

Harriet

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I was in Boston to solve what I thought was a murder. It was early summer, a nice time to be ... and approaching the anniversary of her death.

“But I am a cat and I don’t like cold water,” I said as I rode the red line in the direction of Braintree. I changed the sentence, her last known, slightly to see if it sounded better: “But I am a cat and I do not like cold water.

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“I am a cat and I don’t like cold water.”

When I opened my eyes, the man sitting across from me had reared his upper lip as if he were doing curls at the gym. Making the Ugly Face. I noticed the communication device tumoring out of his ear.

“Why are you saying that,” he pussed.

“Have you heard of Harriet Quimby?” I answered.

The man inflated the edges of his gated mouth like a frog I’d seen once on the Internet. He turned his head a little to the left, a little to right, no longer looking at me. He took a call.

“Yes, Emma? I’m almost there. Hold the spot. Just—hold it. Tell them—tell them the leading edge. Tell them—some more upside.”

In my lap were three dozen pages printed out from various websites I’d scoured early into the morning. Photos of her childhood home in Michigan, now decrepit and unforgettable. Photos of her face on the page. Resting against my ankle: my computer in its case, and next to me on the vacant seat was my hiking backpack and camping gear.

I got off at North Quincy station stop. I had to wait a while for the number 211 bus, but when it came I was the first one up the steps.

“What are you doing?” the driver shot at me.

“I’m going to Squantum Cove.”

“What, to camp? Cops are gonna come and kick you off, if that’s what you’re up to.”

“I assure you, my intentions are nothing but honorable,” I said before passing him by.

I sat at the very back of the bus where there was room for my gear. The people on the bus appeared older except for one woman who looked something like Harriet Quimby. I continued to watch her. I smiled. She looked away.

Harriet Quimby drove a red Ford Roadster, one of the first ever made in this country. She wrote over 250 articles for the popular New York-based magazine *Leslie’s Weekly* on topics such as the misfortunes of the Third World poor and the possible emancipation of women. She became interested in learning how to fly when she saw the famed pilot John Moisant wing his way around the Statue of Liberty during a night flight witnessed by thousands of people late in 1910. After the flight, Harriet saw John Moisant at the Astor Hotel and asked him if he could teach her to fly.

The bus dropped me off close to Squantum Point Park. I had to walk another mile, but I didn’t mind. I was prepared for the weight on my knees, the straps singeing my shoulders. When I reached the edge of the park, I smelled the ocean and saw a tiny bed and breakfast that looked right out of England. Inside the bed and breakfast I asked, “Do you have any Harriet Quimby memorabilia?”

“Who’s Harriet Quimby?” the owner, a woman, asked.

I explained that Harriet Quimby was only the first American woman ever to earn her pilot’s license. She made her first night flight at the Richmond County Fair on September 4, 1911, before a crowd of thousands. She was described as a beauty, tall and lithe, like a great cat, dressed in a purple hooded tunic and wearing a host of lucky amulets and other jewelry around her neck as she took off into the sky.

“Is that a fact,” the owner said when I told her that Harriet had also been the first woman to fly across the English Channel—on the exact day news of the Titanic broke. I showed the owner the famous picture of a beaming Harriet Quimby, goggles off, head still hooded, hoisted on the shoulders of a cheering crowd of French villagers who had rushed to see her touch down on the beach.

“Wow. She really did this? That’s something.”

I nodded. “And then she died. Not right then, but a few months later. Here, in Squantum.”

“Here?”

“At the cove. That’s why it’s so surprising you don’t have any memorabilia. You don’t even know about her.”

The owner looked at me as if I'd asked her for a sexual favor. I remembered promising myself once to watch my tone.

"My partner and I just retired," she said. "We worked in biotech for thirty-five years. We haven't read much in the way of early aviation."

In the lull that followed I asked her, out of curiosity, just how much a room cost for one night at her establishment. She told me they were all booked up for the summer.

I explored the surrounding neighborhood for a bit. I walked up and down streets, past quiet houses and quieter cars. After a half an hour of frustration over not having seen anything bearing the memory of Harriet Quimby, I spotted an old, old woman seated alone on a bench at the edge of the park. She had a cane between her knees and was staring straight ahead as if waiting for someone. I approached her from the side.

"Excuse me, ma'am."

She looked up, my shadow covering her.

"What is your opinion of the death of Harriet Quimby on July 1, 1912?"

The old woman, gummy-lipped, shaded her eyes with one of her hands even though my body blocked out the sun. She shook her head slightly.

"Perhaps I should explain who I am and why I'm here. I am an investigative reporter working for the Internet and my task today is to discover the truth behind Harriet Quimby's death. Suicide, murder, or accident — or a combination of the first two and none of the last? You must have information that could help me in this case."

The old woman took a long moment to answer. "I don't understand any of this," she finally spat.

"How old are you, if I may ask?"

"You may not!" The old woman swung her cane upward and jabbed at me with its tip. I stepped back, undeterred.

