



THE FLIGHT OF THE CENTURY

CHARLES LINDBERGH & THE RISE
OF AMERICAN AVIATION

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INTRODUCTION

ON A RAINY FRIDAY MORNING, May 20, 1927, Charles A. Lindbergh, a twenty-five-year-old air mail pilot from Minnesota, with limited flying experience, fired up his small single-engine monoplane and took off for Paris from New York's Roosevelt Field on Long Island. Constructed in a mere sixty days by a little-known San Diego aircraft company, the *Spirit of St. Louis* was so simple in design that some referred to it as flying fuel tank. Stripped of every extra ounce, the plane carried five sandwiches, a couple of canteens of water and its six-foot-two pilot scrunched into the tiny cockpit. With his forward vision entirely blocked by a huge fuel tank, Lindbergh relied on a bank of primitive instruments and a set of home made navigation plans to take him on a journey no one had ever completed before. Half a dozen men—in the most advanced multiple-engine planes, equipped with state-of-the-art guidance and communications systems—had previously attempted this flight and perished.¹

He had no radio and flew alone across a thirty-six-hundred-mile course, in his modest silver vehicle of wood, cloth, and metal. Much of the flight was over uncharted ocean. Battered by sleet storms and hazards he had not even imagined, he tested the limits of human endurance, staying awake for close to sixty hours straight, the last thirty-three hours alone with his machine in the air. The sheer terror, of knowing that any let-up meant certain death kept him awake, but only barely. During the twenty-second hour of his flight, he found himself surrounded in the cabin by shapeshifting phantoms that resembled humans but had no substance. These strangely familiar forms revealed to him secrets of the heavens but none remained with him after the flight. As suddenly as they came aboard his cockpit they left, leaving him to complete his historic journey alone.²

Against all odds, thirty-three and a half hours after his take off, Lindbergh touched down at Paris's Le Bourget airfield. He expected a bit of trouble because he had no visa and but a few cents in his pocket but he did not expect the exuberant welcome that greeted him. Tens of thousands of starstruck French citizens came streaming at him "as if," wrote the poet Harry Crosby "all the hands in the world are . . . trying to touch the new Christ."³

The next day the delighted American ambassador to France wrote back to Washington about the young flier's "divine genius." Paris lionized him. In London, just a few days later, the British abandoned all reserve in welcoming Lindbergh. All this was prelude to the unprecedented celebrations waiting for him back home in the United States. One clearly overwrought journalist described the Lindbergh phenomenon as "the greatest event since the Resurrection."⁴

Years ago in a review of *New Yorker* writer Brendan Gill's 1977 biography *Lindbergh Alone*, William F. Buckley, Jr., wrote that despite devoting an entire book to Lindbergh the "sharp-eyed Gill" had somehow failed to "explain why it is probably true . . . that Lindbergh was the most famous man of the 20th century," and why he became "even more famous as the years went by?" And despite hundreds of books that have offered revealing accounts of Lindbergh's life, Buckley's challenge has remained largely unanswered. What was it about this event and this man that so captured the imagination of the world and accounts for his enduring fame?⁵

He cured no deadly diseases. He ended no wars, uncovered no fresh continent; he made no scientific discoveries. He did not invent jazz or write a great novel or stir the American conscience with his eloquence. In fact, Lindbergh's flight across the Atlantic was essentially an endurance stunt, part of a sporting competition that was soon replicated and greatly exceeded.

Nonetheless his daring exploit has achieved a timelessness reserved for those transporting events that capture the spirit of the times. In 1967, forty years after the flight, *Time Magazine*, in a special edition celebrating American heroes, described him as the "first real hero of the machine age and in a sense the last." And today, more than eighty years after his flight, and after a life filled with much controversy, Lindbergh's renown persists. In a time of cyberspace and galactic exploration, this story of a man and his machine challenging and overcoming the elements continues to tug at American memory. Other fliers made records, but he made history.⁶

Each age creates its heroes. In the years after World War I, Americans turned away from grand abstractions and the tainted fields of politics and war, and placed new emphasis on palpable accomplishment. In sport, in art, and in life, bold, riveting action took on great importance. Americans reveled in the pure action of

Babe Ruth sending baseballs screaming out of ball parks, the mighty KOs of a Jack Dempsey, and the iron determination of marathoners sitting alone atop tall flagpoles. But these achievements lacked resonance and Americans quickly wearied of faux transcendence.

In these years as Americans sought surcease in normalcy they tired finally of the narrow mission of prosperity, yearning for a more compelling national signature. “It’s as if they’d caught an angel that talks like Coolidge,” Ernest Hemingway said of Lindbergh. This son of farm America, who had tinkered in the solitude of the woods and waters, offered a welcome affirmation of pioneer values and grand aspirations. In search of something clean, solid, and upstanding, Americans embraced this young man of singular skill, grace, and courage who after having conquered the sky, refused to be distracted by the pull of easy wealth and purposeless fame, respected Prohibition, had no girl problems, and worked hard for no better reason than to do his chosen task perfectly.⁷

But if his flight captured the world’s attention—“Such men,” proclaimed the German newspaper *Vossische Zeitung*, “mark the path of humanity; they are the pacesetters of technical progress; they set the pace for their eras” making it possible for lesser men “to reach the highest mountains without climbing”—it was his transforming influence on American life that accounts for his lasting significance. His flight inaugurated America’s Air Age, propelling a nation where trade, travel, and transportation were conveyed by rail and road into the modern aviation era.⁸

In the mid-nineteenth century the United States had committed vast resources to establish the world’s most extensive railroad system but years later it refused to do the same for aviation. Despite pouring a huge fortune into building an air force during World War I, the United States allowed its flight industries to wither following the conflict while Europe forged a broad program of subsidized development.

Lindbergh’s flight and widely covered air tours made Americans air minded, setting off a vast aviation boom. Air mail surged, new air routes proliferated, aircraft manufacture increased, and passengers flocked to the airports. Overnight college students turned to careers in aeronautics. Investors, ever alert to the fresh new thing, poured millions of dollars into aviation research, development, and production. And in a very brief span of time large new aviation companies formed colossal cartels that catapulted America’s air industry to world leadership.

Lindbergh played a critical role in every major step forward, working closely with federal authorities while at the same time directing planning and development for both Pan Am and TAT (“the Lindbergh Line”), the forerunner of TWA. He became not only the voice and face but also the soul of American aviation,

insisting on policies that promoted credibility, safety and professional service. His pervasive influence shaped aircraft design, route planning, flight operations, as well as national and international air policy as he helped mold America's air empire.

All his life Lindbergh sought to be in control, to govern his life by his own strict and disciplined plan. The entire flight project was laid out in a series of action lists. His flight plan to Europe was meticulously sketched out. The load he carried was obsessively controlled to the ounce; he even trimmed the margins off of his maps to save weight! Before setting out to find a wife, he prepared a list of traits that he intended to look for. Later he even prepared and orchestrated his own funeral. Touched off by the flight, Lindbergh's renown and influence continued to grow, yet before very long that influence came to be shaped and channeled by others.

