

Featured: A Boneyard of Laughter-Silvered Wings

By Dana Chamblee Carpenter

Piper sat high in the sycamore watching her house burn. She wasn't sad about it. A half-mile west, the schoolhouse burned a brighter orange along the horizon like another setting sun. A thin, dark line of clouds pulled taut between the two balls of flame, near and far.

The tender skin of her legs slid along the cool, smooth bark of the straddled limb as she turned toward the growing dark. The tiny post office, Pop's General Store, a dozen homes sprinkled between the highway and Village Creek—all gone to fire and ash. Katydid that hadn't burned, warbled out an evening call, and left behind lightning bugs ventured out into the smoky dusk, flickering questions. Piper shoved her hand into the leather satchel slung across her back and pulled out an old rosewood recorder that had belonged to her mother's mother's mother. She played "Greensleeves" for the survivors as night fell on the last fiery throes of Moran, Arkansas.

Sacrifices were expected in a time of war.

The only home Piper had ever known would become an Army airbase to train new pilots to send overseas to avenge those lost at Pearl Harbor. That's what her daddy said at supper one night weeks ago. Early next morning, he packed his family into the truck, his pocket crammed with the cash he'd gotten for the house. Daddy and Mama and Piper's eight younger siblings had rattled away, wakes of dust rolling like thunder-heads around her as she watched them go.

There wasn't room for her.

Piper wasn't angry or scared about it. Or if she was, she didn't know how to show it. She knew from studying other folks when she ought to be happy or afraid. But it was like playing Simon Says. Simon says smile, Simon says frown, wiggle waggle. Simon says cry. She just couldn't get the knack of it on her own.

What Piper had a knack for was machines. It wasn't something she decided to be good at— she didn't really work that way. In her life, something just was. Or it wasn't.

A year back, she'd come home after school one day to find an untidy trail of parts and tools out back of the house that led to her daddy's pickup, hood lifted, doors agape as if it were panicking,

screaming, its mouth wide. Piper reckoned she'd scream too if her innards were spilled hither and yon. She set to work, gathering bits of truck and tool, compelled by a need to stop its suffering. She flung herself over the grille and looked down at the puzzle of metal and tubes and wires. She just seemed to know where the parts belonged.

"Get out from there, girl."

Piper had gone still at the sound of her daddy's voice. She wasn't afraid. She just knew what was coming. Smiling at the put-back-together engine, she dug her feet into the dirt and twisted out from under the hood.

"What the hell did you do?" He wasn't yelling. He hardly ever did. "I fixed the truck." She stared off at the pig pen just past her daddy's shoulder. Piper didn't much like to look people in the eyes.

"What you did was undo the heap of work I done already. Now I got to take it all apart again."

His voice got tight like a fresh-strung clothesline. “No sir, you don’t.”

“What’s that?”

“I fixed it,” she said again.

“You ain’t done no such thing.”

She knew better than to say more. She just stood there until he finally tossed himself into the cab of the truck with a laugh. He was laughing at her. He laughed as he slapped at the gas valve and turned the ignition and yanked the choke. He stopped laughing when the truck came to life on the third turn of the engine.

Quick as a blink, he was out of the cab, fingers dug into the back of her neck. “Some boy teach you to do that?”

“The truck told me.”

She said it as quiet as she could. She knew it’d make him mad, but Piper didn’t know how to tell a lie. It wasn’t that she didn’t want to—life would’ve been easier if she could’ve lied about most everything. But Piper had only ever told what she knew to be true, bare-naked, though she’d learned to say it soft.

Saying it soft didn’t matter to her daddy. To be fair, it didn’t matter to most folks.

Until that moment with the truck, Piper had lived in a world of dissonance, as if everyone around her were a half-note sharp or flat. Or maybe she was the one off-key. She’d given up trying to understand. Best she could figure, there wasn’t any way to make a harmony between her and everybody else. But setting the truck to rights made her feel quiet and easy like the bass at the back of Glenn Miller’s “The White Cliffs of Dover”—nothing anybody’d ever notice unless they were listening for it, but a part of the tune all the same.