"But surely you must have been alive on July 1, 1912. Even if you were a little girl that day. Surely you must remember seeing the plane fall from the sky. So what happened? Tell me, please. Was it Mr. Willard's fault? Did Harriet's passenger jump out of the plane to kill himself, escape from his crushing financial burdens, and thereby unbalance the plane and thus kill Harriet too? Or was it merely the wind? Which?"

"Help! Fire! Fire! Help! Someone's car's on fire! And a house too! Help!"

I walked through the park, the former "airport" from which

Harriet Quimby had taken off on her last flight before a crowd of approximately five thousand, and then down to the cove. The beach was empty, the tide in the mudflats still low and the twilight sky promising a full moon—perfect circumstances for my investigation.

I set my backpack and computer case and camping gear on drier ground at a distance from the flats. Then I got my solo tent ready and ate McDonald's by the light of the moon. Careful to wrap all the waste up for safe disposal, I got into my sleeping bag inside my cozy confines and waited for sleep to slide into me.

What I witnessed next could have been a dream, but it likely wasn't. I was at the airport in Squantum, only it was the real airport and I was among a crowd of five thousand spectators dressed in clothes that only could have been worn in all their authenticity that day, July 1, 1912. And though I could not see myself, I saw her, the Dresden-China aviatrix, Harriet Quimby, thirty-seven years old and surrounded by a flock of female friends all anxious to see her alight into her little Bleriot monoplane shipped all the way from France. And there was Harriet, looking right at me, a toothy smile, a wave of her hand, her silk scarf billowing from her open palm and into the grasp of one of those gathered. And there was her flying companion, Mr. William Willard, the president and organizer of this, the Third Annual Boston Aviation Meet. A heavyset man getting on in years, Mr. Willard climbed up into the seat behind Harriet's and saluted the crowd. Harriet Quimby, face forward now, goggles set before her eyes, waited for the propeller to be spun, and when it was, they were off! Off down the short field and into the air, off across the harbor and toward the Boston Light.

My eyes were open and someone was outside my tent. No shadow, but I knew. I unzipped from my sleeping bag and got my voice recording device ready. Then I opened the front of the tent and stepped out.

A figure stood at the edge of the shore, her back to me. She wore a pure white dress that fell to her black shoes, and under one gloved palm was an umbrella resting straight up in the mud. Her look, the exact same as in the photo taken at the Moisant flight school in 1911, was completed by the hat she wore, large and fashionable for the time.

My breath creeping, my back bent slightly, I approached her to make sure I was not seeing a ghost. When I was within a few feet she turned slowly to observe me. I saw her blameless green eyes, thought of touching her wind-whipped skin, and I knew. It was her. It was Harriet Quimby.

For a time we watched each other, only a foot or two apart now.

"This is how I want to remember you."

"I'm pretty sure I'm supposed to say that," I said. I had yet to remember to turn on the voice recording device.

Harriet drew her umbrella from the mud and pointed it laconically down the shoreline. I followed the direction of the tip.

“Let’s walk awhile,” she said.

Side by side we set off along the beach. Here and there insects and little crustaceous creatures scrambled and dove to hide. With every other step, I listened to the plunging and sucking sounds of Harriet’s umbrella being driven into the mud and then pulled back out like a cane. At one point I glanced at her and was surprised to find that she had aged far beyond the age at which she had died. She was perhaps seventy or eighty, her eyes rimmed red, her nose peeled and her lips retracted into her mouth.

“In my opinion,” she said, quoting from a Leslie’s Weekly article she published in the year of her death, “there is no reason why the aeroplane should not open up a fruitful occupation for women. I see no reason why they cannot realize handsome incomes from parcel delivery, from taking photographs from above or from conducting schools for flying.”

We had since stopped to stare out across the water at Boston Light, the oldest lighthouse in America. Harriet had returned to the age at which she’d died and I, remembering a key component of my investigation, brought up the voice recording device. “Harr—um, Ms. Quimby. Do you mind if I ask you some questions?”

She said nothing, nor would she turn from watching the water. Her umbrella was sinking inch by inch under the weight of her gloved hands.

Again I saw that day. The Bleriot monoplane, gull-white, has just rounded the lighthouse and is sky-sailing back toward the shore. Across the Neponset River and Dorchester Bay, stark perfect against a background of clear blue, the little craft bobs and quivers in its descent. The crowd, anticipating the landing, begins to applaud. There is Harriet Quimby, a man’s woman, author of a dozen produced Hollywood screenplays, perhaps born in California, perhaps not, perhaps born rich, perhaps not. There is Mr. William Willard leaning in as if to say something to the pilot.

And then, at a height of 1,500 feet, the monoplane suddenly pitches forward and Mr. Willard rises out of his seat, clears it as if he jumped. His body ejects in an arc, peaks, and then plummets.

The plane, already in a nosedive, flips nearly upside-down and Harriet Quimby, also unbelted, drops out.