Lindbergh foresaw nothing of what occurred after his landing, and for a full year after Paris he laid no more plans as events overtook his every imagined next step. He had hoped that after he won the \$25,000 Orteig prize and paid off his debts he would have a little money left over and land a good job; the flight opened a new world for him, one for which he had prepared no guide.

Starting in Paris others' plans took over. The remarkable American ambassador Myron Herrick, took the untutored young flier under his wing, arranging his appearances, helping him with his speeches, and assigning embassy staff to go through the sacks of mail that came pouring in. Herrick's son Parmely arranged an advisory group of responsible men to oversee Lindbergh's financial affairs. In the course of a single hectic week the unsophisticated air mail pilot was transformed into a world-class personality.

Once Lindbergh returned to the States, others took over the task of translating his fame to broader purpose. At first it was the St. Louis coterie that raised the money for his flight. But they were quickly supplanted by an elite high-powered group who were not only committed to advancing American aviation, but also had the wherewithal to make it happen. A J. P. Morgan banker took charge of Lindbergh's finances; a former Assistant War Secretary handled his personal business; and the head of the largest aviation foundation paid him a salary and looked after his welfare. In the countless books about Lindbergh these men—Dwight Morrow, Henry Breckinridge, and Harry Guggenheim, respectively—are mostly portrayed as being motivated by friendship and concern for the young hero.

But there was much more than benevolence and warm regard behind their involvement. Around Lindbergh, these men and their circle constructed their ambitious agenda for aviation. He got to plan his trips and write his own speeches but they orchestrated the larger forces around him to mold Big Aviation.

Lindbergh had insisted that he would not be commodified, but in this effort he was entirely complicit.

Lindbergh's flight profoundly stirred the imagination of the nation and the world, promoting an era of good feeling and international reconciliation. It raised hopes for an age beyond war even as it recast military strategy and paved the way for America's air dominance, converting, in the words of one scholar, "the disreputable raiment of American aviation . . . into the garment of empire." It launched American commercial aviation and ushered in an era of air monopolies.⁹

"The flight" also distorted his life. It raised him, a poor farm boy from a broken home, to riches and international acclaim. Overnight it brought him into contact with kings, prime ministers, and adoring millions. No one could imagine a more compelling Horatio Alger story as he became the most famous American of his time. As best he could, he tried to ride the tiger of celebrity for the benefit of causes he held dear, aviation at first, and then American isolationism in the run-up to World War II, and later environmentalism. But he was entirely unprepared for the relentless intrusions of the new celebrity age. The media and especially the tabloid press cast him in a spotlight that had never shone with such painful intensity and the attention cost him tragically. Bitter at America's unrestrained press and holding it responsible for his son's kidnapping and death, in the last days of December 1935, eight years after his momentous flight, he secretly packed his family and belongings and fled America for Europe.

The Lindbergh era was over. The man whose flight symbolized the élan of 1920s optimism had little to offer a depressed America in the 1930s. He was no longer innocent, bold, and gallant. He had suffered tragedy but unlike, for example, Franklin Roosevelt (with whom he clashed bitterly), he could take nothing from his own suffering to inspire his countrymen. His boyish charm had curdled into a corrosive disillusion and dogmatic racism. Not long before, he had represented the most appealing qualities of American life and character. Now, as he expressed a cold disdain for Europe's democratic societies while openly admiring its totalitarian regimes, he flirted with Nazism.

With the Depression widespread and the threat of European fascism looming, Americans faced more immediate problems than corraling new horizons. Even before World War II, the mass bombing of Guernica made clear that the hope that aviation would usher in a brighter age was dashed. Nor were Americans now disposed toward unexamined worship of a rags-to-riches millionaire.

He had come from nowhere, a dark-horse flyboy in a competition that had lasted many years, to become the most popular celebrity of his time, perhaps of all time. Hurdling entrenched barriers of time, space, and distance he conquered the most elusive prize of his day. He achieved the American dream, advanced progress,

captured the world's attention, and rose to great influence as he directed America's gaze skyward. Following his flight the airplane recast global geography as essential exchanges in money, travel and trade were speeded and diplomacy accelerated. New industries sprouted. Men and women came to know intimately parts of the globe they had thought of as strange and unfriendly. Humankind thought seriously about a new world without walls. He influenced the aspirations of millions and fortified Americans in their sense of world leadership.

He dominated his times but those times changed. Like his own private world, the world at large became deeply clouded. The nation he had projected as a land of endless progress and optimism became mired in a demoralizing depression and as global conflict loomed he turned his back on its destiny. He would go on to one of the most controversial second acts in American history and fame of an entirely different sort, but in the pivotal span of his influence, in the first iteration of his fame, he made a vast difference.

"I was born," he wrote, when "the great forces of science and technology had already been loosed, but horses still dominated the streets and Orville Wright had not yet made the first power-sustained airplane flight." Born in the heart of a traditional rural world he helped transform, he was a man of powerful ambitions that were shaped by the land and by his nurture. The story of the flight begins with his youth at the dawn of the American Century and the age of manned flight.¹⁰

YOU'RE YOUR OWN BOSS

AS A YOUNG BOY Charles Augustus Lindbergh lived in one of the most impressive houses in the entire Minnesota lumber region, two miles from the town of Little Falls on 120 acres of lush pinelands. Shortly before Charles's birth in 1902, his father hired workers to clear acres of high woods, taking care to spare the most imposing of the great pines and hardwoods, and to carve out an expansive lawn, lay decorative flower beds, and plant a vegetable garden. In the center of the property they erected a splendid three-story house on high ground at the edge of a bluff overlooking the Mississippi River.¹

Lindholm Manor boasted thirteen rooms, seven of them bedrooms. Each of the receiving rooms was handsomely appointed and finished in a different fine wood. The house's maple floors were varnished to a high shine; there were two indoor bathrooms, a billiard room, a reception hall, and a large furnace that passed heat through hot-water radiators. The furniture, heavy and expensive, came from Grand Rapids, Michigan. Fronting the grounds, which eventually included a caretaker's house, a barn, and other structures, were imposing black iron gates. In the stillness of the evening one could hear the sound of water and birdsong. Charles's mother, Evangeline, described the setting as "wonderfully peaceful and beautiful."²

This house befitted the prominent Lindbergh family, headed by the respected attorney, bank director, and successful real estate developer Charles August Lindbergh. He had traced a remarkable success story in the course of a single generation. Brought to the United States as an infant shortly before the Civil War, he grew up not far from Little Falls. His own father, Ola Månsson, had been a small farmer in Sweden who dabbled in politics and won election to the Swedish Parliament in 1847 as a supporter of progressive change. Ola also directed the

Bank of Sweden's loan office and in 1858, after some of the loans he had guaranteed were not repaid, he was charged with embezzlement.³

After all his appeals failed and with jail looming, the fifty-year-old Månsson prepared to flee the country. When his wife of twenty-four years, the mother of his eight children, learned that Ola had fathered a child with a restaurant waitress the year before, she refused to join him. Undeterred, Månsson swept up his twenty-one-year-old mistress and infant son, Karl August, and slipped away to Liverpool. From there they shipped to Quebec and crossed the border into the United States. Settling on a patch of virgin territory edging the frontier in the new state of Minnesota, Ola took a new name, August Lindbergh, and on August 4, 1859, weeks after arriving in Minnesota, he declared before the district court his intention to become a U.S. citizen.⁴

