

## The Country Doctor

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“It stands beside the same old apple tree.” From *The Grindstone*, by Robert Frost, a poem about the creation of art.

I was alone in the small helicopter, the rotor blades spinning above my head. They sliced the fog into spirals, like a knife peeling an apple. My throat muscles drew as tight as a noose, as cloud pushed me closer and closer to the ground. With all that training in medicine and flying, how in the hell had I got myself into a fix like this?

I held Neurology clinics at hospitals in small towns around Kansas City. Some of the patients worked family farms, in the field day and night during planting and harvest. Others worked in small factories, manufacturing moldings or battery parts. Some worked in meat processing plants. A few were lawyers or teachers or dentists. Some were third generation welfare, who would never make it over the poverty line. All in all, they were like the folks I grew up with, in a small mountain town in western North Carolina.

To get to these clinics, I flew small planes, and landed at local airports. Sometimes I had to fly the planes on instruments, racking up hard instrument hours, especially in winter. But I was instrument rated, current, and legal. And I loved to fly, suspended as I was between heaven and earth, whatever the weather.

One day, though, I made a mistake. I took off and climbed on instruments, but Center told me I was flying in the wrong direction. In my rush to avoid even worse weather, I forgot to adjust a critical instrument. It was then I realized I was legal, but not safe.

As the old saying goes: There are old pilots, and bold pilots, but there are no old bold pilots. So I turned to flying a two-seat helicopter. I resolved I was through with instrument flying. I wasn't going anywhere unless I could see the ground below, and land anywhere if the weather turned foul.

And that little helicopter was like a magic carpet. From it, flying at a few hundred feet, I could see deer foraging in the fields in the morning. I could see wind-rippled fields of wheat, that looked like waves on the surface of the ocean. At night, the jeweled lights of the city passed beneath me, like phosphorescent plankton. And best of all I could land at the helipads of most of the hospitals, and hover taxi to a parking place.

But now, now, fog and cloud were smothering me, forcing me into the ground and a grave. The weather had started off clear with unlimited visibility, CAVU as pilots

like to call it. The forecast was good. But I should have known better. The little town where I was headed might as well have been in another universe. In-route fog could develop quickly, when sunlight hit the rain-drenched fields.

*Carburetor heat with visible moisture and low manifold pressure—Check. A quick 180-degree turn—and I'm out of it—for a few seconds.*

I'd flown that route a hundred times. I thought I knew every inch by heart. But without a good view of the ground, and without instruments, I was lost. If I could reach a highway a few miles to the west, I could follow it to my destination. So I turned west, found the highway, and began to inch along its course

Poles began to appear out of the fog. Sometimes they switched sides of the road, along with the wires they carried. Wires—a big killer of helicopters. Pilots couldn't see them until it was too late. Low visibility and a ragged ceiling would kill Kobe Bryant, many years later.

The fields on either side of the road were drowned in standing water. Landing on the highway itself was death by truck. So I crept, crept along.

Then suddenly a farmhouse appeared to my right, as if materializing out of the mist. At first I thought it was an illusion. But then a calf appeared in the yard, beside an ancient apple tree.

*Ease over the power line. Keep away from the tree and the calf. Kiss the ground with the skids...and mixture, mags, master...off.* The rotor blades whirling over my head slowly came to a stop.

My hands were white as death as I reached for the door latch. Stepping onto the skid, my legs gave way, and I tumbled to the ground. For an eternity of relief I lay there, gazing at the grayness above.

The house and yard were quiet as a graveyard. I somehow got up and stumbled to the door. Before I could knock, a woman with gray eyes deep set in a wizened face opened it. She wore a flour sack dress, like one of my Appalachian aunts. She offered me coffee, bitter and hot.

I called my nurse and told her what happened. She said she knew just where I was, about four miles north of town.

When I got to the clinic, patients were waiting. I said I was sorry for being late, and told them I was held up by the weather. Helen was there with her husband. He took her for rides to familiar places to remind her of who she was. *For better or for worse.* And Jim and his wife—I gave them the news of his brain tumor with his little girl playing on the office floor. *In sickness and in health.*

Those clinics died a long time ago, but their memories can come alive with me still. If I close my eyes, and conjure them up, I can still see the farmhouse and apple tree, that saved the life of a country doctor.