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Obsessed

Gothic novelist, Mary Shelley, is best known for her novel "Frankenstein". Her book is now synonymous with horror, with Mary's monster taking undue prominence over the main protagonist, the obsessed Victor Frankenstein.

The real story is not the monster, but the travails of Dr. Frankenstein in creating something viable from nothing but pieces and parts. Unfortunately, the downside of this was his fall into utter madness. With that said, I have known more than a few Victors in the flying business; men who choose a different path when approaching an aircraft project; men who, when faced with the nearly impossible task of creating a flying machine from scratch, assume a Frankenstein-like persona.

As if cast in a Universal movie rendition of Shelley's novel, we both enter a darkly lit barn smelling of compost, shrouded by wispy veils of Wolf spider webs. Is that a hound baying outside? The maglite plays across dark shapes until it illuminates the outline of something vaguely familiar camouflaged by a dusty canvas tarp.

"There. Do you see it? It's magnificent isn't it?" Am I Shelley's Henry Clerval: a close friend of the obsessed Doctor? Whereas I see a rusting skeleton of a corpse with a few dismembered and deformed parts and appendages, the obsessed doctor sees a finished airplane in pristine flying condition. My mind is too limited by rationality and case-hardened to logic to recreate the vision my good friend sees.

He sees a vibrant, complete whole. I see a miserable pile of refuse discarded by the uncaring, long destined for

the scrap heap. "It's a pile of crap." He shoots back at me in icy words of rebuke: "You fool. It's a 1946 Taylorcraft Deluxe." "No, my friend, it once was a 1946 Taylorcraft Deluxe." I roll my eyes back into my head as he caresses the steel tubing surrounding the doorframe. "Yes, yes. Maybe so and no doubt there exists some 'fur' rust, and possibly a tube or two will have to be scabbed in, but all in all intact and in need of a spark of restorative life."

I grimace as I point to the left wing spar. "Look here. The rats have made this spar into a half eaten ham sandwich. And look at these ribs. I've seen straighter lines on a snake."

He laughs with a gratuitous tone, dripping of abject sarcasm as if I am incapable of piercing the barrier of my own aeronautic ignorance. "Certainly, not all parts are useable but that is where we must continue our search for more suitable replacements."

Oh, no. I can see us skulking about the boneyards of numerous airports armed with a Coleman lantern and a portable Milwaukee Sawzall, morbidly picking over the dead looking for an unbent left main gear or a straight and true rudder. How did I get into this nightmare?

He lifts the top off a wood crate that could just as easily be a casket and giggles in unadulterated glee. "Oh yes., the heart." as he lovingly gazes at a dust covered Continental A-75. It looks more like an iron boat anchor than an engine, much less a heart, with paint-peeled Eisemann magneto's spun together by rotted plug wires.

He forces me to clasp the wormwood remains of a Freedman Burnham

propeller and cautions me to turn it slowly. In the flickering light of a dying maglite the propeller groans in protest but slowly, ever so slowly, it turns as the lifeblood of ancient black carbon-soaked oil releases the reluctant pistons to move in their sleeves. The engine burps and he claps together his hands like a child who has found his lost Frisbee. Then his eyes grow wilder than normal as he spies something under the right engine mount. It is a small card or bit of metal partially covered by remnants of a decomposing St. Louis sectional, last current in 1966.

He gingerly picks it up and then brushes away the dust. "Eureka! The Taylorcraft has a soul and a future." "Relax. It's only a stinkin' data plate." He grabs the light. "Yes, only a data plate to you, but now my creation has a name and number which means it will legally fly again."

Once more: How did I get into this? Back in his Byzantine cement hangar nearly hidden by gnarled and spiny locust trees, the doctor gathers together disparate pieces of carrion from other less fortunate T-Birds. Occasionally, a hearse-like UPS van backs up to the hangar door disgorging more parts integral to the good doctor's obsession.

In the dark of night the hangar windows illuminate with the flash of a TiG welder, silence occasionally broken by the screeching of a barred owl and hysteric cries of elation when the wings are rigged true. Then comes the day of reckoning. The hangar doors slowly creak open and out rolls a completely restored and yes, pristine Taylorcraft Deluxe with the good doctor tugging the prop forward as if urging on a baby in it's first tentative steps.

His eyes are swollen from lack of sleep.

His hair is matted in clumps by paint overspray. Under his fingernails are compressed striations of oil, grease, and butyrate dope. His coveralls are mere tatters of cloth marked by blood, sweat, and tears, with strips of Trade-a-Plane stuck to his shoes.

He furtively motions me to the new Sensenich propeller. I hesitantly grasp the tip. Unbelievably, I, too, am caught up in this moment of madness and revelation. He climbs into the immaculate cockpit and primes the A-75. He nods and I yell, "BRAKES, CONTACT." I draw down on the heart of this creation resurrected from a pitiful heap of dead scrap. I don't expect much, but am instantly shocked when it kicks over twice and then rumbles into life.

"It's ALIVE. It's ALIVE." No, he didn't really say that, but the look on his face said it all – a manic contortion of euphoria, conquest, and relief. The good doctor shouts above the idling Continental generously offering me the first ride in his creature. "Not on your life", I shout back. Hey, I read the book and in the end the monster kills Clerval.