Now everything was silent. Ash and ember and gone.

Piper sighed as she lifted the sycamore branch above her to eye the harvest moon rising. She couldn’t see them from her tree—the machines come to build the base—but they were there, sleeping in the same disheveled night as she.

When her neck grew stiff with pining, she dropped like a buttonball from the sycamore, her feet black with soot and warm at the sole by time she met up with the bulldozers and scrapers sitting all quiet and still and cattywampus against the clean lines of a runway. Piper ran silent hands over metal bodies, seeking out signs of anything amiss, like a mama cat licking a newborn kitten that’s been taken away and brought back.

She had borne witness to the men who worked the machines. Men only cared about getting a job done, and the machines only mattered after they broke. But to Piper, she and they were part of something kindred. They let her know when a thing wasn't right with them. They had a voice—not loud and barking, but purr-like, humming and vibrating. Soft. A person just needed to listen.

Even now, at the edge of what was left of the woods, the moon slid up the sky behind the tip of the tall neck of the crane and rested there, like a glowing, marble eye, softly, kindly, looking down on Piper as she pressed herself deep into the creature's innards to clean out a gummed-up oil valve.

She came back to the world when a subtle hint of dawn dusted the horizon like chalk, her eyes heavy and her belly hollow. Piper had nowhere to go. The sycamore and charred leftovers of Moran would be full gone by noon to make room for a base hospital. A ditch would do for sleep, but only the half-grown base could promise food.

Her satchel pressed hard against her thigh, she came to the base as the smell of bacon lured her closer to the men's voices eddying against the metal walls of a nearby hangar. But another sound, like the rumble of a timpani, pianissimo, rolled through the air from the west and caught her. The men walked to the edge of tarmac and looked to the sky.

So did Piper.

Then noise dropped like bombs—a sonorous, rhythmic pounding—as dozens of planes soared overhead. Something inside Piper broke. All at once. Like stone cracking. But she didn't feel broken. She felt born.

"What's their name?" she hollered to no one particular.

"Them's trainer planes for the men to practice on before they go fly in the war," a man answered as the planes disappeared into the sky toward Walnut Ridge. He never looked at her. "They's called Vultee BT-13 Valiants. They gone to do a flyover for the folks in town. They'll be back."

Piper spun off across the wide shelf of the taxiway and onto a patch of grass choked on either side by the two finished runways. It was Sunday-morning quiet as she knelt to wait.

"Vultee BT-13 Valiants."

She said it like a prayer.

When the planes came back, Piper was something different.

There had been before and now was after.

She watched them land, rushing past on either side, waves of pushed air washing over her and smelling of fuel and oil and something she couldn't identify. Piper wondered if flight had a smell.

She followed the last of them down the taxiway toward the dirt patch where the ramp was not yet built. The planes spun their tails, raking her with their breath. She walked among them until she came to the end of the line, to the last Valiant. She shivered as the propeller shuddered and stopped. There was something different about this one.

The pilot shoved the canopy back and stood in the cockpit, reached up and pulled the helmet off, letting loose a carpet of shoulder-length blonde curls. She put her hands into the small of her back and stretched.

She.

It was as if Piper had been listening to the song of her life and the needle suddenly jumped tracks. The whole of her that had been let loose when the planes arrived now poured like water from a spillway toward the plane or to the woman—Piper couldn't tell which. Maybe it was both.

The woman looked down at Piper, a smile spreading. All Piper could think to do was run. Away from the thrum of the Valiant calling to her. Away from the blonde pilot and her smile. Piper's hair came undone from its usual knot and fell behind her like a piece of herself torn loose.

She spent the day hiding in the toolshed loft watching new people come and go. She considered herself to be among the strangers. Her skin felt too tight, as if she were a snake in need of molting. Piper felt. For the first time. For the first time, she wanted something.