Although Ola had not worked with his hands for a long time, he cleared the land before the cold set in, put up a twelve-by-sixteen-foot log cabin, and prepared the soil for crop farming. With only two other settler families as neighbors amid thousands of Indians in the surrounding territory, he hacked out a new American life. Less than two years after he made his new start, a sawmill blade slashed his arm. A surgeon arrived days later, too late to do anything but amputate. Like many of his compatriots Karl was learning that America's promise would not be claimed without hardship, but also like many he rose to the challenge. He made do with one arm, supporting his growing family and building a solid future.⁵

Karl (now Charles) August, the only one of the seven Lindbergh children born in the Old Country, grew into a strikingly handsome lad, an inch short of six feet, with jet black hair, arresting blue eyes, and a cleft in his chin. His deadly accurate marksmanship brought the family many a supper. As a youth he was a dreamer, often skipping class to wander the woods. At age twenty, faced with the prospect of unrelieved farm work for the rest of his life, he enrolled in a demanding two-year course of preparatory study at the Grove Lake Academy. From there he went on to complete a law program at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, financing his studies by hunting and selling small game fowl. The Minnesota bar admitted him in 1883, the year he graduated.⁶

Charles August settled in Little Falls, fifty miles from where he grew up, a compact village community of fewer than five hundred souls, situated near a slight rapid along the Mississippi River. Farming, furs, and pine formed the principal underpinnings of the local economy, with the giant Weyerhaeuser Lumber Company employing many of the Scandinavian and Polish immigrants who pioneered in the area. In 1887 C. A. ("I do not remember my father's friends calling him by any other name than C. A.," Lindbergh later recalled) married Mary LaFond, the

daughter of one of Little Falls's original settlers, and went on to build a thriving law practice, specializing in real estate and land sales. The largest companies in the region became his clients, and C. A., privy to information about the best deals, bought local property, turning a nice fortune on his investments. He also bought mortgages and helped found a bank.⁷

By the 1890s Little Falls was bustling with five thousand inhabitants and C. A. Lindbergh was its leading lawyer. But he retained the heart of a yeoman, lecturing his bank colleagues more than once, "To make money, in my opinion, is not the sole purpose of a bank."⁸

C. A. and Mary raised their two young daughters, Lillian and Eva (a third daughter died in infancy), surrounded by the comforts of a prosperous life. In 1898 this life was shattered when doctors found that Mary, not yet thirty-one, had an abdominal tumor. She died of complications following surgery. Inconsolable, C. A. sent his two young daughters to a boarding school, moved out of his large home, and for a long time sought relief in solitude.⁹

In time he met twenty-four-year-old Evangeline Land. University educated, beautiful, and vivacious, she came from the big city of Detroit and a family of doctors. Her father, Dr. Charles H. Land, ran an innovative dental laboratory; her grandfather, Edwin Albert Lodge, was a highly regarded doctor, specializing in homeopathic cures; and three of her uncles were also doctors. When economic reversals forced her father into bankruptcy, Evangeline's mother suggested that she might put her University of Michigan degree in chemistry to practical use. With few opportunities for women scientists, Evangeline inquired at a placement service about teaching jobs and learned of an opening in Little Falls. Evangeline was intrigued by the prospect of teaching miners' children chemistry on the frontier and perhaps even having "a great St. Bernard dog following her back and forth to school." She arrived in Little Falls early in September 1900 but encountered no miners' children and, alas, no St. Bernard, but she did land a job teaching chemistry, physics, and three other science courses.¹⁰

From the beginning it was clear that she was misplaced in the small town, but she did find one thing to write home about: "the best looking man in Little Falls," C. A. Lindbergh, a man of sterling reputation who did not "drink, chew or smoke." C. A. was equally captivated by this urbane young woman. Her flair and education stood out in the dour frontier community; her charm and spontaneity lifted his spirits, restoring the joy that had gone from his life.¹¹

She could ignore the eighteen-year difference in their ages, could promise to make the best of raising two rambunctious girls, but Little Falls she found suffocatingly narrow, with "two saloons for every church and a church for every creed," none of which much interested her. Four months after she began teaching, her job

at the high school ended following a confrontation with the school principal. Disappointed with everything in Little Falls but the “brightest lawyer in Minnesota,” she wrote her mother, “Surely no matter what becomes of me & my friend the lawyer, Little Falls, Minnesota shall not see so very much more of this chicken.” In January they became engaged. Evangeline knew all would be well after they married, moved to Detroit, and lived happily ever after.¹²

They were married on March 27, 1901, at her parents’ home in Detroit and then honeymooned for ten weeks, touring Pike’s Peak in Colorado, San Francisco, Sacramento, and a good part of the rest of California. They hiked, rafted, and camped out along Oregon’s Columbia River and then boarded the Northern Pacific Railroad for Minnesota. Several years before, C. A. had bought a large property where he had gone for walks to ease his sorrow after his wife died. It was a stunning sylvan expanse near the Mississippi’s waters, and he commissioned a house for his new bride on this property, hoping that it would convince her of Little Falls’s charms.¹³

The elegant couple easily climbed to the top of local society. They entertained the leading families in the county—the Weyerhaeusers, the Williamses, the Tanners, and the Mussers—with games of pinochle and with music and singing. With her “rippling sense of Irish humor,” Evangeline put on plays for her guests. One of Lindbergh’s early recollections is of his mother nervously pacing in powder and wig preparing one of her skits. He remembered his parents as the “most handsome pair in the city of Little Falls.”¹⁴

Nevertheless, there were few bright lights in Little Falls, and the most popular local male pastime, drinking in bars, did not impress Evangeline. She longed for her family and for Detroit’s more vibrant social life. But soon she set these thoughts aside and turned to planning for a new arrival; within two months of her marriage she learned that she was pregnant.

At the end of January, C. A. brought Evangeline to Detroit as they had planned so that her uncle, Dr. Edwin Lodge, could deliver the baby. On February 4, 1902, Evangeline gave birth to a nine-and-a-half-pound boy. C. A. arrived in Detroit two days later to join his wife, proudly announcing that his son’s name would be Charles Augustus Lindbergh. He was not a true junior because his father’s middle name, August, was one syllable shorter, but he was still often referred to as Charles Jr.¹⁵

Evangeline hoped to raise young Charles in Detroit, where he could learn much from her father and uncles. There, with a good education and the family’s example, he might carry forward the family tradition in medicine. But six weeks after she gave birth, she trekked back to Minnesota. C. A. wanted a different environment for his son: a life shaped by the land and framed by its rough-hewn beauty. He himself felt a strong attachment to nature’s prairie rhythms and

aggressively defended the virtues of the rustic life. He hoped that the new home he was building for Evangeline would soften her attitude about life on the agrarian frontier.¹⁶

