STATELESS

Books by Elizabeth Wein

Stateless

The Enigma Game

The Pearl Thief

STATELESS

ELIZABETH WEIN

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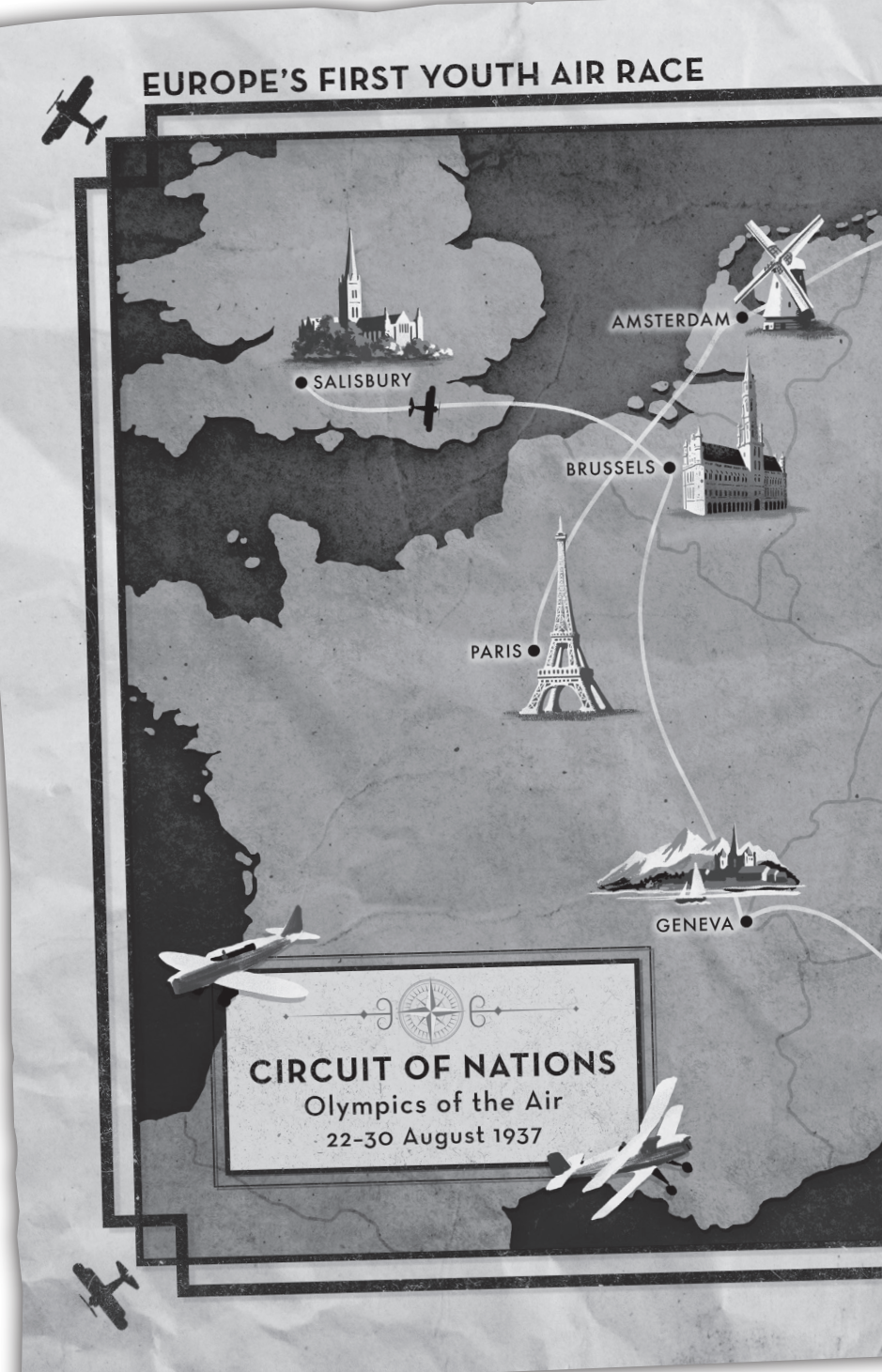