After dusk, the men went elsewhere, and the planes were left alone. She wanted to go straight to her Valiant, but she felt oddly shy. She drifted from one plane to another, introducing herself, until desire overwhelmed her. She raced past the last rows to the last Valiant, hers.

Piper ran her hands along the smooth slope of the propeller blade, her fingers trembling a little as she said hello. She felt unearthly, like mist, as she moved around the body of the plane and came to lay her head softly against the aluminum skin of the nose, cool against her forehead, before sliding down beneath the belly. She pulled out her recorder and played soft tunes to reverberate through the metal and soothe the planes on their first night in a new place. She was halfway through a sonata that rippled like wind over wings when a voice broke through.

"That's beautiful. You write it?"

Piper sat up straight and watched the feet and legs walk closer. She wouldn't bend down to look out.

"Bach wrote it. Flute Sonata in E-Flat Major."

"Now how did you learn Bach out here in the middle of nowhere?"

The legs and feet stopped. Piper held her breath.

"I heard it on the radio."

"And learned to play it? Just from listening?"

The legs bent at the knees, a tendril of blonde hair dropped below the metal casing of the plane's nose, and then Piper was looking into the face of the woman pilot. She almost looked away. But whatever had broken loose in her that afternoon wouldn't allow it.

"I did," Piper said.

"That's unbelievable."

"I assure you I did. I heard it. I played it."

"No, I meant that's amazing," the woman said. "What else can you do?"

Piper cocked her head.

"Do you remember everything you hear or just music? What about books? Do you remember those, too? I've heard about people who can do that. That makes you special. I'm Rosa, by the way."

She put out her hand as she dropped to sit on the ground.

Piper didn't touch people. She didn't decide, now, to press her hand into Rosa's—her body just did it, like a magnet drawn. The feel of Rosa's calloused skin against her own, still stained with oil, stirred the newness in her.

"Piper," she said, and, in the next breath. "Books, too."

"You like airplanes?" Rosa reached up and let her fingers run lightly along the underbelly.

Piper heard the Valiant purr like a cat. She wondered if Rosa could hear it too.

"I want to fly."

Rosa laughed. "How old are you?"

Piper didn't think of herself in numbers, so she had to count. "Seventeen."

"You on your own?"

Piper nodded. She didn't understand the crease in Rosa's forehead.

“I want to fly.”

“I can surely do that. The trainees aren’t here yet. We’ll have our pick of planes.”

“I want to fly this one.” Piper put her hand on the fuselage of her Valiant.

“Why this one?”

“This one is... special.” It was the word Rosa used to describe Piper.

“Special how?”

“It wants.” Most of the machines Piper met were content doing what they were meant to do. Simon says go. Simon says stop. But not her Valiant.

“Wants what?”

“More.”

Piper couldn’t explain because her Valiant couldn’t say what more it wanted.

“More.” Piper couldn’t explain because her Valiant couldn’t say what more it wanted.

The crease came back to Rosa’s forehead.

“It’s late. Let’s hit the sack and start fresh tomorrow,” she said as she stood and pulled Piper up with her. Piper left her hand entwined with Rosa’s until they came under the base lights and Rosa let go. “I’ll see you in the morning,” she said as she headed off toward the mess.

As Piper climbed back up into the shed loft, a memory woke—her grandmother cradling her head and holding a spoon against her lips. Little Piper had been terribly sick with measles and a high fever. She was dying, but her mother’s mother fought to keep her. Piper remembered the sugary sourness of honeyed apple trickling into her mouth, the soft humming of her grandmother’s voice.

Piper wrapped the memory in a bundle in her mind alongside the warmth of her skin against the chill metal of the Valiant and the roughness of her hand pressed into Rosa’s—they were one and the same to her.

In the early hours before dawn, Piper broke into the operation chief’s office and read the maintenance manual for the Vultee BT-13 Valiant. She met Rosa at the perimeter of the parked planes and walked with her as they did the preflight check on the Valiant.

“Spinner. Controlled-pitch propeller. Nose. Wing. Fuselage. Flap. Aileron. Tail. Rudder. Elevator.”