Little Charles was pampered by servants and housekeepers. Surrounded by a beautiful landscape—he recalled later that as a toddler he could see the Mississippi from his room—his parents kept him outdoors for much of the day, and he played with assorted animals on the farm: goats, horses, cattle, and especially a succession of dogs, who became his closest friends.¹⁷

His most dramatic recollection was of August 6, 1905, a Sunday: “A huge column of smoke is rising from our house, spreading out and blackening the sky.” Amid shouts and panic a nurse called out to the three-year-old child to avert his eyes from the razing of his home. “Charles, you *mustn’t* watch,” the agitated nurse insisted, inadvertently searing the image in his mind forever. “Our entire house . . . sunk into the stone walls of its basement,” he wrote many years later. “Father will build us a new house,” his mother said consolingly, though even she did not believe it.¹⁸

Much more than the house went up in smoke. Soon after the blaze C. A.’s investments suffered reversals. He and a partner had developed properties, anticipating Little Falls’s expansion, but they speculated on the wrong side of town and the family fortunes plummeted. It did not take long for expenses and taxes to burn through their savings. Less than six months after the fire he informed Evangeline that they were strapped for cash. “They both, our little daughters, have got to work and it will be better for them,” C. A. wrote. He did not have to add that she would have to curtail her own extravagant spending.¹⁹

For all her gifts and her husband’s fine local reputation, Evangeline never felt comfortable in Little Falls. C. A. had not denied her much, but even her frequent shopping binges could not still her growing unhappiness. Small-town life depressed her. She resented the chattering wives and old ladies who criticized her spending sprees, gossiped about her difficulty controlling two resentful stepdaughters (now hardheaded fifteen- and eleven-year-olds), and regaled one another with tales of her temper tantrums. Nor did she appreciate living in the shadow of memories of C. A.’s sweet and unassuming first wife, whom everybody had loved.²⁰

Even as a small child Charles realized that his mother felt out of place. He later explained that her “experience and aptitude” had not equipped her for life in Little Falls. She felt roughly handled in the coarse social environment: “My mother’s protected family life in Detroit, and her education in an elite girl’s school did not form a good background for Minnesota, one-generation-beyond-the frontier life.” She quickly lost patience with her husband’s unexpressive manner and his

crude, at times mean-spirited practical jokes, often at her expense. She resented what had become of her young life, increasingly secluded from the stimulation and excitement of the urbane world that she had left behind.²¹

They were spectacularly mismatched: he a middle-aged man who cherished the agricultural lifestyle with its fixed horizons and daily routines, and she, much younger, craving the quicker tempo and diverse texture of city life; he a serious, intellectually disposed man of stolid temperament, and she a vibrant young woman whose charms lay in her directness and boisterous sense of fun. Her mercurial moods clashed with her husband, “who,” C. A.’s biographer reports, “did not show emotion at all.”²²

The house was not going to be rebuilt, and Evangeline knew that her husband, brought low by his reversals, would be too busy fighting off his own demons to make her or her son happy. By the end of 1905 he had stopped trying. Little remained to hold the marriage together beyond C. A.’s refusal to divorce. “Their relationship,” Lindbergh later recounted, “was a tragic situation.”²³

Like his father before him, C. A. turned to electoral politics, running for the seat in Minnesota’s Sixth Congressional District in 1906. A friend warned him that elective office would mean spending many weeks away from home, little realizing how satisfactory this might prove to C. A.²⁴

C. A. was a striking presence on the campaign trail. He had helped subdue the wilderness as part of the frontier generation and held a genuine regard for the agrarian way of life. He spoke forcefully, bristling with outrage at modern America’s dismissive treatment of common farmers and workers and about the need to defend wholesome homespun values against vile urban influences. Around the spirit of populist discontent he molded an articulate program of opposition, exhorting grangers to fight for reforms, including currency inflation and restraints on corporate privilege. “My father loved the farm,” Lindbergh would later recollect, “but not to farm.” Fixed in Lindbergh’s early memory was how different his father was from their neighbors, absorbed by such issues as tariffs, monopolies, and the “Wall Street interests.”²⁵

C. A. attacked the incumbent congressman, Democrat Clarence B. Buckman, for working private deals with local lumber interests. The erstwhile real estate speculator and banker railed at the “perfidious” eastern banks and dark “money powers” like J. P. Morgan and Kuhn, Loeb. If farmers fail to organize, he warned, “big business will take everything they’ve got. This country belongs to the people, but they haven’t learned how to run it yet.” He won the election and went on to serve for five succeeding terms until 1917.²⁶

With C. A. immersed in electoral politics and the girls off at school or working and later married, the family of three spent summers in Little Falls and much of

the rest of the year in Washington. In Little Falls there was at least the pretense that they were a family but in Washington there was no denying the estrangement. Evangeline and her son lived in a rented apartment or a series of boarding-houses, while C. A. roomed in a hotel or slept in his office. In the summer of 1909, long after the marriage had expired in fact, Evangeline again asked C. A. for a divorce. Fearing the political fallout, he implored her to “let things slide,” promising to treat her fairly. Evangeline resigned herself to a sham marriage.²⁷

Periodically they would reconcile, only to dissolve into bitter bickering, or worse. C. A. would call Evangeline a “bloodsucker” and on at least one occasion struck her. There were rumors that he had become involved with his stenographer, leading an infuriated Evangeline to hold a gun to his head. (Lindbergh told C. A.’s biographer that his mother never fell in love with another; he could not be as certain about his father.) It was a time when divorce and being raised by a single parent were uncommon, and the situation left deep scars on Lindbergh. “I am awfully sorry for the boy,” his father wrote. “He feels so hurt.”²⁸

Lindbergh lived mostly with his mother, who encouraged him to spend time with his father, but C. A. was consumed by his work. Up at four in the morning, he exercised and breakfasted on an apple or an orange before setting off for his office, often by five. Lindbergh remembered his father as always so preoccupied—composing a speech, meeting with colleagues, or working with constituents—that even when they were in Washington he did not get to see much of him.²⁹

Lindbergh also remembered seeing the great men of the nation, catching a glimpse of the portly president William H. Taft taking his morning exercise; meeting Theodore Roosevelt, whom his father supported in his 1912 bid for the presidency; and witnessing Woodrow Wilson sign a bill at the White House that his father had sponsored. He would wander the halls of Congress, causing mischief, gliding through the corridors of the Capitol on skates or locking toilet doors from the inside. Once he dropped lightbulbs one by one from atop the House Office Building to the street below.³⁰

Neither parent did much disciplining, and he took full advantage of all the immunities granted to the cute son of a sitting congressman. Congress never impressed him. It was too somber a place and too much like church, another place to which he was dragged once his father became elected. Both places were full of talk: “Sometimes you got a headache as you listened.” And both were “too hot, [and] rather stuffy,” when the really interesting things were outside.³¹

His mother understood his urge for the outdoors and for freedom from structure. She would pull him out of class every once in a while to take him for hikes in the woods or through the Rock Creek Park Zoo; other trips included visits to national shrines and museums, which he enjoyed, especially the Smithsonian,

which filled him with a sense of wonder. Mostly, though, he liked to play alone in Washington's vacant lots, spending hours daydreaming and digging for rocks and artifacts that he imagined were fossils millions of years old. He would gaze in fascination as the wind caught a sheet of paper and sent it soaring through the air. Why, he wondered, was it more complicated getting rocks and scraps of wood airborne, while a shingle, despite its weight, would float up in a draft?³²

