of weather. It's greatly comforting that amateur pilots care enough about their mothers not to fly when it's even remotely dangerous. But then the next day rolled around, calm and cloudless across the entire Great Lake State.

We drove from Good Hart down to the Harbor Springs Airport—kind of a ranch house with an airstrip in the backyard—and sat down on some couches to wait. On a wall, a radio burst out with garbled jabber from pilots near and far. I wandered outside and watched a well-dressed young couple load their children into a fancy-looking executive jet with a hired pilot. The toddler screamed as they strapped him into his seat. I understood. After checking the sky to the south, I went back inside and leafed through some boring airplane magazines.

Suddenly the radio came to life. It was Sam! Saying things like "niner" and "uniform-Mike"! We ran outside, and there, in the air, was the boy—a tiny silver dot, bobbling in the gentle breezes, south of Harbor Springs. He glided in for a perfect landing and taxied over for a quick visit. It had been a nice flight, he said. Torch Lake and Elk Lake had been absolutely tropical blue. We fed him a sandwich and only a sip of water, for obvious reasons. Then he refueled and flew back home.

Now, license in hand, his first official passenger by his side, Sam headed down the runway.

Faster and faster we rolled. Then, gently, the ground slid away from us, and the bump of the asphalt eased into smooth flight. I kept my face pressed to the window (but trying not to press too hard, in case the door flew open) and watched how quickly the world, my world, got tiny. The subdivisions west of the airport devolved into a series of geometric shapes: the brown blocks of the houses, the serpentine curves of the roads, and the bright rectangles of swimming pools. Looking farther out, to the south and beyond, I could see old houses, barns, and long straight dirt roads, reminding me once again that not too long ago, this was farm country.

The lights of the Chelsea Fair lay like flung jewels on the dark land. The sky was a deep turquoise giving in to black, but the headlights of the cars and trucks on I-94 far below us pointed the way.

Sam banked to the right ("Whoaaa!" I yelled, laughing), and we headed north so we could get a good look at downtown, the new Ann Arbor Y, our house, the field where we run our dog. How strange and wonderful to see it all from above. In the distance, the Huron River flashed reflections of the high clouds that in turn reflected the setting sun. We turned west into that sun and followed I-94.

I've learned some interesting tidbits about aviation and air traffic control over the course of Sam's education. I've learned that as pilots fly across the country, they move from airspace to airspace, checking in with local air traffic controllers who find them on their radar and keep track of them as they pass through. As we left Ann Arbor, Sam radioed Detroit Metro to let them know who he was, where he was coming from, and where he was headed. The guy at Metro welcomed him and confirmed his information. I continued looking out the window, happy that no one could hear the depth and rapidity of my breathing over the roar of the plane.

Strangely, I felt most calm looking down, busying my brain by trying to locate landmarks. Every time I looked at the boy to my left, flying this plane, I had to remind myself, "He's ready for this. They wouldn't have given him his license if he weren't ready. He's studied so long for this, and I trust him." And I did trust him. I had to.

The sun was setting fifteen minutes later as we made our approach to the Jackson Airport. We passed the field and then turned a sharp 180 degrees to approach it from the west. In a clearing just west of the runway, a herd of deer stood. Moving as one, they raised their heads and looked up at us. Sam's landing was perfect.

Jackson's airport is a study in 1960s modernism. There's a little restaurant there that appears to be unchanged from the day it opened. We got a table by the window and Sam ordered a burger and fries. I didn't order anything; my mind was on weighty matters. Getting to Jackson was one thing; now we had to fly back. In the dark.

But by this time, I began to notice a strange, new feeling draped over my shoulders like a slowly warming cloak: a blend of acceptance and confidence. Sam was a licensed pilot. He had flown me to Jackson on this beautiful, gentle night. Now he would fly me home.

It was great up there. The lights of the Chelsea Fair lay like flung jewels on the dark land. The sky was a deep turquoise giving in to black, but the headlights of the cars and trucks on I-94 far below us pointed the way. From time to time the voice of a friendly man in Lansing would tell us of air traffic in our area. And we'd look, and there would be a plane, right where he said it would be, a bright dot in the distance.

Ahead was our town. After a bit of looking, we found the airport beacon; then we spotted the runway, clearly marked by colored lights. Sam banked right, then left, to line us up with those lights, and brought us smoothly down. We taxied back, he turned off the plane's engine, and we were engulfed in a good and steady silence.

"Nice job, buddy," I said. He smiled and opened the door. ■