Piper touched the parts as she named them. It was probably the most words she'd spoken all at once in her whole life.

"You know your planes. Now let's go fly one."

Rosa put her gloved hand into the small of Piper's back as they crawled into the tandem cockpits.

Piper ran her fingers lightly over the instruments.

"Fuel pressure gauge. Altimeter. Climb indicator. Ammeter. Tachometer. Clock," she whispered and then lifted her face, breathing in the scent. There was a sweetness among the twang of oil and metal and leather and sweat. She couldn't tell if it was the vanilla in Rosa's hair or some sweet smell that belonged to the Valiant.

As they sped down the runway and lifted, feather-like, Piper forgot everything except herself and the plane. Even Rosa faded into the periphery of blue sky and clouds and motion and something that felt like arpeggios rippling up and down her insides and through the Valiant. Was this joy—hers and the plane's?

The lines of a poem she'd heard on the radio came to her.

Oh! I have slipped the surly bonds of Earth and danced the skies on laughter-silvered wings.

Piper had never understood poetry much, but she understood now as this feeling bubbled up and out in raucous laughter. The Valiant laughed with her.

Piper never looked down, but she knew when the wheels touched the tarmac. She wept because the Valiant wept, sad to be tethered once more.

At the purple ends of the day, Rosa walked Piper to her toolshed.

"I want to kiss you," she said.

"Okay."

Piper didn't understand why she was trembling as Rosa leaned closer. As their lips touched, she thought of simple things her mouth did—eating, breathing. She thought of brushing her teeth. She thought of making words, the feel of her tongue holding the shape of them. She had never thought about the feel of lips—her own or another's—how soft they were but with hills and valleys and bits of wrinkled skin. When the honeyed-apple feeling burned in her chest, she took Rosa's hands in her own and wondered what was happening to her until Rosa pulled back, smiling. Piper lifted her hands to her lips and pressed, but it didn't feel the same.

"Tomorrow, I'll teach you to fly," Rosa said as she walked away.

In the days that followed of more flying and more Rosa, Piper wove what she felt for her Valiant and what she felt with Rosa into one tangy sweetness that was maybe joy and maybe something

more.

The sun was low in the day when they landed. Rosa and Piper put the Valiant to bed, but another pilot was getting ready to clock IFR hours—flying solely by instrument readings in the dead of night because war sometimes meant killing in the dark.

“Clear!” the pilot yelled as he cranked the engine which turned over but didn’t come to life.

“Try her again,” a mechanic nearby hollered.

“Stop.”

The pilot didn’t hear Piper—or didn’t care if he did. He cranked the engine again. She ran, vaulting herself onto the wing and grabbing his arm.

“Stop!”

He shoved and sent her spinning backward, off the wing. She landed hard on the ground near the propeller.

“What’s all this?”

The deep voice came from a very tall man who covered the distance with long, bold strides.

There was saluting and quiet among the men.

“Is someone going to tell me what the hell’s going on?”

No one spoke, but everyone looked at Piper.

“What’s the problem, Miss?”

Piper turned her eyes to the tall man. She forced herself to keep them there.

"The engine is the problem."

"There ain't no problem with the engine, chief. I just serviced it," the mechanic said. "And how could you know a thing about it?"

"She knows planes," Rosa said.

"What'd you think's wrong with the engine?" the chief asked.

"Fuel leaking from a fissure in the line," Piper answered.

"How on earth could you know that?"

Piper couldn't say she heard the plane begging. It didn't want to die.

She drew her shoulders back and, for the first time in her life, she lied.

"I can smell it."

"You can smell it? We got oil, dirt, fresh-poured concrete, but you can smell a fuel leak inside an engine as you walk by?" The chief sounded like her daddy.

"That's just cockeyed, boss," the mechanic said. The pilot laughed.

The chief shook his head and started to turn away, but Piper stepped in front of him, her jaw set, eyes fierce.

"I can prove it."

He stared at her, looking for what she didn't know, but she stared back. When he shoved his hands in his pockets, Piper knew she'd won.