In the end nothing in Washington could really take the place of his home in Little Falls. Charles disliked the capital's crowded rows of unappealing redbrick houses, the snarl of traffic that filled the streets with an unnatural cacophony, the rushed hullabaloo, the tall structures that blocked the sunsets, the artificiality of the man-made environment. City life was a prison. He missed Little Falls's uncluttered rusticity, the "feel of branch to muscle," the solitude and open woodlands. He yearned for late spring and his annual return to the high blue skies of the Minnesota farm.³³

Years later, in a book devoted to his flight to Paris, Lindbergh vividly reconstructed virtually every step of his return to his "extraordinarily beautiful" home in Minnesota. He described walking two miles from the railroad station, past local shops and saloons, stopping in at the grocer's, and then, after passing the last of the towering telephone poles, arriving at "real country," where he made his way down a woodland path, past a white cedar fence, a gray horse barn, and thick honeysuckle bushes before catching a reassuring glimpse of the modest dwelling that had replaced the razed mansion. He would rush to his room, remove his city duds, don overalls, grab his dog Dingo, and take off to run barefoot in the woods.³⁴

Charles loved to hunt, fish, swim, and skip over logjams created by the drifting Norway pine sent downstream by the large timber companies up north. He would lie naked in the sun, stretched out on one of the stalled logs, and even in the late fall he would dip into the icy waters, relishing the afterglow: "You can walk along the beach afterward, in well below freezing air, and still feel warm, completely naked. It is a wonderful experience." In his memories the country formed an idyllic past.³⁵

He and his mother would plant a vegetable garden, raising sweet corn, potatoes, peas, beans, tomatoes, and other vegetables. C. A. would visit for a few days and while there do his best to detach the boy from his mother's apron strings. In the little time that he shared with Charles he strove to make him manly and resilient, rushing the hardening process, sometimes to the point of tears. Boys, he would say, "must get knocked and knock back in order to stand the world's knocking later."³⁶

C. A. presented his son with a .22 caliber Savage hunting rifle when he was seven. When he was "almost old enough to hold it to [his] shoulder," about a year

later, Charles graduated to a Winchester twelve-gauge automatic. Father and son would go off to shoot wild fowl and deer near the Mississippi. For all his mixed emotions, Lindbergh reveled in his father's trust, recalling, "[C. A.] let me walk behind him with a loaded shotgun at seven, use an axe as soon as I had strength enough to swing it, drive his Ford car anywhere at twelve. . . . My freedom was complete."³⁷

C. A. also taught the boy to swim: "Father didn't have much use for water wings." When Lindbergh was around eight his father took him to the river bank; there Charles dropped his clothes and waded "neck-deep in the slimy, smooth-stone bottom, and slipped into a hole that was over [his] head." Suddenly he was tumbling, splashing, and swallowing water while struggling to surface. Finally he came up, coughing and quite shaken. He expected to see his father running toward him, but instead C. A. stood at the shore laughing. Decades later, the sting of his father's unconcern remained fresh, but he had passed a test and he was proud of winning his father's regard: "I realized that I was swimming by myself. . . . Now that I could both shoot and swim, I became his partner." When Charles was older C. A. would take him rafting through rapids on the headwaters of the Mississippi and camping with a band of Chippewa.³⁸

Each excursion had a subtext: to stiffen the boy so that he would be able to care for himself when his father was not there to protect him. "YOU and I," C. A. told his son, "are able to take hard knocks. . . . We'll get along no matter what happens." There were times when they roughhoused when the boy could hardly catch his breath, but he kept quiet: "I was proud of not needing much help." Some criticized C. A. as too demanding, even austere, but Lindbergh internalized his father's outlook and remembered him as an intellectual, a warm, even witty man in whom he felt "the deepest kind of love."³⁹

The strained family situation and his father's frequent absences contributed to a painful shyness in the youngster. Evangeline, concerned that Charles made few friends, even paid some local boys to come over and play with him. But he pursued his solitary diversions, hammering together a flat-bottomed boat for excursions along the river, reading, collecting stamps, rocks, and coins, and wandering through the woods and along the water, filling his days making friends with nature. He could seclude himself in a small tree house for hours: "I loved to stand up on the high branches in a wind, while the tree swayed and the leaves fluttered." It was not that he had a "'zone of gloom' around [him]," Lindbergh later explained, but that he genuinely preferred solitude, spending hours on his back in the tall bushes, "hidden from passersby, watching white cumulus clouds drift overhead, staring into the sky." "How wonderful it would be," he dreamed, "if I had an airplane. . . . I could fly up to the clouds and explore their caves and canyons."⁴⁰

Though he spent only a few months a year on the farm, Lindbergh would always remember himself as a farm boy, dwelling among “secret, violet guarded dells,” where he learned to respect the “the value of water, trees and sky—and solitude.” Anyone who did not delight in these elements, he thought, “had not really lived.”⁴¹

One day a pilot flew into town in a biplane, offering air rides for a dollar a minute, but Evangeline was too scared to allow Charles to go up. He too had fears and uncertainties. They came out in the dark in nightmares filled with drowning bodies along the river, thieves and violent men hidden in the woods, and dangerous animals and deadly snakes.⁴²

Twice a year, on the way to Washington and back, mother and son would stop off to visit her family in Detroit for about two weeks. Charles would be excited to see his beloved grandpa Charles H. Land, the inventive, unorthodox dentist who met them at the train station, “face beaming, [with his] familiar white mustache and gold-rimmed spectacles,” and took them to the aging gray frame house at 64 West Elizabeth Street.⁴³

Grandfather Land’s house was like a quaint museum filled with artifacts collected by an eccentric curator. Natural curiosities shared space with the mounted head of a Rocky Mountain sheep. One box held a human skull, another a preserved tarantula and a horned toad; piles of old *National Geographic* magazines lined the walls, offering transporting profiles of faraway places. In a corner a curio cabinet exhibited polished stones, mounted butterflies, fossils, and even part of a mammoth’s tooth. Off in another corner stood toy soldiers, fire engines, and an entire arsenal for Charles’s war games. There was also the Stevens single-shot .22 caliber rifle that the boy fired at a range that Grandpa Land set up for him in the basement.⁴⁴

Charles was equally fascinated by the fully equipped laboratory where Dr. Land crafted his dental inventions. He remembered the absorption with which he watched his formidable grandfather, whose hands seemed capable of making and fixing anything. From this lab emerged new techniques in restorative dentistry, anesthesia, and silver amalgam technology. Strewn with dental refuse, porcelain pieces, and old teeth, the lab struck the boy as a wizard’s workshop. Dr. Land gave his grandson the run of the place, withholding only the most delicate instruments and dangerous chemicals. He indulged the endlessly curious child, answering his questions, teaching him how to cast metal and work with electricity, and instructing him in the biology of various birds, plants, and flowers.⁴⁵