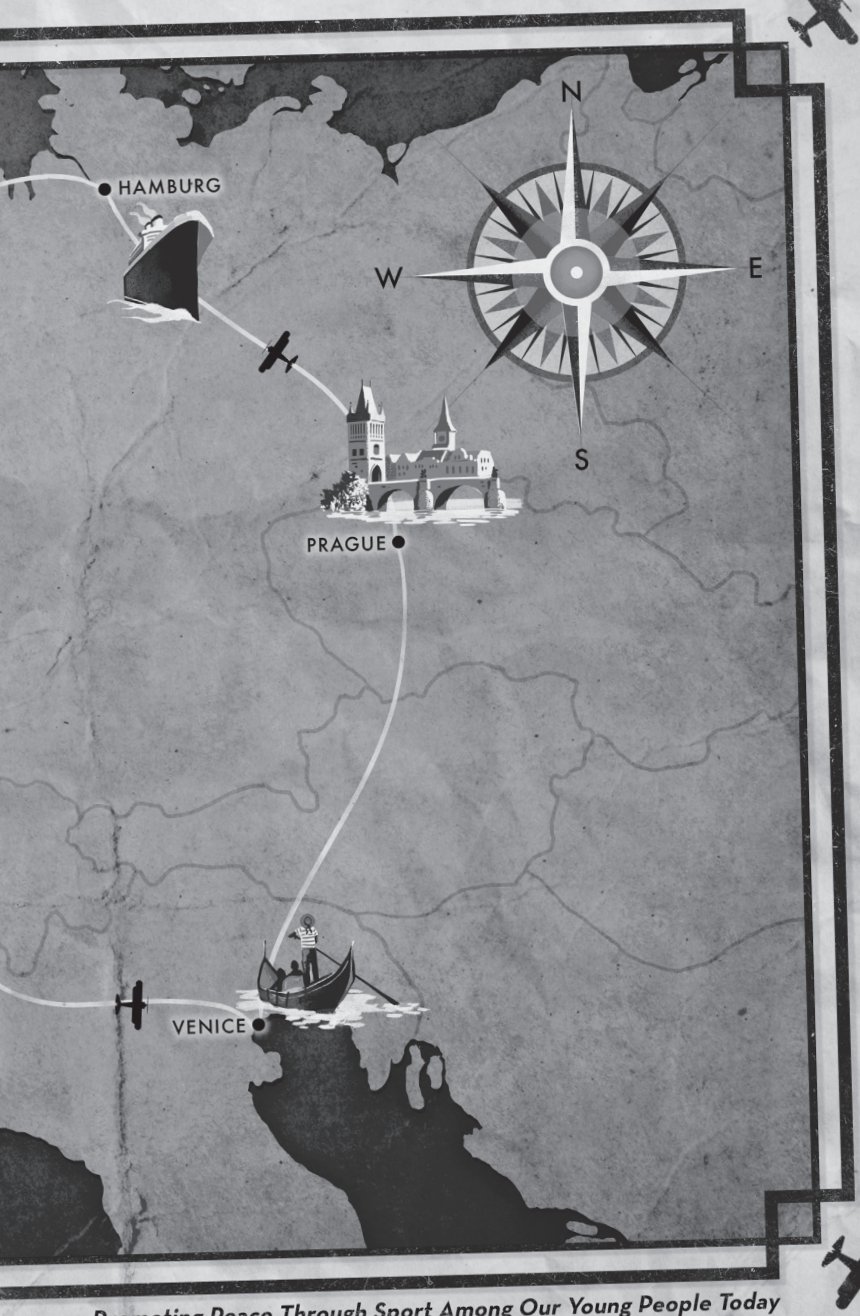
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For Elizabeth,
still writing at the other
end of the table

No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main; if a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friends or of thine own were; any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind; and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.

—JOHN DONNE


EUROPE'S FIRST YOUTH AIR RACE
SALISBURY
AMSTERDAM
BRUSSELS
PARIS
GENEVA
CIRCUIT OF NATIONS
Olympics of the Air
22–30 August 1937



Promoting Peace Through Sport Among Our Young People Today

CIRCUIT OF NATIONS
OLYMPICS OF THE AIR

22–30 August 1937

THE RACE CONTESTANTS, BY NATION:

KINGDOM OF BELGIUM:
Master Gaby Dupont, age 17, flying a Tipsy B

CZECHOSLOVAK REPUBLIC (CZECHOSLOVAKIA):
Master Jiří Jindra, age 17, flying a Beneš-Mráz Bibi

