

LILIAN BLAND - A RARE BIRD
DRAFT 2

Written by

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CHARACTERS / DOUBLING UP
LILIAN BLAND
AUNT SARAH / WOMAN ON TRAIN
JOE BLAIN / PATRONISING FELLOW
JOHN BLAND / RUC OFFICER / ANGRY MAN

EXT. WILDS OF SCOTLAND - DAY

SFX - A summer morning - birds tweeting, seagulls cow-cowing
(UNDER)

LILIAN (V.O.)

There I was, quite contented, lying on my back, face warming in the glinting summer sun, watching seagulls duck and dive in the cloudless sky above me. My peace was disturbed - as a great beast glided into my peripheral - a wingspan at least as long as I am! Could it be? A white tailed eagle? In western Scotland? A blessing, a vision! Awed by it's majesty, I daren't move for my camera incase I disturbed its flight. Watching it skate across the sky, I was struck by how free it must feel, to soar above everything, untethered by constraints.

END SFX.

INT. COTTAGE, SCOTLAND - NIGHT.

LILIAN (V.O.)

After a descent down the cliffside with my camera and my dear friend, Miss Blackburn, I arrived back at my cottage.

SFX. A door opening.

LILIAN (V.O.)

The cottage door stuck on a pile of post. Crammed beneath I found a letter from my cousin Charlie, one from father, and... I recognised the writing immediately - a postcard from Uncle Robert in France! There was a strange note from him: "Wing 8.9 m, Length 7.8 m, Height 2.5 m". Turning it over, I was met with a picture of the Blériot XI - the monoplane that had successfully flown across the channel a few months past. Staring at that great manmade flying machine, something moved within me. A belief that I too could fly! Yes!

(MORE)

LILIAN (V.O.) (CONT'D)
I decided there and then that I too
will build my own plane!

INT. TOBARCOORAN HOUSE, CARNMONEY - DAY

LILIAN (V.O.)
I arrived home to Tobarcooran house
in Ireland and attempted to head
straight to my late uncle General
Smyth's workshop. Hoping to avoid
my father's incessant nagging, I
crept past the drawing room -

SFX: A floorboard creaking.

LILIAN
Drat! He's seen me.

JOHN
Lilian. I heard you were unable to
behave yourself in Scotland. Aunt
Sarah is scandalised again.

LILIAN
What now?

JOHN
Well, aside from the smoking in
public, wearing breeches, the jiu-
jitsu and tinkering with the
neighbour's motorcars... There were
reports of you firing on local
poachers.

LILIAN
I'm a crack shot. If I wanted to
hit them I would have.

John stifles a laugh.

JOHN
But other ladies of your standing -

LILIAN
Society women? Empty lives and
empty talk.

AUNT SARAH
It's dangerous, Lilian. Riding
astride in Tipperary - that Priest
nearly had you stoned!

LILIAN

How long have you been loitering
behind that door Aunt Sarah?

AUNT SARAH

I worry about you Lilian. With no
mother to guide you... And no
husband to ground you. I could
throw you another soiree? Invite
the local bachelors?

LILIAN

No soirees. And let them throw
stones. Now. If that's everything,
I have something to attend to in
the workshop?

JOHN

A new project?

AUNT SARAH

This one better not involve
anything unladylike.

INT. BLACKPOOL AVIATION SHOW, GOLF COURSE - DAY

SFX: Hustle and bustle of a major event, people chatting
(UNDER)

LILIAN (V.O.)

Little did she know! For the rest
of that summer, I immersed myself
in all things aviation - magazines,
books and articles. But to
construct my own plane, I needed to
look over more of the flying
machines.

VOICE OVER THE TANNOY

Welcome to the Blackpool Aviation
Week. Paulhan will be taking to the
sky in his Farman Machine shortly.

LILIAN (V.O.)

I peered out over the teeming
crowd, and saw only men. My
confidence faltering, I pulled out
my post-card. Uncle Robert's
inclusion of the dimensions of
Blériot's monoplane were both
practically useful, and served as a
sign of his encouragement.

(MORE)

LILIAN (V.O.) (CONT'D)
 After all, he knew of my love of
 mechanics, and interest in flight.
 I believed in myself and he
 believed in me too. Bolstered, I
 went plane to plane, taking notes.
 There were some very patronising
 fellows -

PATRONISING FELLOW
 I wonder what illusive designer has
 sent his pretty secretary to take
 notes?

