MELVILLE’S DREAM OF FLYING TO WAKE ISLAND—A HOPELESS ambition, given all his handicaps—came alive again when he found the crashed aircraft buried in the dunes above the beach-house. Until then, during these first three months at the abandoned resort built among the sand-hills, his obsession with Wake Island had rested on little more than a collection of fraying photographs of this Pacific atoll, a few vague memories of its immense concrete runways, and an unfulfilled vision of himself at the controls of a light aircraft, flying steadily westwards across the open sea.

With the discovery of the crashed bomber in the dunes, everything had changed. Instead of spending his time wandering aimlessly along the beach, or gazing from the balcony at the endless sand-flats that stretched towards the sea at low tide, Melville now devoted all his time to digging the aircraft out of the dunes. He cancelled his evening games of chess with Dr. Laing, his only neighbour at the empty resort, went to bed before the television programmes began, and was up by five, dragging his spades and land-lines across the sand to the excavation site.

The activity suited Melville, distracting him from the sharp frontal migraines that had begun to affect him again. These returning memories of the prolonged ECT treatment unsettled him more than he had expected, with their unequivocal warning that in the margins of his mind the elements of a less pleasant world were waiting to reconstitute themselves. The dream of escaping to Wake Island was a compass bearing of sorts, but the discovery of the crashed
aerial. He had been aware of the bomber, or at least of a large engineered structure, for some time. Wandering among the dunes above the beach-house during the warm afternoons, he had been too preoccupied at first with the task of settling in at the abandoned resort, and above all with doing nothing. Despite the endless hours he had spent in the hospital gymnasium, during his long recuperation after the aviation accident, he found that the effort of walking through the deep sand soon exhausted him.

At this stage, too, he had other matters to think about. After arriving at the resort he had contacted Dr. Laing, as instructed by the after-care officers at the hospital, expecting the physician to follow him everywhere. But whether deliberately or not, Laing had not been particularly interested in Melville, this ex-pilot who had turned up here impulsively in his expensive car and was now prowling restlessly around the solarium as if hunting for a chromium rat. Laing worked at the Science Research Council laboratory five miles inland, and clearly valued the privacy of the prefabricated solarium he had erected on the sand-bar at the southern end of the resort. He greeted Melville without comment, handed him the keys to the beach-house, and left him to it.

This lack of interest was a relief to Melville, but at the same time threw him onto himself. He had arrived with two suitcases, one filled with newly purchased and unfamiliar clothes, the other holding the hospital X-ray plates of his head and the photographs of Wake Island. The X-ray plates he passed to Dr. Laing, who raised them to the light, scrutinising these negatives of Melville’s skull as if about to point out some design error in its construction. The photographs of Wake Island he returned without comment.

These illustrations of the Pacific atoll, with its vast concrete runways, he had collected over the previous months. During his convalescence at the hospital he had joined a wildlife conservation society, ostensibly in support of its campaign to save the Wake Island albatross from extinction—tens of thousands of the goony birds nested at the ends of the runways, and would rise in huge flocks into the flight-paths of airliners at takeoff. Melville’s real interest had been in the island itself, a World War II airbase and now refuel-
ling point for trans-Pacific passenger jets. The combination of scuffed sand and concrete, metal shacks rusting by the runways, the total psychological reduction of this man-made landscape, seized his mind in a powerful but ambiguous way. For all its arid, oceanic isolation, the Wake Island in Melville's mind soon became a zone of intense possibility. He daydreamed of flying there in a light aircraft, island-hopping across the Pacific. Once he touched down he knew that the migraine would go away forever. He had been discharged from the Air Force in confused circumstances, and during his convalescence after the accident the military psychiatrists had been only too glad to play their parts in what soon turned out to be an underrehearsed conspiracy of silence. When he told them that he had rented a house from a doctor in this abandoned resort, and intended to live there for a year on his back pay, they had been relieved to see him go, carrying away the X-ray plates of his head and the photographs of Wake Island.

"But why Wake Island?" Dr. Laing asked him on their third chess evening. He pointed to the illustrations that Melville had pinned to the mantelpiece, and the technical abstracts lavishlly documenting its geology, rainfall, seismology, flora, and fauna. "Why not Guam? Or Midway? Or the Hawaiian chain?"

"Midway would do, but it's a naval base now—I doubt if they'll give me landing clearance. Anyway, the atmosphere is wrong." Discussing the rival merits of various Pacific islands always animated Melville, feeding his potent re-mythologising of himself. "Guam is forty miles long, covered with mountains and dense jungle, New Guinea in miniature. The Hawaiian islands are an offshore suburb of the United States. Only Wake has real time."

"You were brought up in the Far East?"

"In Manila. My father ran a textile company there."

"So the Pacific area has a special appeal for you."

"To some extent. But Wake is a long way from the Philippines."

Laing never asked if Melville had actually been to Wake Island. Clearly Melville's vision of flying to this remote Pacific atoll was unlikely to take place outside his own head.

However, Melville then had the good luck to discover the aircraft buried in the dunes.

When the tide was in, covering the sand-flats, Melville was forced to walk among the dunes above his beach-house. Driven and shaped by the wind, the contours of the dunes varied from day to day, but one afternoon Melville noticed that a section below the ridge retained its rectilinear form, indicating that some man-made structure lay below the sand, possibly the detached room of a metal barn or boathouse.

