

# An Evening Alone

by Stu Simpson

“Lights, camera, action”, I recite to no one but me. It’s my final mantra before takeoff in my Cavalier. Nav and strobe lights on, transponder to ALT, and power up to go. Gladys, my instructor, taught me that.

Acceleration, steady and strong. Tail up. It stays there for a few seconds. Then a pleasant easy grin, and a twinkle of excitement and giddy disbelief as the Cav slips away into the first few feet of the air. The radio is mute this evening. The Cav and I are alone climbing to the northeast for Three Hills, about 25 minutes away at our speed.

The sun shines on the earth then bounces right back up, reincarnated as small tendrils of warm turbulence weaving their way to cooler heights. The Cav catches some of them, rocking this way or that as we fly along.

Sleek fuel tanks perch on each wing tip seeming to race the rest of the plane through the late afternoon. The wooden wings, marvels of strength and endurance, flex every now and then with the bumps. The ailerons move clandestinely, barely noticeable, each time I nudge the plane back to level from a deviation.

My Three Hills landing is a little rough. A puffy duvet of warmth floats us along in ground effect for an extra couple hundred feet, then suddenly abandons us, plunking the Cav ingloriously onto the pavement.

I spend a pleasant half hour chatting with my mother-in-law Diane, a graceful, enchanting woman in her 80's. We watch a few landings by the local flight school's planes, then I hug her, kiss her cheek and take once more to the air.

I don't know where I'm going yet, but I head northwest, certain some place will come to mind.

I finally decide on Innisfail. The Cav and I soon arrive over top of the airport, an old war time strip that still enjoys regular use by glider

pilots, parachute jumpers and guys like me. I set up for some touch and goes on runway 34.

I love landings. I adore how the Cav talks to me then, maybe by straying slightly from the glidepath, or through subtle hints in the airspeed as we get closer and closer. I answer with the lightest touch on the stick, or a miniscule change in RPM, maybe a tweak on the trim.

And this time, as there often is, there's a sharp stab of fear when I cut the throttle just short of the runway. It jousts with my logic, fighting over whether or not the Cav will make the runway or tangle in the grass just this side of it. Of course, logic has always won and once more the Cav glides beautifully across the button.

My landing is bad, purely my fault this time. But the sky offers salvation and another chance, so I throttle up and run away from my sins. The Cav climbs superbly and soon we're setting up again for another try. Twice more I land at Innisfail, and these landings are good. I am redeemed.

We leave there heading south. The shadows grow longer, the air gets smoother. I smile at the evening from the depths of my soul.

The Cav follows a section line between two highways; the main highway on left, and a smaller, two-lane version on the right. There's something primal inside that draws me to such symmetry; a comfort and pleasance found in the balance of the straight lines below. I feel the same about the symmetry of airplanes.

What would happen, I wonder, if I just kept going? What if I didn't in another 50 miles turn for home at Kirkby Field? What if I just flew until I needed to land for gas, or food, or sleep? I could look at a map and choose a place with an airport. It would have to be one with fuel, the elixir that feeds this addiction. I could set a course now and see where I end up.

What would really happen? Where would I go? What would I see?

It's a fantasy in which I've immersed myself a thousand times. I've nibbled at such freedom on other flying adventures, and I crave

another taste. I want to run from the bad weather that's forecast for tomorrow; to pick a direction and just fly, limited only by time and distance.

I indulge a twinge of disappointment and self-pity that I can't go, that I can't escape and just fly away. Then a much deeper guilt strikes me for my brief but shameful greed. How dare I pity myself? How dare I feel anything but blessed as I fly my Cavalier? How can I pout while my senses completely consume the sky around me and the cherished moments I've lived this evening? What would others give to have such riches as mine?

The Cav and I continue south, exactly a mile above sea level, but only a couple thousand feet above the world below. I revel in our speed as I often do with this plane. It's so much fun to watch cars on the highway vanish beneath the wings at half our speed.

My thoughts wander again, this time pondering the engineering that went into my airplane. What calculations took place to figure out how strong the flaps have to be? How did they know the speed where the plane stalls? Why is the landing gear leg that thick? How do they calculate the drag of my Cavalier?

There's curiosity, but I don't really want to know. That knowledge might take the mystery from flight, pare it all down to cold hard numbers and facts. To know the strength of materials, or the coefficient of lift, might rob me of my innocence, of my wonder and fascination with flying. I don't need to know a wizard's secrets. I like to believe in a little bit of magic.

I'm close to Calgary now and I need to pay more attention as the airspace gets busier. I switch to Calgary's arrival channel to learn of any other planes that might be close to me. I listen for several minutes but none announce themselves. So I switch to Kirkby's frequency and tell anyone who cares that I'll soon be landing, that I'll soon be mortal again.

I fly overhead, confirm the wind and complete the circuit onto final approach. Once more the Cav talks me through the landing, and

maybe this time the fear of the last little power-off glide is a bit less. My logic is winning.

The last landing of the evening sees the wheels kiss the greening grass and the Cav rumbles gently as we slow and turn off the runway. A glance to the west and I know I'll have the Cav fuelled and back in the hangar just as the sun disappears. My day is complete.

Most times I prefer flying with others. I enjoy sharing the air and the amazement of flight with my wingmen, with pilots who think of the sky as I do. But on this flight it was truly fine to spend an evening alone.