FRENCH REPUBLIC (FRANCE):
Master Antoine Robert, age 19, flying a Hanriot 436

GERMAN REICH (GERMANY):
Second Lieutenant Sebastian Rainer, age 19, flying a Bücker Bü-131 Jungmann

KINGDOM OF GREECE:
Master Philippos Gekas, age 20, flying an Avro Tutor

KINGDOM OF ITALY:
Master Vittorio Pavesi, age 18, flying a Breda Ba-25

KINGDOM OF THE NETHERLANDS:
Master Willem van Leer, age 16, flying a Koolhoven FK-46

KINGDOM OF NORWAY:
Master Erlend Pettersen, age 20, flying a Breda Ba-25

REPUBLIC OF POLAND:
Sub-Lieutenant Stefan Chudek, age 19, flying an RWD-8

KINGDOM OF SWEDEN:
Master Torsten Stromberg, age 20, flying a Raab-Katzenstein RK-26 Tigerschwalbe (Tigerswallow)

SWISS CONFEDERATION (SWITZERLAND):
Master Theodor Vogt, age 18, flying a Bücker Bü-131 Jungmann

UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN AND NORTHERN IRELAND:
Miss Stella North, age 17, flying an Avro Cadet

THE CHAPERONES:

DIANA STEPNEY-MILTON, LADY FRITH
The United Kingdom, flying a de Havilland Dragon Rapide

MAJOR FLORIAN ROSENGART
Germany, flying an Albatros L-75 Ace

CAPITANO ERNESTO RANZA
Italy, flying a Breda Ba-33

CAPITAINE MARCEL BAZILLE
France, flying a Hanriot 436

THE RACE DESTINATIONS, STARTING FROM SALISBURY, ENGLAND (OLD SARUM AIRFIELD):

BRUSSELS, BELGIUM (MONT DES BERGERS AIRFIELD, CHARLEROI)

GENEVA, SWITZERLAND (COINTRIN AIRPORT)

VENICE, ITALY (NICELLI AERODROME, LIDO)

PRAGUE, CZECHOSLOVAKIA (RUZYNĚ AERODROME)

HAMBURG, GERMANY (HAMBURG AIRPORT)

AMSTERDAM, THE NETHERLANDS (SCHIPHOL AERODROME)

PARIS, FRANCE (LE BOURGET AIRPORT)

PART ONE

WASHED AWAY BY THE SEA

Saturday, 21 August–
Monday, 23 August 1937

1

No Parachute

Salisbury, England

I didn't realize those vultures were going to see me as fresh meat until it was too late.

I pulled up to park at the end of the line of visiting aircraft, brought my aeroplane to a stop, and cut the engine. I couldn't start it again without someone swinging the propeller for me.

"It's Stella North! I say, chaps, it's Britain's own 'North Star,' here at last!"

"The Flying English Rose!"

One of the reporters was hatless and without a jacket, his shirtsleeves rolled up, informal and swaggering. "May we call you Northie, like your flight instructor?"

The moment I took off my goggles and leather flying helmet, the man leaped up onto the lower wing of my borrowed Avro Cadet biplane and leaned into the open cockpit. He grabbed my hand.

"Welcome to Old Sarum Airfield! You're the eighth to arrive! We know you're committed to an exclusive interview

with the *Daily Comet*, but would you mind answering just a few informal questions about Europe's first-ever youth air race? How do you feel about being the only girl in the competition? Didn't your guardian give an interview objecting to your participation?"

I pulled my hand away with a vicious tug and unclipped my parachute without saying anything.

The hatless reporter laughed. "Some kid! Are you sure you're the right person to represent Britain in an international competition?"

I pressed my lips together tightly.

I wasn't at all sure.

By sending my application to the flashy and formidable race organizer, Lady Frith, I'd deliberately disobeyed my adoptive parents. Aunt Marie was tearful and melodramatic: *It would break your dead mother's heart, dirtying your hands and face with engine oil, sleeping in rented rooms with a dozen strange young men all over Europe!* Uncle Max played the proud exiled aristocrat: *You owe no loyalty to the King of England. As soon as the Bolsheviks are out of power we will go back to Petrograd.*

As if he hadn't been saying the same thing for nearly fifteen years! Even I could see that the Soviet Union was never going to let them come back.

