

*It took two people with a special talent to fly the ship . . . but the fact that they shared a talent did not render certain that they made an ideal couple.*

## TO LIFT A SHIP

*by Kit Reed*

IT WAS A SMALL, GREY, DRAB, relatively unimpressive hemisphere. Later it would be fitted for cargo, passengers. It would be enlarged and fountains would flow in mirrored lounges and cabins would nestle where the dome met the flooring, open and ready for intrigue. But it was all but empty now, and the lines of the dome rose above them, pure, unadorned.

The man and the woman sat on metal stools at the center, knees touching, hands resting lightly on a metal bar. There was no other machinery in the ship.

*Better turn back now.* He canted one hand.

They turned the hemisphere together, minds meshing, and Mary Lee's delight pushed the ship into an extra little skip.

Skimming soundlessly, avoiding highways and buildings, they went on into the cloudy morning.

They circled over the field where Zorn waited, loath to set

down. Troubled by something in the air of the ship, Mary Lee let herself look up, into Ike's face, sensing some deep restlessness that intruded at the back of his mind. Shaking her head, she touched his thoughts and the two of them pulled the ship into a rising, swooping turn and circled the field once more, lost in flight.

It was not as joyful as their first flight. When they first lifted the ship together Mary Lee had faltered, at the brink of all joy, all understanding, afraid if she looked too closely at what was happening it would dissolve and she would lose everything. Then Ike's thoughts had swelled and surged past her in the sheer exuberance of flight. The hemisphere had leaped forward, and laughing, she had given herself to the rush of the ship. Now, even as her happiness in what they were doing grew, Ike pushed the ship farther, faster, and she

found herself frightened, sure that his growing impatience threatened their control of the ship.

*What's the matter?* He lifted his eyes from the bar between them, annoyed.

*Nothing.*

Shrugging, he inclined his hand.

They set the ship down with a bump.

Zorn was clattering out of the transmitter shack as they landed. He bounded across the field to meet them, small and rugged in a hairy tweed coat.

"You went like a dream," he said. "Not a bobble. And I was sending out a helluva strong signal." He gestured at the tower that rose at the far side of the field. "You didn't hear me at all?"

Mary Lee shook her head, wondering why he thought anything could distract them.

"Hum?" Ike had thrust his hands in his pockets, preoccupied.

Zorn pressed him. "My transmission. I thought it might jam you."

"Oh, that." Ike waved his hand negligently. "Didn't hear a thing. I told you nothing bothers us."

At his shoulder, Mary Lee drew herself up proudly, acutely conscious of the way they looked, standing together in the grey morning.

"I've hired a commercial pilot who can keep his mouth shut," Zorn went on, making notes. "Tomorrow he'll circle you and we'll see if *that* slows you down."

"I told you," Ike said with a flash of irritation. "Nothing bothers us." He lifted his dark face. "We can fly anywhere."

"We have to know just what you can do," Zorn said patiently. "And we have to know a little of the *why*."

"Testing. Talking." Ike's face was clouded. "We've been coming out here for three months."

Zorn's voice was quiet. "And you've only been flying for one. Do you think I can show this ship to anybody until we have some idea what makes it work? Why it works for you and Mary Lee?"

"It works for us." Ike leaned forward a little.

"Now. But for how long?"

Mary Lee fell back, oppressed by the idea that they might not always be able to fly, that the flights might stop.

"It works for us," Ike said determinedly. "That's enough."

Zorn put a hand on his arm. "Then flying should be enough for you, for now."

"When nobody sees us?" Ike shook free, jaw thrust forward. "We can fly anywhere. Why in hell don't you let us?"

"We have to take our time," Zorn said. "We have to test."

"Test . . ." Ike growled.

Mary Lee put up one gentle hand to stop him, but he was gone.

Zorn turned to her, eyes pleading. "Do you feel the same way?"

She shook her head, almost blinded by the memories of flight. "Flying's enough, Mr. Zorn. It's . . ." She lifted her hands expressively. Then, running them over her pale hair, she talked in a spurt, trying to explain. "He wants somebody to *see* us. He wants to make money. Mr. Zorn, I don't think he can *afford* . . ."

"Afford!" Zorn snorted. "My laboratory's pouring thousands into this project. Do you have enough money to live comfortably, Mary Lee?"

"Yessir. More than I ever made at the flower shop . . ."

"Well Ike is getting twice as much. He made next to nothing at that gas station. He can afford to come here every day. He can afford to take orders, too." He headed toward the shack where his equipment was stored. "Call him to come back here and help you put the ship away."

She sent out the call. Then she looked anxiously from Zorn to the edge of the field, wondering if there would be more hard words when Ike came.