Talk at the Land dinner table engaged the boy in discussions about science and theories that could be put to real tests in the downstairs laboratory. Nature’s mysteries seemed so much more meaningful than politics or sermons (another of his

least favorite things). Science was firm, factual, and empirical. “Your experiment either works or it doesn’t,” regardless of whether you are a true believer or not, a Republican or a Democrat. Recalling the conversations at the Land home, Lindbergh would later write, “Science is the key to all mystery. With this key man can become a god himself. Science is truth; science is knowledge; science is power.”⁴⁶

Land helped him understand the layered complexity of progress. Yes, moving pictures were a great innovation, but they also exposed youngsters to temptations that were unwise and even dangerous. Technical advances in automobile technology were breathtaking, but at the same time they raised immeasurably the destructive potential of a common accident, and Land predicted they would multiply greatly the loss of human life. Charles decided that he wanted to study biology and perhaps become a doctor.⁴⁷

His schooling, however, could best be described as episodic. At first he was home-schooled. Then in 1909 Evangeline enrolled Charles in the second grade. His single strongest memory of that year was “waiting, waiting, waiting for the school to close.” His subsequent education was a peripatetic affair, stitched together from irregular attendance at no fewer than twelve different schools. Not until college did he spend a full academic year in one school.⁴⁸

Usually Evangeline would bring him to Washington after classes had already begun and take him off to Detroit before finals were completed in the spring. She did not hesitate to remove him from class for mother-son trips, sometimes for as long as ten days at a time. Two and three times a year Charles would change schools, requiring round after uncomfortable round of painful adjustments to new teachers and classmates.⁴⁹

He made few friends among his classmates and usually avoided school games and activities, dismissing it all as boring. He preferred excavating empty lots and staring up at the sky or tinkering in his grandfather’s laboratory. A teacher recalled that “while not eccentric, he was what you might call ‘individual’ in the extreme.” Once, when the teacher called on the class to form a circle for a demonstration, Charles refused to hold anyone’s hand. He did not seem much concerned with the impression this left, and his classmates responded in kind, calling him “Limburger” or just “cheese.” Little wonder that he “thoroughly disliked school . . . [and] had little interest in [his] teachers.” He applied himself to his studies rather sparingly, consistently finishing the school year at or close to the bottom of the class. In his early autobiography, *We*, Lindbergh devoted fewer than two hundred words to the first eighteen years of his life.⁵⁰

The truth, as he himself admitted later, was that, like his father, he was a loner who “didn’t feel dependent on friends at all.” Isolation may also have been his way to protect the secret of his broken home, or maybe an even more sensitive

matter. Evangeline suffered from a family strain of mental instability. Describing her stepmother's behavior, one of C. A.'s daughters insisted, "Only insanity explains it."⁵¹

If Charles's formal schooling was weak, Evangeline nonetheless did her best to expose him to more of the world than was common for the average schoolboy. In addition to their regular Minneapolis-Washington-Detroit loop, she took him to Philadelphia, New York, Atlantic City, and, for an entire semester, to California. In January 1913, when he was not yet eleven, she took Charles for a three-week junket to Panama, traveling through forests and jungles, observing the wildlife firsthand, visiting old castles and dungeons, and watching as powerful mechanical shovels reduced imposing mountains to rubble to gouge out the Panama Canal. Charles remembered, "We walked over the concrete bottom of the still-empty Miraflores locks, stared at the rusting hulks of machines the French engineers had abandoned to the jungle . . . and hired a horse and buggy to take us to Pirate Morgan's Castle." The year before, he attended the Aeronautical Trials at Fort Myer, Virginia, where he saw an airplane race an automobile around an oval track.⁵²

Education-poor but experience-rich, he learned to drive C. A.'s Ford Tour-about (they named her "Maria"), which remained on the farm for much of the year. Evangeline would have eleven-year-old Charles drive her around town, and soon enough he did the same for C. A. during the campaign season.⁵³

In the fall of 1915 C. A., aiming for higher office, ran in the Senate primary. Now fourteen, Charles was pulled from his classes in Washington to drive his father around Minnesota. At these campaign stops he was exposed to his father's political views, which C. A. also spelled out in several books. In *The Economic Pinch* he wrote, "We must unshackle ourselves from the arbitrary domination of property privilege over human right." Firmly in the western progressive tradition, he lashed out at the "rigged" economic system and called for urgent reform. His son found driving along the rude paths and unfinished roadways by far the most interesting part of the campaign.⁵⁴

Though progressive in so many respects, C. A. held a number of regressive views as well. He believed that America's black population, albeit the "happiest of all races," was hopelessly inferior and destined to a subordinate role in social and political life. He thought that African Americans came from a climate that disposed them toward sluggishness and did not deserve the vote. As for Catholics, he worried that they might be conspiring to bring the United States under papal domination, and in a House speech demanded a "true and impartial investigation" of these claims. C. A.'s notions about race left a deep imprint on Charles's thinking.⁵⁵

Yet it was not race but war that dominated the 1915 campaign, with C. A. taking an impassioned stand against American involvement in World War I. As national policy tilted from strict neutrality toward preparedness and support for the Allies, he joined the isolationist bloc in Congress, accusing “Wall Street’s profiteers” of fanning war hysteria to make profit from the conflict. “At no time in the world’s history,” he thundered, “has deceit been so bold and aggressive as now in attempting to engulf all humanity in the maelstrom of hell.”⁵⁶

The speeches had little effect on Charles. “I was not old enough to understand the war’s basic issues,” he later wrote, “yet I felt a pride in the realization that my country was now powerful and influential enough to take a major part in world crises. We would fight for good and right, and for freedom of the seas.” His father’s indignant criticisms he later dismissed as courageous but ill-informed. Most voters agreed. In the four-way primary race early in 1916 Representative Lindbergh garnered the fewest votes of any candidate. The seat went to the well-known trust buster, preparedness advocate, and future secretary of state Frank B. Kellogg.⁵⁷

Few were surprised by C. A.’s defeat. He had by this time become an annoying scourge, out of step with his times. Even admirers conceded his irrelevance. On March 3, 1917, two days after joining a tiny minority to vote against arming U.S. merchant ships (the bill passed 403–14), he closed his congressional office and returned to Minnesota, to author another attack on the money trust and the war, *Banking and Currency and Why Is Your Country at War?* The tract proved so offensive to the U.S. Justice Department that, according to some accounts, federal agents had the publisher destroy every copy.⁵⁸

That year Evangeline and Charles did not return to Washington. Almost as soon as he registered for his junior year at Little Falls High School his mother decided that they should drive out to Redondo Beach, California. Charles did all the driving for the forty-day journey and did not begin class there until late October. Despite all the days he had already missed, Evangeline withdrew him from class for a tour of the West Coast stretching from San Diego to San Francisco.⁵⁹