"Show me then," he said.

Piper lowered the casing to expose the engine.

"Pratt & Whitney R-985 Wasp Junior. Crankshaft, intake valve, starter drive, exhaust valve."

She slid her hand behind the shielding, letting the plane guide her, until her fingers felt the slimy wet. She held them out to the chief.

He sniffed. "That's pure gasoline." He looked over at the mechanic. "You have a fuel leak."

"Sir, I—"

The mechanic stepped closer to the engine as the pilot jumped down from the cockpit.

"I'm not interested in excuses," the chief said. "I want it fixed. And I want—"

He turned to Piper.

"What's your name?"

Now that she knew the plane would be okay, the urgency driving her left like a sigh. Her eyes drifted back down to the dirt.

"Piper."

"Piper, you just saved this man's life."

He didn't sound like her daddy anymore.

"I know it."

The chief turned to the pilot.

"You have something you want to say, son?"

"Thank you, ma'am," he muttered and then headed off to the barracks.

"You want to help my man here find that leaky fuel line and replace it?" the chief asked.

Suddenly, a flicker of another might-be came to life, another desire.

"Yessir, but—"

The words caught in Piper's dry mouth. Her Valiant kept feeding them to her until they forced their way out.

"But I want more."

The chief raised his eyebrows.

"I want to work on the planes again tomorrow. And the day after that. I just... I want to work on the planes."

"Let's see how you do with this one, and then we can have a talk about the rest."

Rosa leaned in close.

"I'm going on over to the mess. You catch up later."

Piper nodded.

Her world was full of possibilities when she knocked on Rosa's door a few hours later.

"I'd ask how it went, but I can tell from the smile on your face."

Piper raised her hand to her mouth. Had she been smiling?

"Hold on to that feeling. It's called triumph and it comes rare for women like us."

For the first time in her life, Piper could read another person. She knew what came next.

"You're leaving."

Rosa nodded from where she lay on the cot.

"They're flying a C-47 in tomorrow morning to drop off equipment and a batch of trainees. Someone's got to ferry the plane on to Texas, and they're looking for test pilots out there."

She shrugged.

“Sounds more fun than training a group of boys, wet-behind-the-ears, who think they know more than me.”

Piper leaned into the door.

“It’s not personal.”

She felt the cleaving then—herself from Rosa, Rosa from her Valiant.

“You want to stay here tonight? Or—”

Piper already had her hand on the doorknob. For her, going was gone. And goodbyes were pointless.

She went to visit the machines at the end of the still-being-built runway. Hellos were as needless as goodbyes, at least among friends. It was the touch of hand they’d missed. It was being heard and finding a place in the song that mattered. The machines hummed along as Piper, hands covered in grease, played sad songs on her mother’s mother’s mother’s rosewood recorder until dawn.

She watched the C-47 soar onto the base with the early morning light. She walked onto the runway, but only when Rosa was taxiing the plane out to depart. In awe, she watched the wheels lift from the tarmac, a Goliath impossibly airborne. Piper believed in the impossible.

And now, she believed in longing. She longed for that honey-apple feeling Rosa took with her. It had made life interesting as if Piper was the countermelody to whatever song Rosa was singing. With the machines, the connection was harmony, a layering of voices, a symphony. With her Valiant, it was unison.

Was that love?

Rosa sent a letter every week after she left. Piper tried to write back, but she couldn’t think how to say what she felt, so she bought a card in the commissary she thought Rosa would like—a birthday card with Pluto on it though it wasn’t her birthday.

All she could think to write was:

Thank you for the letter.

Or:

It snowed yesterday.

She wanted to write:

Come back.

In January of a new year of the same war, the chief came to Piper as she worked on an engine. He had a piece of paper in his hand.

“It’s Rosa. She was tugging a target for the artillery boys to practice shooting. They hit her plane instead.”

“What kind of plane?” was all Piper could think to ask.

“A Douglas Devastator.”