Seeing her distress, Zorn spoke more gently. "We have to do things in their own time, Mary Lee. Every pirate in the world

would be after you and that ship if we turned you loose now, and the people who weren't trying to buy or steal you would be trying to discredit you. We have to take our time." He touched her hand. "I'll get out of the way now, before Ike comes back. Try to calm him down, will you? Oh—and tomorrow—don't try to outrace that pilot I hired. There are some things I'll need to know."

By the time Ike came across the field to help her with the ship, Zorn was gone.

For a wild moment, when they touched the bar together, she thought they were going to take the ship and run with it, fly until there were just the two of them, the ship and the sky, but then Ike cleared his throat, jaw set in remembered rage, and they eased the little hemisphere into the low shed hidden at the edge of the field. After the ship came to rest Mary Lee sat for a few minutes, still touching the bar. When she shook herself to attention and left the ship, Ike was gone.

She killed the rest of that day in the park, in shops, in the movies, and the world outside seemed no more real than the black-and-white shadows that moved on the screen. She slipped through the streets like a ghost, marking time until the next morning, when she would be in the ship with Ike, and everything would seem real again.

Her landlady nodded as she went by, ticking off one more boarder home from work. "Nice day, Miss Addison?" The voice ordered her to stop.

"Yes'm," Mary Lee said reluctantly, wishing she could escape the old woman and go inside.

"Come." The old woman was imperious. "Come sit down." She fixed her eyes on Mary Lee until the girl took a chair beside her on the creaking porch. She talked on and on about goings on in the neighborhood and Mary Lee tried to give the appearance of listening, but the yammering woman was no more than a shadow to her, moving shadowy lips. ". . . and he hasn't seen you in the flower shop for weeks."

"Um?" Mary Lee shifted uncomfortably.

"He likes you, you know. You two should—get together." The old woman shaped her hand suggestively. "By the way . . ." Her eyes narrowed, almost disappearing in greasy, wrinkled folds. ". . . If you haven't been at the shop, where *have* you been?"

Mary Lee gnawed at the inside of her mouth.

"I mean, a girl who isn't working regular . . ."

"Oh." Mary Lee got to her feet. "If that's what you're worried about." Zorn had paid her that morning. She fished in her pocket. "Here. Here's the rent."

She thrust the money at the old

woman and fled into the house. A couple passed her on the stairs, quarreling, no more than a pair of chattering wraiths.

In her room things seemed even less substantial. Curtains flopped at the window, a grey film, and the sounds of the street flowed in and about her, never touching her. She moved from chair to table with no apparent plan, fluttering her hands over their surfaces, and even the furniture seemed indifferent to her. She moved on and on, trying to find something in the room that mattered, almost overcome by her isolation, sure for the moment that she herself was no more than a shadow, until finally, if only to prove her reality, she sent out the call. *Ike? You anywhere around?*

*Zat you, baby?* She could tell he was surprised.

*Hi. Oh, Ike, hi. I just had to . . .*

He cut her off. *Can't talk now. Got a date.* As if to soften it, *We'll really show them in the morning, won't we, baby?*

Her pride sang in the air. *We sure will.*

And she forgot his abruptness, and clung to that. She knew she gave his thoughts more meaning than she should, but she couldn't stop herself. And she felt somehow that their flights together underscored the meaning, that what they were doing pointed toward a future that, for her, couldn't help but be better.

She stayed at the window for a long time, thinking about Ike. She remembered the first hostility, the suspicion. Ike, with arms crossed in a black tee shirt, black hair swept back, menacing. The look in his eyes that told her he had already dismissed her as a drab little girl, a nothing. And the sharp surprise when she found herself fully aware of his scorn. She had looked up, biting her knuckles, to see the glint break in his eyes as he realized that he was not alone with his thoughts. Bristling, they had faced each other.

*Who are you?* The question had no words.

And Zorn, still not sure they were different from the hundreds of others he had tried, had introduced the unlikely team—a cocky, swaggering boy who seemed little better than a thug and a plain, frightened girl, wondering why his processing staff had ever selected them.

By the time the weeks of testing were over they had reached some sort of brusque, businesslike truce, barely tolerating each other, each rigid for fear the other would slip past all barriers, into the unguarded mind.

Then there had been weeks in the field, trying to lift the ship.

Then there had been the first flight.

With it hostility became a memory. In the air they were a team, a man, quick and strong, with a

profile like a blade, and a woman, sure and perceptive, now, unaccountably, almost beautiful. And for Mary Lee, at least, from that moment, there was nothing but Ike and the ship.