England was my home. It meant the world to me that I was representing Britain in this race—"uniting nations through aviation," as Lady Frith put it. But I dreaded the press finding out that their "Flying English Rose" left Russia as a refugee at the age of three and wasn't technically a subject of the King.

Other reporters were pelting me with questions now. I wondered how I was going to escape this crowd.

"Don't you wish there were another girl besides yourself flying in the Circuit of Nations Olympics of the Air? How do you feel about the participation of pilots from Nazi Germany? Will the stop in Hamburg be your first visit to the German Reich?"

It would, and I was burning to prove myself a better pilot than the young German Luftwaffe air force officer I'd be racing against. But I dared not say anything so ambitious in public.

"Lady Frith's planned your route through seven major European cities, so why isn't she starting the race from London? D'you think you're meeting here at Old Sarum to impress the Germans with the strength of Britain's Royal Air Force?"

I protested through clenched teeth. "I really couldn't say."

Two men in gray fedora hats climbed up on the lower wing on my other side, supporting themselves by hanging on to the upper wing struts like trapeze artists. I felt the jerk as the plane took their unexpected weight. The swaggering hatless man who'd shaken my hand waved a notebook at me. "Just quickly, Northie, are you going to perform in the air show in Paris after the awards ceremony?"

A fourth journalist jumped up alongside him. "Have you met any of the other racers yet? They're a handsome bunch, aren't they? Aren't you worried about unwanted advances? What about you being one of the youngest contestants? Or at seventeen do you feel you have more flight experi—"

"*Get off my wings!*" I bellowed at them all.

I scrambled to stand on my parachute on the seat. "Get off! *Get off!* The wings aren't strong enough to hold all of you! *GET OFF! You'll break my wings and I won't be able to race!*"

I hit out at the notebook in the swaggering journalist's hand and sent it flying. He gave a grunt of angry surprise and jumped to the ground to retrieve it.

I could feel my face getting hot. *Hell's bells*, what would he write about me now? *The Flying English Rose has got nasty thorns—*

But I had to protect my plane, at any cost.

"*GET OFF!*" I yelled wildly.

They climbed down from the wings, but I was trapped in my cockpit like a finch in a cage surrounded by cats. Two dozen reporters crowded against the sides of the plane, jarring it, all shouting for my attention at once.

"Tell us, Northie, have you conquered your fear of crossing the Alps?"

"Don't you think it's unfair that the Belgian contestant is being allowed to fly a specially modified machine?"

"How do you feel about the Swedish racer breaking his fiancée's nose?"

My mouth dropped open and snapped shut again. I hadn't known that. Was it true, or were they trying to frighten me? Or both?

The hatless journalist in shirtsleeves lowered his voice, suddenly coaxing. "Would you say something inspiring for our women readers who'd like to learn to fly? It's so unnatural for a young girl to put herself in danger. Most women haven't the strength nor the endurance nor the knowledge of a man when it comes to flying an aeroplane. Aren't you worried that someone will try to sabotage your machine, as happened to some of the planes in the 1929 Women's Air Derby in America? Wing wires corroded with acid—fire in the luggage compartment?"

Now I was sure he was trying to scare me.

But I was beginning to feel ridiculous about being so tight-lipped. I tucked my stopwatch and its chain into my jacket pocket and folded my map into my flight bag, trying to appear collected and unruffled. Then I looked up and met the man's eyes. I raised one hand to hush them, and they went expectantly quiet.

"I've fulfilled exactly the same requirements as all the other contestants," I said coldly. "And you probably know that Louise Thaden and Blanche Noyes competed against men and *won*, almost exactly one year ago, in the American speed race. So women *can* fly and be good at it."

They all bent their heads, scribbling in silence, until someone piped up earnestly: "Oh, *thank you*, Northie, and can you also tell us what you'll be wearing to the Valedictory Banquet tonight?"

Now they'd managed to make me self-conscious about what I looked like, in addition to being desperately worried about my plane and trying not to let distrust of my fellow contestants go galloping away with me. Blast it, did they really want to know about my *clothes*? I gasped in annoyance at the silly question and pushed untidy hair out of my eyes with one hand. The ribbon that was supposed to tie back my hair had pulled loose when I'd taken off my flying helmet.

I wished I were back in the air.

Standing on my parachute in the Cadet's open cockpit, holding on to the upper wing for balance, I was above this rabble, but the moment I climbed out of the plane and set my feet on the ground, it would be like opening the finch's cage and letting the cats do their worst.