LILIAN (V.O.)
 And while many of the men seemed
 wowed by what was on display -

SFX: Ooohs and ahhs

LILIAN (V.O.)
 - I saw room for improvement. The
 few English machines, were no good -
 much too small and fitted with
 motor-bike engines. When sketching,
 I made additions to some of the
 designs. And that really rubbed
 some punters the wrong way -

ANGRY MAN
 Do you think yourself smarter than
 these learned men? You, a woman?
 With what? A basic education?

LILIAN (V.O.)
 Unfortunately for him, I'm the type
 to be spurred on by criticism.

LILIAN
 I'm going to make my own plane. And
 I'm going to fly it.

SFX: Hoots and Derision.

LILIAN (V.O.)
 You heard that right. Hoots and
 derision. Which did not worry me at
 all.

INT. TOBARCOORAN HOUSE, CARNMONEY, WORKSHOP - DAY

LILIAN (V.O.)
 On returning to my workshop, I
 built a scaleable model.
 (MORE)

LILIAN (V.O.) (CONT'D)
A biplane glider with a wingspan of
6ft. I took it out on Carnmoney
Hill, and flew it like a kite. My
proof of concept soared
beautifully, and at times reminded
me of that white tipped eagle, in
stature and in gracefulness. And so
with the help of my aunt's
gardener's boy -

JOE
Boy? I'm 32!

LILIAN (V.O.)
I got to work on building a glider.

JOE
We've ash for the wood spars and
skids, spruce for the plane's ribs
and stanchions, bamboo for
outriggers, and calico muslin for
the wings.

LILIAN
I've decided we can deconstruct a
bike, and use the handlebars as a
steering mechanism.

JOE
And have you any further thoughts
on how to waterproof the wings?

LILIAN
Yes! I'll need you to source some
gelatin and formalin.

JOE
I think it'll be a struggle
sneaking the materials past your
aunt again.

LILIAN
She's resigned to the project, Joe.
As is my father.

JOE
Aye. For my jobs sake, I hope so!

EXT. CARNMONEY HILL - DAY

SFX: A hillside in winter (UNDER)

LILIAN (V.O.)

With a great deal of work and determination, we finished the plane. My uncle's workshop was too small to assemble in, so we carried the pieces out section by section to the coach-house. When finished, the winspan was 27 feet, 7 inches. At 200lbs, I did worry that flight may be an impossibility. So we named her the "Mayfly" - she may fly or she may not! We put her to the test first as a glider, taking her out in winds of 18mph. It was difficult to prevent her from flying when I did not want her to. I'm sure my father would say -

JOHN

You and that plane are not too dissimilar. Difficult to keep on planet earth!

LILIAN (V.O.)

We had quite a lively time, sailing her downhill to the shed. A 4ft bank was cleared in fine style, and indeed the only drawback was the pace - she wanted to go at about 30mph! Finally, I decided we needed to test the weight she could take, so that she should be fitted with an engine.

INT. TOBARCOORAN HOUSE, CARNMONEY, WORKSHOP - DAY

JOE

We'll need more hands on deck.

LILIAN

Yes. By my estimations, four strong men over six foot. I've spoken to some strapping lads at the Irish Royal Constabulary.

SFX: A knock at the door

JOHN

Hello Joe.

JOE

Mr. Bland. I was just on my way out.

Joe exits.

LILIAN

Come take a look at this. I'm just altering the steering arrangement so that the elevators can be controlled from the ground, which naturally, I should have done from the first.

A PAUSE.

LILIAN (CONT'D)

Oh. You look concerned?

JOHN

You're wearing men's mechanic overalls.

LILIAN

To work safely on a machine like this, a skirt really is out of the question.

JOHN

So now you're concerned about safety? But you're happy to take off in that thing and try and steer it?

LILIAN

With scientific innovation there's always going to be an element of risk.

JOHN

Lilian. What's this really about? Proving something to me?

Lilian sighs.

LILIAN

This is about my own ambitions. I want to build and fly a plane! You and Aunt Sarah are welcome to be a part of it, but I will do it either way. Scorn me or support me. It's your choice.

EXT. CARNMONEY HILL - DAY

SFX: A hillside in spring (UNDER)

LILIAN (V.O.)