She left the window long after dark, not even hungry, and composed herself on the bed, clearing her mind, shutting out the room and the street and the drab expanse of the shabby neighborhood, waiting for morning.

"Morning, baby." Ike sprang over the grass, hair tumbled in the sunlight.

"Ike. Hi, Ike." She went to meet him, half-skipping.

The sun struck lights from the ship.

Above, a biplane was circling. Zorn was stationed at the edge of the field, adjusting a pair of expensive binoculars. He was expansive this morning, anxious to see what they could do, grinning. He had an assistant with him, who drew a drafting pencil over a series of graphs. At a signal, Mary Lee and Ike were to go into the ship.

They flew like angels. They dipped and swooped around the small plane, confounding the pilot, oblivious of the electronic device Zorn had planted in their ship, not even aware that the tower was beaming the strong signal Zorn had designed because if anything could, it would curb their flight. Ike shouted for joy, and

then, before May Lee was fully aware of what he intended, he had brought the ship down hard on the tail of the biplane. Laughing, they chased it home, circling twice high above the airstrip before they turned back to Zorn's field.

Zorn was on the ground to meet them, furious. He turned on Ike. "You acted like a fool."

"You wanted to see what that plane would do to us." Ike slouched, grinning. "I showed you what we could do to the plane. Any plane."

"You went too near that airfield." Zorn shook his binoculars. "What if you were seen?"

Ike drew himself up. "What if we were? It's time somebody saw us."

"You know you're not ready."

"Who the hell says we're not ready. You're keeping us hidden like a couple of . . ." the word eluded him. He shrugged. "It's time people saw this thing. People with money. I didn't come into this for peanuts, and I'm not going to settle for peanuts just because you're scared." He jammed his face into Zorn's. "Scared."

"If you bring this thing out in the open you'll blow it for all of us." Zorn's face was set in anger.

"I know why you're afraid," Ike said. "Your contract's no good. You're afraid somebody will cut you out. If you keep us hidden, nobody can get to us to tell us what suckers we are."

"Tomorrow some people from the plant will be out for observation," Zorn said, dangerously quiet. He was making notes.

"We're suckers!" Ike swelled with rage.

"You and Mary Lee will be on the field at eight," Zorn said in level tones. He turned on his heel.

"You're afraid, Zorn, afraid," Ike roared.

Mary Lee shrank from his thoughts.

"Without us you're nothing, Zorn." Ike's voice seemed to fill the field. "That's why you're afraid."

May Lee stood at the edge of the field after Ike and Zorn had gone, too weak to move, awash in the waves of their anger.

Her landlady was lying in wait for her, like a fat spider.

"Man was here for you," the old lady said, licking her lips, "Sweetheart?"

"What . . ." Mary Lee forced the words. "What did he look like?"

"Like trouble, that's what he looked like. Dark hair, black shirt . . ." The old woman ran her thick tongue back and forth.

"Oh." Mary Lee could feel the blood leave her face. "I . . ."

"If that's the kind you're hanging around with . . . If that's the reason you're not working . . ." The old woman made an obscene gesture. Her face seemed filmed over with grease.

"Stop!" Strangled, Mary Lee ran to her room.

She tried to shut out the woman, the house, in memories of the flight, but try as she could, she couldn't call them up. There was a sound on the stairs. Step, snuffle. Step, snuffle. The old woman was coming up, heading toward her room. She heard fingers fumbling at the door, heard her landlady's sharp, ugly bark. Just then Ike's call came into her mind, and she ran out the door, past the sweating old woman, and went without question into the streets. She didn't even hear the woman shouting after her.

He was at a small park, one of the last pretty places in the neighborhood, trembling with urgency.

*Come on, baby, come on.*

Where, Ike? Even before he touched her hand she knew she didn't care.

Hands still touching, moving in silence, they boarded a bus and rode to the field and the ship. Dazed, Mary Lee stood by while Ike did something to the guard and they were in the shed, at the door of the hemisphere, in the ship.

It lifted like black lightning, hurtling into the night, and they flew on without direction, faster than they had ever gone, eyes turned inward, on their own pre-occupations, hearing dulled by the rush of wind against the hemisphere. Mary Lee lost herself in the

plunge forward, the feeling of oneness with Ike, knowing that she had found in flight with him something she would never find at any other time, in any other place, in any other human being. She didn't care how far or fast they went, and she didn't care (for she had read it in his mind) that the ship was theirs now, not Zorn's, and they would never go back.