Why were these scavengers even allowed near the landing aircraft? There ought to be guards about, or at least policemen, someone associated with the army communication school that operated here. Where were the chaperones who were supposed to be looking out for me and the other eleven young pilots flying in that afternoon? Where was the race organizer and patron, Lady Frith, the leading lady in this pantomime?

The aggressive reporter who'd asked the menacing question about sabotage thought he had my attention now. He said smoothly, "Northie, is it true you don't hold a British passport?"

"*I have a passport!*" I snapped in wild alarm. "I am *English* and I have a passport."

Cameras whirred and clicked and there I was, captured on film with my guard down, my hair flying every which way like the mane of a shaggy Shetland pony, my mouth open and my eyes wide with guilt, caught. An impostor.

I had to escape them somehow. I absolutely had to get away from them.

It seemed like there was an entire ocean of worn grass separating me from the sanctuary of the Old Sarum hangars and offices. There were dozens more people over there; I could see one or two in flight gear, probably my competition. I glanced over at the plane parked next to me. It was another biplane with upper and lower wings painted exactly the same color as mine, a fresh forest green. But the *F* on its tail showed it was from France.

A tall man in a coverall flight suit was standing by the plane's nose, carefully winding the propeller. His skin was dark and his hair was just beginning to be dusted with silver, though his face was still youthfully unlined. There weren't

many Black people in southern England, and I knew from photographs that this must be the French chaperone, Capitaine Marcel Bazille.

The race chaperones, who would escort the racers in their own aircraft along the same course, were experienced pilots, aviation heroes. Apart from Lady Frith, the first woman to fly solo from Portugal to the Azores, all of them were flying aces of the Great War. Capitaine Bazille was also a doctor of veterinary medicine and the mayor of his town. No doubt the reporters had been hounding this extraordinary man too, just before I pulled up. He'd had to wait until the crowd moved back before he could start the other plane's engine, so the propeller didn't kill anybody when it suddenly leaped to life.

I could just see another head in the pilot's cockpit of the French plane, his face hidden beneath a leather flying helmet and goggles like mine. He was leaning out around his windscreen to watch the chaperone.

That must be the French race contestant—one of my competitors.

As I watched, Capitaine Bazille cried out, "*Contact!*"

The reporters around me all swiveled their heads to look, as if they were watching a cricket batsman.

"*Contact!*" the pilot in the plane yelled back.

Capitaine Bazille swung the propeller and jumped aside. Then, as the engine roared, no one could hear anything else. The reporters all backed away, clutching their hats and notebooks in the sudden wind of the whirling propeller.

There was an acre of grass airfield between me and Old Sarum's military buildings. But there were only a couple of paces between my own wingtips and those of the French

plane, and the startled reporters had now left me a gap to get between them.

Hanging on to my helmet and goggles, I snatched up my flight bag and swung down from my cockpit. As the French plane began to roll forward, I hurled myself across to it, leaped onto the wing, and scrambled into the empty passenger seat in front of the French pilot.

The pilot leaned forward over his windscreen, right behind me, and shook me roughly by the shoulder.

"*Get out of my plane!*" he yelled in my ear, in English.

The plane was veering sideways over the grass because he'd had to take his feet off the rudder and brake pedals to be able to reach me. There were controls in the front cockpit, too, and I straightened the plane with my own feet. He sat back down and his voice seemed farther away, over the sound of the engine.

"This is a test flight! Get out!"

I gave him a thumbs-up, pretending I couldn't hear. I pulled on my helmet and goggles and strapped myself into the safety harness. The pilot behind me idled the engine so that I couldn't help but hear him yelling at the back of my head.

"Get out of my plane! What in tarnation do you think you're doing? Sizing up the competition?"

He didn't sound the least bit French. His fluent English had a twangy drawl that reminded me of Hollywood. American—that was it.

"I'm getting away from those blasted reporters!" I yelled back. "You owe me a favor! You couldn't have got your engine

started if they hadn't left your chaperone alone to go after me. Go ahead with your flight! I won't touch anything!"

"The heck you'll touch anything," he growled. "You'll regret it if you do. And I don't owe you a wooden nickel."