I knew father's disdain masked concern for my physical safety. Many pilots had crashed. At the Blackpool airshow, I watched as Lantham's wings had caught in a ditch and broken his propeller. Aunt Sarah on the other hand, her curiosity got the better of her, and she came out to see the machine. I even managed to take a great photo of her sitting up at the controls! It was a beautiful spring day when Joe, the four officers and myself took to the hillside in Carnmoney.

JOE

Right. Get you sat down up there.

Lilian climbs up.

LILIAN

Now. I'll run through your instructions again. Each of you, take hold of a rope. We'll launch and sail her downhill towards that shed. I've not yet had the chance of ascertaining the gliding angle, but she will soar with those vertical ropes, at about 7 degrees. So hold on tight. And don't worry about me and crashing. If we bring her gliding down in a steady wind, she lands as softly as a feather.

JOE

Okay. Everyone ready?

LILIAN

A wee bit more enthusiasm please!
This day is historic!

SFX: Men cheering.

LILIAN (CONT'D)

Let's go!

Sfx: Sound of feet stamping, as they run the glider along the hill.

LILIAN (CONT'D)

And we're off!

SFX: Wind (UNDER)

LILIAN (CONT'D)
Look at that! She's lifting easily.

RIC OFFICER
She's in danger of taking us with
her!

JOE
Christ, we're at least a foot off
the ground here.

RIC OFFICER
Lad's! Quick let go!

JOE
No! Don't! It'll send me flying!

SFX: Sounds of thumping, as men hit the ground.

LILIAN
Ah Joe, my faithful co-pilot, of
course you held on!

JOE
Oh God! I'm flying!

LILIAN
Isn't it exhilarating?

JOE
Get me down!

LILIAN
Just jump!

JOE
It's too high!

LILIAN
Turn it Joe, turn it. Out of the
wind!

JOE
I don't know how much longer I can
cling on!

LILIAN
Look! There you are, we're landing,
don't you worry!

SFX: Wind calming.

LILIAN (CONT'D)
She did it! She lifted!

JOE
Yes. I'm well aware of that...

LILIAN (V.O.)
I could hardly believe it. I ran back to see where the wheel tracks had left the grass, to convince myself I had really been airborne. Now - to find her an engine!

INT. TRAIN CARRIAGE - DAY

SFX: Steam train carriage (UNDER)

LILIAN (V.O.)
Poor Joe. And he's afraid of heights! Bolstered by her weighted flight, I focussed on sourcing an engine. I contacted AV ROE, ordering an Edwards/Avro two-stroke 20 horsepower air-cooled engine. I waited and waited, but the unit had a delivery issue, and I grew impatient. To hasten matters, I caught the Ferry to England and brought it back myself on two spars; it fitted very neatly into a railway carriage.

WOMAN ON TRAIN
My dear, what on earth is that?

LILIAN
An engine. To make an aeroplane.

WOMAN ON TRAIN
What's an aeroplane?

END SFX.

INT. TOBARCOORAN HOUSE, CARNMONEY, WORKSHOP - NIGHT

LILIAN (V.O.)
Once I got home after than long journey, I was keen to test the engine, even without a tank. So I fashioned an old whiskey bottle and filled it with -

AUNT SARAH
Has any one seen my ear trumpet?

LILIAN (V.O.)
- Aunt Sarah's ear trumpet.

AUNT SARAH
Oh for goodness sake Lilian!

SFX: Sound of an engine starting and running - REALLY loud.

LILIAN (V.O.)
The effect was awful and
overpowering!

AUNT SARAH (SHOUTING)
Lilian, I'm very hard of hearing,
and even I can tell that's booming!

END SFX:

INT. TOBARCOORAN HOUSE, CARNMONEY, WORKSHOP - MORNING

LILIAN (V.O.)
The following morning, Joe told me -

JOE
Several locals heard the noise and
assumed there was an explosion at
the mill!

LILIAN (V.O.)
To save myself getting in anymore
trouble, I decided to wait for a
petrol tank. After all, the engine
was English and thus its sense of
humour was not developed
sufficiently for these proceedings.
While I waited, we added an engine
mounting to the trailing edge of
her lower wing. We made a seat
using left over carpet, which was
placed on the leading edge.

SFX: Sound of an engine starting again.

LILIAN (V.O.)
The vibrations caused the bolts to
loosen and the wires between the
struts to snap, so I fitted a t-bar
control yoke and a tricycle
undercarriage. It was a beast to
start -

JOE

So you want me to stand between the tailbooms and swing the propellor?