She was ready to fly on forever, until the ship disintegrated and the wind took them, until their power failed and they plummeted into the sea, because as long as they flew she was with Ike and he was with her, and she knew now that she was in love with him, and there was nothing outside herself but Ike, and the ship. She threw back her head as the ship went on and on, forgetting everything now but the immediacy of the flight, dreaming, until suddenly, in the half-light of the ship Ike lifted his eyes from the bar and looked at his watch, and she realized he had some plan.

*It's time.* And he put a direction into her head

They turned the ship together, and Mary Lee could make out in his mind the picture of a vast field, a geometric array of buildings, elaborate wires and towers and a knot of expensively dressed people on the ground, waiting for Ike. Soon she could sense the excitement of the watchers, and when she glanced at the viewport, she

saw the field below them, and the knot of people. As they swooped low, one of the watchers waved a flag.

*Let's show them.*

Ike lifted one hand from the bar to touch her face, and then unfurled an intricate pattern of dips and turns, of rises and falls, and bending their minds together, they moved the ship into a parabola. She was uneasy now, because what they did seemed important to Ike only because there were powerful men watching from below. But in the next second she saw that his plan for the ship's motion was beautiful; and because she loved him she threw her heart into it.

Mary Lee could sense the excitement of the watchers, and Ike swelled with pride. Expanding in his strength and happiness, she helped him pull the ship into a wild dash for the ground, to hover, two feet above the field, to pull up suddenly in a free, headlong rush for the heavens.

*Ike. Oh, Ike.*

*Pretty good, baby, pretty good.* But the swoop and the dive seemed to mean little to him. He was intent on the men below.

*Who are they, Ike?* She was uneasy.

*Never mind, baby. It's not important.*

But it was, she could tell, and she fought back the feeling that there were other things for Ike,

things more important than her and the ship.

*Hey . . .* His delight at their power rang in her head like a bell. *Let's show 'em what we can do.*

And they dipped and turned in a dizzying pattern and then slowed, to hover above the field.

The thoughts of the watchers crowded into the ship and Mary Lee shrank from them. The expensively dressed men couldn't believe what they had seen, couldn't wait to run their hands over the ship, to touch the fliers, to own both. Their minds were mirrors of greed.

*Ike.* She called him, with a sense of foreboding. *Let's go . . .*

He was distracted by the thoughts from below, and she couldn't reach him. There was the fragment of an answer. *After I fixed this up?*

A short command came from the signal tower. *Come down.*

*No. Mary Lee clung to flight. Ike, let's get out of here.*

Another fragment. . . *ready to go into production.*

*Come down.* The signal intruded. *Come down.*

*Ike, it's no good.* She pushed a picture of endless skies into his mind.

*We'll show 'em how it works, train new pilots . . .* He was slipping away from her.

*We don't need all that, Ike. The ship's all we need.* She pleaded, eyes burning fiercely. *Ike?*



*Come down.* The signal was imperious.

She tried to touch his mind but it was driving ahead now, closed to her. *Ike.* Nothing. *Ike, look.* And she laid her mind open, showing him everything—the love, the drive, the most secret things—and begged him to look into it, helpless, vulnerable in her appeal.

And in that second he swept the control away from her, nosed the ship down with such power and drive that she knew she and the ship had never been enough for Ike, and their time for flying together was ended.

She sat numbly in the ship while Ike, swaggering a little, went across the field to talk to the chairman of the board. He brought the man, encased in tweed, redolent of tobacco, into the hemisphere. He stood by politely as the industrialist sniffed at the unimpressive metal, the simple controls, Mary Lee.

Ike looked at her indifferently. "We could jazz up the inside a little bit," he said bluffly, waiting for the offer.

Finally, when the man touched the end of his cigar to the bar, knocking a thick ash on the floor, Ike grew tired of waiting, and spoke again.

"Well?"

"It looked pretty good up

there." The man stepped on the soft ash. "But this . . ." He waved a hand around the control room. "Let me go along this time. Before I make an offer I want to be sure what you can do." One of his lackeys brought a camp stool and set it up at one edge of the hemisphere.

Wityout looking at Mary Lee, Ike settled himself at the bar.

Numbly, still blinded by love, Mary Lee bent her will to his. She put leaden fingers on the bar. She could still sense his tension as they strained together, trying to lift the ship. There was no sound but the throb of their bodies, the breath of the man on the camp stool. Both willing the ship to lift, they pushed again.

They worked together for several minutes, straining, trying, until finally, without looking at Ike, Mary Lee put her head down on the bar and wept.

The industrialist left the ship.

*Maybe now.* Ike was desperate, unbelieving.

And they tried once more.

Then, black with rage, he turned without another word for her and stamped outside, already framing the explanations he would make.

Broken, still sobbing, not even aware of what she was doing, Mary Lee lifted the ship blindly and started back to Zorn's field.