“The voice recording device is on now, Ms. Quimby. Please, if you could, speak slowly and clearly enough for it to pick up.”

The umbrella was at this point a good third of the way into the mud. I realized that Harriet was forcing it down, plung-

ing it as she would a sword into a stone. I realized she was angry.

She was biting her lip, her eyes still on the lighthouse. But the lower lip was being tested so hard blood was dribbling down her chin. Rather than recoil, I pressed forward.

“I know this may be difficult for you, Ms. Quimby. But, please. What did Mr. Willard say to you just before the plunge?”

Even before I’d finished the question she was walking toward the water. Her shoes made a squelching sound, a catch and release. She had left the umbrella standing straight up in the muck.

I followed her to where the mudflats gave way entirely to the ocean. Here she hesitated, lifted one caked shoe, allowed it to hover, and then nestled it back in its cradle.

She was a cat and she did not like cold water.

I brought the recording device up to Harriet Quimby’s face, as if doing so would force her to look at me at last.

“You must tell me, Ms. Quimby. It’s crucial to the investigation.”

I heard a sloshing and squelching from behind. I turned to find the moonlit expanse of mudflats empty. The umbrella was gone.

When I turned back to Harriet Quimby, she was no longer dressed as a lady but rather as the Dresden-China aviatrix, her trousers and purple-hooded tunic and goggles and lucky necklaces drenched in mud. I saw the bodies somersaulting through the blue.

Harriet crumpled before me, and her body began to sink. I was meant to drag her up and carry her to dry land.

Like in the picture.

I wasted little time. Within moments I was upon her body, grasping for a hold, but it was difficult; each time I felt I had her she slipped out like a worm from a peach. Finally I got my arms under her body and bore it up. She was lifeless, head lolling, her goggles cracked, mud and murk and living things spilling from her mouth.

I set her on the ground and tried to stand her up. She only collapsed. On my second attempt I shook her violently, so roughly that her head appeared ready to pop from its neck.

“Damn it, Harriet!” I said to her opaque face. “I need to know!”

Whether she said it to me then or in another time does not matter. What does matter is what I heard next: He’s still out there.

And I'm meant to find him.

I didn't bother to watch Harriet Quimby's body sink. Turning from the edge, I scanned the mudscape leading back to my tent. He was out there, somewhere. I started squelching.

"Mr. Willard! Mr. Willard! Are you here? Please!"

I stopped, held the voice recording device up as a beacon, rotated three hundred-sixty degrees, and when I came to stand facing in my original direction, Mr. William Willard was in front of me at a distance of about five feet.

He looked awful. Mud and critters clung to his body in equal amounts. One of his eyes had burst from its socket and dangled like a body from a hangman's noose. He swayed two feet toward me, and his mouth opened, expelling the earth and sea.

I brandished the voice recording device at his face. "Mr. Willard. Could you tell me what exactly happened right before you fell out of the Bleriot? Did you jump? And if you did, why?"

"Tell me, tell me, tell me," the suspect intoned.

I lunged at him. My fingers on his throat, I pressed him down into the mud. His lack of resistance made my act all the more frustrating, all the more futile.

"You're going to tell me!" I said. "You're going to speak into this voice recording device slowly and clearly, and you're going to tell the truth of that day!"

But he was gone from beneath my hands, now sinking effortlessly. The voice recording device was gone too.

I managed to pull myself up into a sitting position. Mr. Willard, looking just as he had before he fell out of the monoplane, sat beside me. For a time we watched the ocean, the first faint light rising in the east and turning our nation's oldest lighthouse into a silhouette, a statue. Then Mr. Willard said, "I'm trying to do some good here."

"That's my line, I think."

The sun was breaking fast over the flatline.

"All I want to know," I said, "is whether or not you jumped from that damn plane. The Internet says nothing for sure about this. People of the time thought one thing, and they thought another. So what was it? What..."

"Debts," Mr. Willard said.

"So it was a suicide. And by committing suicide you murdered Harriet Quimby."

Smiling ruefully, he shook his head. "I did not want to die,"

he said.

"Then ... they were right, the ones who said a bad wind caused the plane to flip."

Mr. Willard, his face tight, nodded.

"And you're willing to swear on this? That it was an accident?"

"I do hereby swear," he said.

"Then what did you say ... as you ... as you leaned forward ... before your weight tipped the plane forward too far ... too fast?"

"I said, 'I can't wait to tell my son about this glorious experience.'"

And then he was crying quietly, his head draped to his chest. I put my arm around him, and together we witnessed the sun's ascent.

When next I looked to my left Mr. Willard was gone, and my arm fell awkwardly. I got to my feet and walked back to my tent.

As I was packing up, I heard a sharp voice from behind. I turned to see an officer of the law approaching fast. I welcomed her.

"There's no camping here," she said. "We have signs posted all around."

I waited for the inevitable.

"I'm going to have to write you up for this."

"I know."

I was wrong this time, but I wouldn't always be.