LILIAN (V.O.)

Not a task for the faint hearted. But Joe trusted me and I, he. He's a brave man. Together, we decided that Carnmoney hill was too small for engine flight. Lord O'Neill's Deerpark Estate at Randalstown was chosen.

JOE

You know there's a resident bull there?

LILIAN

If it gets annoyed and charges I shall have every inducement to fly!

INT. TOBARCOORAN HOUSE, CARNMONEY, WORKSHOP - NIGHT

SFX: Sound of Lilian tinkering with the engine. Metal clanging etc.

LILIAN

Oh! Father. I didn't see you there.

JOHN

Still in your overalls.

LILIAN

Well, you wouldn't want me to wipe the oil on my skirt would you?

JOHN

Tomorrow is the big day?

LILIAN

Are you sure you won't come. How often does one get to see his daughter in the air?

JOHN

I've actually come to make you another offer. If you give up all this plane business, I will buy you a brand new Model-T Ford motorcar.

LILIAN (V.O)
My father knew just how much I
loved motorcars. He was driving a
hard bargain.

JOHN
Do we have a deal?

LILIAN
Look. I know you're worried for me -

JOHN
Are you not worried for yourself?

LILIAN
I'd be an idiot not to be. But I
have put the best of everything
into this. And I know I can do it.
I've watched the likes of Farman,
Paulhan, Latham - masters of the
art. I know I can be among their
ranks. And when I was up there
before, gliding on the wind, I
glimpsed a taste of true freedom.

EXT. DEERPARK ESTATE, RANDALSTOWN - DAY

SFX: Sounds of a late summer's day (Under)

LILIAN (V.O)
We had to wait sometime for the
right weather, but on that calm
afternoon in late summer, on Lord
O'Neill's estate, I climbed into
the cockpit.

SFX: Lilian climbing up the metal.

LILIAN (CONT'D)
Okay, Joe. Here we go. The moment
of truth. Let's fire her up! Swing
that propellor!

SFX: Sound of a propellor spinning, an engine starting.

LILIAN (SHOUTING) (CONT'D)
And we're off!

SFX: A thud of the plane hitting the ground.

JOE (SHOUTING)
Lilian! Are you okay?

LILIAN (SHOUTING)
Nothing but a mere bounce! The
impact has propelled me upwards!

SFX: A thud of the plane hitting the ground, again.

JOE (SHOUTING)
Hold on!

LILIAN (SHOUTING)
I'll steer her upwards, it's just
like handling a rearing horse!

JOE (SHOUTING)
There you go! Now you're sucking
diesel!

LILIAN
I'm up! I'm away! My god, Joe. I'm
flying!

SFX: Wind blowing (UNDER)

LILIAN (V.O.)
I looked down and watched as Joe
shrank beneath me, and realised,
there was no way he could hear me!
I was at least 30 ft above the
ground. He waved at me, elatedly! I
could barely stop grinning. Oh! The
exhilaration of it! Hurtling
through that sky, breaking through
a ceiling placed upon me, the
boundaries of human limitations,
and of the expectations of me as a
woman. What I wouldn't have given
to have been born a white-tailed
eagle! To soar like that, for hours
on end. But I was limited not by my
belief in myself and the
possibilities available to me, but
by my fuel intake, and by gravity.
Regrettably, after about a quarter
mile, I had to bring the plane
down, but Joe ran to meet me -

SFX: Engine turning off, propellers slowing.

JOE
Oh Lilian, she's magnificent!
You're magnificent. Come here!

They embrace.

JOE (CONT'D)

There was someone watching.

LILIAN

Father?

JOHN

Well done, dear Lilian.

LILIAN

Have I brought you round to the wonders of aviation?

JOHN

It was quite remarkable. But very dangerous and unbecoming.

LILIAN (V.O.)

After seeing me up in the air, Father was more determined than ever to keep me grounded. And, if I'm honest, the promise of my very own automobile, was enough to turn my head. In the end, the decision was made for me. I attempted to sell bi-planes and gliders, but there was little interest. So, that was that. Driving was my new adventure to embark upon! But I will always cherish my time building and flying the Mayfly. I had proved wrong the many people who had said that no woman could build an aeroplane, and that gave me great satisfaction.

JOE

Lilian?

LILIAN

Yes, dear Joe?

JOE

You were right. Catching a rare bird in flight? There is nothing quite like it.

END.