Charles did not know that Evangeline made the trip to Redondo Beach to visit C. A.’s ailing twenty-nine-year-old daughter, Lillian. She had contracted tuberculosis and gone to the West Coast with her husband, Dr. Loren Roberts, in search of a cure. There was no cure, and Evangeline hoped to see her one last time. However, younger sister Eva, still bitter toward her stepmother, barred Evangeline from seeing the dying Lillian. C. A. wrote Eva that he would not interfere with her decision. He took the occasion to tell her how badly he felt about having left Charles, but he “would rather be dead one hundred times” than live with Evangeline, who “was a slave to her moods and her demons.” He closed the letter

by imploring his daughter to yield a little for Charles's sake, telling her how sorry he felt for the boy. But the bitterness ran too deep and she would not relent. Years later Eva admitted, "Charles was hurt terribly."⁶⁰

Once more mother and son picked up and left in the middle of the school year, returning to Little Falls to care for Evangeline's mother on the farm during the last months of her life. Isolated with her son and dying mother on a lonely farm, Evangeline became more and more fearful. She slept with a loaded Smith & Wesson revolver under her pillow and came to depend more than ever on Charles to protect her emotionally and physically. He helped her with the housework, drove her where she needed to go, and learned to deal with her moods. Lightning terrified her; at the sound of thunder he would scramble to her side to hold her hand. When on several occasions local hooligans sent bullets whizzing across the river for amusement, Charles drove them off with a combination of rifle shots and a round from a ten-gauge saluting canon. But for all of his devoted care the relationship never broke through its fixed boundaries of reserve. The closest thing to emotion between them was when Evangeline shook her only son's hand good night.⁶¹

C. A.'s political career was over, but he had no intention of going back to the farm. He tried to return to practicing law but spent more time writing cantankerous books about the money trust, publishing a progressive magazine, and fashioning quixotic plans for his political comeback. None of these efforts brought much success, and he no longer provided Evangeline and Charles with regular support. He did stock the farm with some heifers and sheep while he kept deeding small slices of the property to Charles, pushing the teenager to assume responsibility for providing for his mother and himself.⁶²

Charles did his best to make a go of the farm, adding some milk cows and purebred rams, tending the livestock, working the land, and maintaining the property. Martin Engstrom, who ran the town's hardware store taught young Lindbergh how to carry out many of the countless tasks that fall to a small farmer. Charles would steal away from the farm to spend hours at Engstrom's workshop, absorbed in learning about farm technology. Lindbergh ordered all the latest mechanical equipment, including a tractor, a gangplow, and the first milking machine in Morrison County. Engstrom remembered being impressed with the teenager's aptitude for machine mechanics.⁶³

Meanwhile Charles still had a year of school to complete, and the responsibilities kept piling up. As he began the fall semester of his senior year he had to prepare the farm for the winter, bring in the crops, fill the lofts with hay, and thicken the walls to insulate against the coming cold, all while he trekked two miles to and from classes each day. To pull in some extra cash he took on work as the local agent for the Empire Milking Machine Company.⁶⁴

With so many fathers off at war this problem of overburdened students was not lost on the school administration. Little Falls High School adopted a Food for Victory Program, promising each member of the senior class graduation credit for all their courses if they spent the year farming the land. Charles took up the offer, later recounting, "I was among the first to leave school." He did not return until he came to claim his diploma in June. Later, when journalists sought to fill in his background by interviewing his schoolmates, they were surprised to find that few actually knew him because he spent so little time in class. Even when he did attend he usually ran home right after the bell to work on the farm. He did not date or participate in the social scene. The son of a man who had become more notorious than famous, he was not interested in discussing his father. "I guess I knew him as well as anyone," Roy Larson of the class of 1918 told an interviewer, "but I didn't know him well. He always kept to himself." C. A. wrote Charles that he admired his ability "to buck the world alone": "I love that quality in you as a person."⁶⁵

Charles was working so hard that he did not even have time to help C. A. with another campaign. This one, for governor in 1918, turned ugly.⁶⁶

C. A. tended to get carried away on the stump, and failure and frustration loosened his tongue even more as he accused the president, leading citizens, and supporters of the war effort of various dark conspiracies. In return he was denounced as a traitor and pro-German. In the fevered war atmosphere this led to some nasty confrontations. Mobs broke up his speeches, pelting him with eggs. He was dragged from platforms, run out of several towns, and hanged in effigy.⁶⁷

Not entirely sympathetic, Charles wondered if his father didn't "spend too much time thinking about problems he [didn't] have to solve." What was the point of being so different, so at odds with the rest of the community? Later in life Lindbergh tried to capture his father's essence for a biographer, beginning with perfunctory praise, "He himself was, I think, a great man," and concluding that in certain ways C. A. reminded him of Henry Ford, the automobile mastermind whose "erraticism," Lindbergh wrote, "was, I think, fully as great as his genius."⁶⁸

Little about his father's career appealed to him. C. A.'s conspiratorial view of American society he found too sour and unpersuasive. He also dismissed his notions about the government's ability to achieve large goals and improve lives on a vast scale. He granted that his father "felt closely allied to the 'common man'—to the farmer, the wage-earner, the small businessman, and he was constantly endeavoring to advance their welfare," but he was hard-pressed to explain how C. A. actually made a practical difference in their lives.⁶⁹

Exactly how little his father's antiwar politics appealed to him became clear in his plan to join the armed forces as soon as he turned eighteen. If the war

continued he wanted to be trained as an army pilot. His father and mother both disapproved, but the signing of an armistice in November 1918 wrecked his plans and, his parents hoped, put an end to his notions of flying in dangerous airships.⁷⁰

He thought this was silly. If it was physical danger that they feared, the farm was not without its own hazards. A malfunctioning gangplow had come within inches of crushing him once, and on another occasion a collapsed ditch submerged him in sod up to his neck so that he had to claw his way out inch by inch. Then a horse team he was driving was felled right under him by lightning. An eventful life, he liked to think, was full of dangers.⁷¹

From the annealing experience of his youth Charles Lindbergh emerged with a sense of discipline and fearlessness, a risk-taking loner with a gift for mastering mechanical processes and complex details. From his mother he took a sense of wonder and inquisitiveness, and from his father a strong code of midwestern rectitude and exacting standards. His father had hardened him with a regimen that affirmed the boy's sense of isolation as a manly and soul-satisfying solitude. From his mother's parents he inherited a regard for the age's fresh ways of knowing, for scientific theory, empirical wisdom, and practical technology. He came to respect technological precision; it provided a shape and structure that his home life lacked.