I glanced back over my shoulder. Capitaine Bazille had his hand on one of the reporter's arms, holding him back. The French pilot must have seen it too, because he agreed irritably, "I want to get out of here, and I'm not gonna waste time arguing. Those skunks aren't my friends either."

He thumbed his nose at the reporters waving their hats and notebooks at us, then increased the engine's power. That was the end of our conversation—we couldn't say anything to each other over the noise.

But the French pilot told me a lot about himself just by the way he handled his aircraft.

I could hardly believe how fast he taxied, bumping over the grass field as if he were making a getaway from a bank robbery. It wasn't reckless: it was hard, controlled speed. On the ground the plane's nose pointed at the sky, so the French pilot had to zigzag to taxi because he couldn't see straight ahead of him; his sharp turns threw me roughly from side to side. He was going so fast I felt the wings lift the very second he turned into the wind.

Around us, disturbed skylarks soared out of the long grass at the edge of the airfield, and we soared with them into a blue and gold late-summer afternoon sky, almost straight into the air, effortless. I had the impression that the plane was flying itself—that the French pilot didn't have to think about the takeoff any more than the skylarks did.

This was my competition. My heart sank. If all the other

racers flew like this, I was going to be completely out of my depth.

As I pulled the unfamiliar harness tighter and made sure my flight bag was secure, I realized in alarm that I'd left my parachute in my own plane.

I gripped the sides of my seat so I wouldn't be tempted to touch the flight controls. I wondered what his "test flight" would include.

We climbed only to about five hundred feet, not very high, and passed over Old Sarum's fleet of Fighter Command Hector biplanes. For the past few years the Royal Air Force had been grimly expanding bases that could protect England if the Nazi government in Germany tried to get aggressive. Alongside these military machines, the racing aircraft stood out boldly, all different types, small and gaudy.

We left the airfield. The ancient green mound at Old Sarum, crowned by its ruined castle, dropped below us. We reached the River Avon, and then the pilot turned so steeply that it took my breath away. For a moment I was afraid we'd dive into the thousand-year-old ruins. But he leveled out smoothly and began to follow the river.

Within five minutes we were over Stonehenge.

It was obviously what he'd been aiming for. It was incredible to look down on from five hundred feet overhead. The late afternoon sunlight cast long shadows behind the old stones, their heavy arches painted in strokes of light and dark against the green summer grass, the wide ring of markers around them making the whole landscape look like a giant ancient sundial.

I wished I'd flown here by myself, on my way over from my

home airfield at White Waltham. It would have been an easy detour. But I'd been so focused on the race I hadn't thought for a moment about touring.

The French pilot swept around the great stone circle in the golden light for longer than it had taken to fly there, holding his plane in a steep turn so steady and perfect that he caught up with his own slipstream, and it buffeted the wings as we came around. The view was breathtaking.

Then suddenly he broke out of the turn and began to climb. The roar of the engine was deafening. We rose steadily higher and higher, two thousand, three thousand, four thousand feet above the ground. And then he pushed the nose down and we were diving, plunging so fast it felt like my insides were being rearranged. The wind sliced at my cheeks as we plummeted toward the stones and the earth below and—he *knew* I didn't have a parachute.

With another jolt to my guts he pulled the nose up. Now his plane was thundering aloft again with the engine roaring, and I realized he was going to loop. As far as he knew I might not have even strapped myself in.

He was reckless and arrogant and oh, I *hated him*.

I wasn't scared and I was damned if I'd let him think that I was, especially if he was *trying* to scare me. He was obviously a better flier than I was, and there wasn't anything I could do about his showing off—I wasn't an aerobatic pilot and it would have been suicide to try to control the plane myself. So I just gave him a fierce thumbs-up, so he'd know I realized what he was doing, and let him get on with it.

Then we were upside down, and for a split second

Stonehenge was above me, and a moment later it vanished beneath the edge of the upper wing. The engine cut and we swooped dizzyingly earthward in silence. Instead of finishing the loop, he let the wing spin—now we were spinning down toward the stone circle, and then suddenly we weren't, and he leveled the wings.

He gave a whoop. "*Fantastic!*"

It was beautiful. It was *magnificent*.

The engine roared back to life and he began to climb again, and I realized he wasn't thinking about me at *all*. He didn't care in the slightest whether I was scared by his showing off, or even impressed.

He was flying because he loved it, soaring in long, exuberant loops through a golden August sky over Stonehenge.