Piper thought about Rosa’s lips, wondering what they felt like now, knowing she’d never again taste that same honeyed-apple—surely that was more than longing. But was it love? If it was, Piper only understood it by its absence.

An answer came eleven days later on a foggy Sunday morning. There was no Sabbath in times of war.

She felt it before she heard it. An instructor and cadet aborted takeoff and slowed to turn off the runway, but another Valiant—her Valiant—was landing. The pilot couldn’t see in the fog.

Piper ran to the runway with the men who were yelling orders. Alarms blared as water trucks revved toward a ball of flame. But the sound in Piper’s head rose like a descant over all the others.

Her Valiant screaming as the flames took it.

She ran toward it even as the heat blistered her face and singed her hair. Arms closed around her waist, holding her back.

“They’re safe! The men,” the chief yelled in her ear. “Look.”

He turned her toward where the other plane had been shoved down the runway, mangled but not on fire, the pilots laid out on the ground in a circle of medics.

Piper twisted in his arms, back toward her Valiant. She looked up into the chief’s eyes. She could feel, feel, the hope and desperation ripping her open, a chasm.

This was love.

She whispered, mouthed, “The plane?”

His arms tightened as if he knew what would happen next as he shook his head.

"It's too late."

Piper threw her head back against his chest as she shoved up with her legs trying to break free.

She would save her Valiant.

She would.

She would.

Like all things, the end of the war came slowly and then all at once. The base had grown—dozens of new buildings, thousands of pilots trained and forty-two who died, twice that many babies born in the base hospital. Life was an ebb and flow.

Until someone dropped a bomb.

The war was over.

Men left. Most of the planes ferried out. Operation transferred from the Army to the Navy. The base became a boneyard for warbirds no longer wanted.

When the Navy ordered the mechanics to gut the planes for parts, Piper quit. She hauled the burnt shell she'd saved from her Valiant to a left-behind barn in an overgrown field at the edge of the base.

She haunted the boneyard at the witching hour. If not for her grief, which swallowed everything, the boneyard would have been more than Piper could bear—Flying Fortresses and Liberators lined in tidy rows, giant bodies helpless like beached whales, Mustangs and Warhawks stacked on their noses, tails flung skyward as if they were diving deep into hell.

Thousands of planes came there to die.

Moonlight raked their silvered wings, summoning ghostly memories of touching the sun and dancing on clouds, but there was no laughter now.

At first, Piper walked among them as if their suffering was just an extension of her own. But one night, at the back edge of the boneyard, she came upon a camp of B-32 Dominators unlike the others. No art painted on their noses. No identifying numbers. No battle scars on the tall, sleek tails towering up.

These planes were straight from the factory, born only to die.

Their grief was for a life they'd never even had a chance to live, and their emptiness pulled from Piper the too much that smothered her. She told them stories—of other planes in the boneyard, of her life, of Rosa, and of her Valiant. She wept with them, and she played for them on nights of long waiting before the day when they would be rolled away in the steady march of savage and melt.

But the planes wanted more.

They wanted some part of themselves to live on, and they wanted to give Piper a measure of the peace she'd given them. They wanted her to live again.

That's what they told her as they offered parts of themselves.

Gasket, valve, pump.

That's what they told her when she pulled metal sheathing from a wing or underbelly.

Spinner, spar cap, wing ribs.

That's what they whispered as she crawled up into cockpits and stripped the instrument panel, rudder pedals, stick.

When she came to tell them that the work was done, they told her to fly.

Piper taxied out to the runway in the wee hours. The plane vibrating under her was like a Valiant—not her Valiant who was gone forever. But it was also something new, something not built by men but born of loss and love. She felt the plane wanting—wanting to fly, wanting to see new places, wanting to live, bold and free.

Piper wanted, too.

As they lifted into the chalky dawn, she took a sad look down to what was left of the planes in the boneyard, the planes she could not save. Their silver wings caught the easy morning light and glimmered with parting joy.

The thrill of first flight bubbled up from the Valiant and burst out in laughter as Piper scanned the wide horizon.

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