He had put together enough of a high school education to earn a diploma and he had the farm. But the farm was not making money. The world market for produce collapsed with peace, depressing prices. The best a small farmer could do was scratch out a living. But this generation of farm boys was no longer satisfied to be scraping by. "After leaving it, I always missed the farm," he wrote later, but the sentiment sounded almost dutiful. Farm life had drained the joy from Evangeline's years in Little Falls, and the clotted, bucolic environment threatened to severely pinch his own future as well. The day of the small farmer was passing. In the fall of 1920 he leased the farm to tenants who worked the land.⁷²

If not farming, and not politics, and no army training, then what? C. A. invited Charles into his law practice, though exactly what there was to share in that dead office was a real question. In any event Charles was not interested. C. A., the erstwhile enemy of speculating wealth, then tried his hand at investing in Florida property, hoping, like William Jennings Bryan, another good populist with a yen for a quick buck in Florida real estate, to hit the jackpot in unearned increments. He invited Charles to join him. They could easily clear \$100,000, he promised. But C. A. was living out of his aging Buick, eating from tin cans, and sleeping in a folding tent under the open sky, all of which failed to convince Charles of the great possibilities.⁷³

His parents agreed on precious little, but on one thing they saw eye-to-eye: if Charles was not going to make the farm his future he must go to college. It is true

that on the evidence of his poor grades and uneven application to formal schoolwork it would be bold to call him a promising student. Nonetheless he was an excellent “learner,” with a methodical, retentive mind; higher education could open a fresh path for him. He agreed. He would pursue a degree in mechanical engineering.⁷⁴

From his days in Grandpa Land’s basement of wonders, Charles had been captivated by machines and instruments. Bicycles, cars, boats, motorcycles, and all kinds of mechanical devices, especially those that provided rapid transport, fascinated him. He took them apart and put them back together to learn how they worked. Driving the family car in those years meant keeping a complicated machine in good repair by yourself, and he also learned a lot from Mr. Engstrom’s workshops. In this heyday of the dabbler savant, of Edison, Ford, and the Wright brothers, Charles was entranced by the promise of machinery.⁷⁵

Technology was transforming the world around him (“You are living in an extraordinary time,” he recalled his father telling him), and its significance extended beyond the new inventions and labor-saving appliances. The new spirit of speculative thought and imaginative experimentation made far more of the world accessible, replacing an inscrutable cosmos filled with biblical miracles with one anchored in empirical knowledge.⁷⁶

Science and mathematics he barely understood, but the precision of gears and shafts and pistons working in unison to shape man’s new environment captured his imagination. Riding a motorcycle enthralled him, and not just for its speed in getting from here to there. He was beguiled by the “mechanical perfection” of his Excelsior motorcycle: “I liked the feel of its power, and its response to my control. Eventually it seemed like an extension of my own body, muscles and movements.” Intuitively he grasped that machines expanded life’s reach and the scope of what was possible.⁷⁷

He was particularly interested in aeronautical engineering. The idea of flight touched him in ways that no profession could: “I could work hard to understand magic in the contours of a wing.” The best place for such training was at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, where he had no hope of passing the entrance exams. So late in the summer of 1920, eighteen-year-old Lindbergh motorcycled off to the University of Wisconsin at Madison, where he was accepted into the engineering program.⁷⁸

He had grown into a lanky six-foot-two-and-a-half-inch young man, strikingly handsome, with blond hair, a dimpled chin, clear blue eyes, and a winning smile. He remained withdrawn—others would call him painfully shy—and very attached to his mother. Never a particularly motivated student, he expected that college would be different. However, his reason for choosing the University of Wisconsin

did not augur well for his new seriousness: “My primary reason for choosing the University of Wisconsin lay in the fact that it was located on the edge of a lake. I loved water, and didn’t like to think of spending four years away from it.”⁷⁹

Nor did it bode well for his independence that Evangeline beat him to Madison, taking a job in a junior high school there and renting an apartment a short distance from the campus for them to share.⁸⁰

Soon college education seemed a poor second choice to his dreams of designing charmed vehicles that carried men through the air. He could not summon the will to crack the books; he bristled at the idea of required courses. He had hoped that college would allow him to fashion his own education, but it was the same story as in high school: uninteresting courses foisted upon him by an unyielding curriculum. Of the eleven schools he had gone to before college he said, “There’s not one that I have enjoyed. Their memory chafes like a slipping rope against the flesh of childhood.” Now number twelve promised little improvement. Not the idea of college, not the serious level of his classmates, not the renown of the professors who taught him—none of this changed his notion that education must be practical and hold his interest. He wanted to “stop taking English and concentrate on engineering . . . maybe . . . take an aeronautical engineering course.” Only there was no such course at UMW.⁸¹

Classes became a chore, and he often failed to do his assigned work or relied on his mother to write his assigned papers. He was unaccustomed to sustained effort: “The long hours of study at college were very trying for me.” A short burst of thought would send his mind wandering, pining for the outdoors. He’d get up from his books and go off to swim or ride his motorcycle on the country roads. Lacking the poise for social intercourse, he kept mostly to himself: “I thoroughly disapproved of many phases of college life, and my motorcycle was a means of getting away from a life I did not like.”⁸²

His best college work, Lindbergh later recalled, “was on the rifle team.” He joined Wisconsin’s Reserve Officers Training Corps team in his freshman year and was assigned to field artillery: “[I spent] every minute I could steal from my studies in the shooting gallery and on the range.” The student who recoiled at the demands of the classroom took easily to ROTC’s disciplined regimentation. College courses that sought to introduce doubt or complexity did not appeal to him. ROTC, on the other hand, offered certainty, rules, and a prescribed regimen with a tested leader barking the orders. Charles thrived during the grueling six weeks of field artillery training at Camp Knox in Kentucky. It offered a break from life with his mother and an opportunity for male bonding and physical challenges.⁸³

For the first time someone held him to a schedule with no option to go off dreaming in the woods: “I learned to know the imperative note and thrill of the

bugle. We rose early, worked hard, slept soundly. The strictness of discipline amazed me, but I enjoyed it, and realized its value in military life.” And there was the fillip of danger when he and his companions took chances shooting twenty-five-cent pieces out of each other’s fingers at a range of fifty feet. His rifle team took first place in the national ROTC competition and he took home the prize as the best marksman on the team.⁸⁴

ROTC commendations and the fact that the severely straitlaced Lindbergh avoided cigarettes, booze, and chasing coeds were not enough to warrant continued matriculation, though. After three semesters, two of them on probation, his most noteworthy achievements remained on the rifle range.⁸⁵

To no one’s surprise, at the end of the third semester, in February 1922, Evangeline received a letter from the registrar informing her that “the record made by Carl [*sic*]” was “very discouraging,” with failing grades in a number of subjects. “It seems to me,” the registrar continued, “that Carl is quite immature, and that a boy of his temperament might do better in some less technical courses than engineering. In my conversation with him during the semester he seemed to agree with me on that point.” As a result of this “poor record, the Sophomore Adviser Committee decided . . . that Carl should be dropped from the University.”⁸⁶

Charles was less than devastated. His greatest regret was losing ROTC: “Ten years of school were like that—mining for knowledge, burying life—studying in grade school so I could pass examinations so I could get into high school—studying in high school so I could get into college—studying in college so—but there I broke the chain. Why should I continue studying to pass examinations to get into a life I didn’t want to lead—a life of factories, and drawing boards, and desks.”⁸⁷

All along it was something else he wanted: “to enter aviation and learn to fly. I had become fascinated by airplanes.” Later he rhapsodized about this epiphany: “Science, freedom, beauty, adventure: what more could you ask of life. Aviation combined all of the elements I loved.”⁸⁸

His father thought the occupation was too dangerous. Even Charles had to admit that the image of pilots was not the best. They were thought of as daredevils with nerves of steel, “wild with drink and women, and who placed no value on their lives.” But Charles was determined, and C. A. finally accepted his son’s choice, telling him, “You’re your own boss.”⁸⁹