Irritated by the familiar drone of a single-engined aircraft flying from the light airfield behind the resort, Melville clambered up to the ridge through the flowing sand and sat down on the horizontal ledge that ran among the clumps of wild grass. The aircraft, a privately owned Cessna, flew in from the sea directly towards him, banked steeply and circled overhead. Its pilot, a dentist and aviation enthusiast in her early thirties, had been curious about Melville for some time—the mushy drone of her flat six was forever dividing the sky over his head. Often, as he walked across the sand-flats four hundred yards from the shore, she would fly past him, wheels almost touching the streaming sand, throttling up her engine as if trying to din something into his head. She appeared to be testing various types of auxiliary fuel tank. Now and then he saw her driving her American sedan through the deserted streets of the resort towards the airfield. For some reason the noise of her light aircraft began to unsettle him, as if the furniture of his brain was being shifted around behind some dark curtain.

The Cessna circled above him like a dull, unwearying bird. Trying to look as though he was engaged in his study of beach ecology, Melville cleared away the sand between his feet. Without realising it, he had exposed a section of grey, riveted metal, the skin of an all-too-familiar aerodynamic structure. He stood up and worked away with both hands, soon revealing the unmistakable profile of an aerofoil curvature.

The Cessna had gone, taking the lady dentist back to the airstrip. Melville had forgotten about her as he pushed the
heavy sand away, steering it down the saddle between the
dunes. Although nearly exhausted, he continued to clear the
starboard wing-tip now emerging from the dune. He took
off his jacket and beat away the coarse white grains, at last
revealing the combat insignia, star and bars of a USAAF
roundel.

As he knew within a few minutes, he had discovered an in-
tact wartime B-17. Two days later, by a sustained effort, he
had dug away several tons of sand and exposed to view
almost the entire starboard wing, the tail and rear turret.
The bomber was virtually undamaged—Melville assumed
that the pilot had run out of fuel while crossing the Chan-
nel and tried to land on the sand-flats at low tide, overshot
the wet surface and ploughed straight through the dunes
above the beach. A write-off, the Fortress had been aban-
donated where it lay, soon to be covered by the shifting sand-
hills. The small resort had been built, flourished briefly, and
decayed without anyone’s realising that this relic of World
War II lay in the ridge a hundred yards behind the town.

Systematically, Melville organised himself in the task of
digging out, and then renovating, this antique bomber.
Working by himself, he estimated that it would take three
months to expose the aircraft, and a further two years to
strip it down and rebuild it from scratch. The precise details
of how he would straighten the warped propeller blades and
replace the Wright Cyclone engines remained hazy in his
mind, but already he visualised the shingle-reinforced earth-
and-sand ramp which he would construct with a rented bul-
dozer from the crest of the dunes down to the beach. When
the sea was out, after a long late-summer day, the sand along
the tide-line was smooth and hard.

Few people came to watch him. Tennant, the former ad-
vertising man leading the group digging out the Messers-
chmitt, came across the sand-flats and gazed philosophi-
cally at the emerging wings and fuselage of the Fortress.
Neither of the men spoke to each other—both, as Melville
knew, had something more important on their minds.

In the evening, when Melville was still working on the air-
craft, Dr. Laing walked along the beach from his solarium.
He climbed the shadow-filled dunes, watching Melville clear
away the sand from the chin-turret.

“What about the bomb-load?” he asked. “I’d hate to see
the whole town levelled.”

“It’s an officially abandoned wreck.” Melville pointed to
the stripped-down gun turret. “Everything has been re-
moved, including the machine-guns and bomb-sight. I think
you’re safe from me, Doctor.”

“A hundred years ago you’d have been digging a diplo-
-ocus out of a chalk cliff,” Laing remarked. The Cessna was
circling the sand-bar at the southern end of the resort, re-
turning after a navigation exercise. “If you’re keen to fly,
perhaps Helen Winthrop will take you on as a copilot. She
was asking me something about you the other day. She’s
planning to break the single-engine record to Cape Town.”

This item of news intrigued Melville. The next day, as he
worked at his excavation site, he listened for the sound of
the Cessna’s engine. The image of this determined woman
preparing for her solo flight across Africa, testing her air-
craft at this abandoned airfield beside the dunes, coincided
powerfully with his own dream of flying to Wake Island. He
knew full well now that the elderly Fortress he was labori-
ously digging from the sand-dunes would never leave its
 perch on the ridge, let alone take off from the beach. But
the woman’s aircraft offered a feasible alternative. Already
he mapped out a route in his mind, calculating the capac-
ity of her auxiliary tanks and the refuelling points in the
Azores and Newfoundland.

Afraid that she might leave without him, Melville decided
to approach her directly. He drove his car through the
deserted streets of the resort, turned onto the unmade road
that led to the airfield, and parked beside her American
sedan. The Cessna, its engine cowlings removed, stood at the
end of the runway.

She was working at an engineering bench in the hangar,
welding together the sections of a fuel tank. As Melville ap-
proached she switched off the blowtorch and removed her
mask, her intelligent face shielded by her hands.

“I see we’re involved in a race to get away first,” she called
out reassuringly to him when he paused in the entrance to
the hangar. "Dr. Laing told me that you'd know how to strengthen these fuel tanks."

For Melville, her nervous smile cloaked a complex sexual metaphor.

From the start Melville took it for granted that she would abandon her plan to fly to Cape Town, and instead embark on a round-the-world flight with himself as her copilot. He outlined his plans for their westward flight, calculating the reduced fuel load they would carry to compensate for his weight. He showed her his designs for the wing spars and braces that would support the auxiliary tanks.

"Melville, I'm flying to Cape Town," she told him weary. "It's taken me years to arrange this—there's no question of setting out anywhere else. You're obsessed with this absurd island."

"You'll understand when we get there," Melville assured her. "Don't worry about the aircraft. After Wake you'll be on your own. I'll strip off the tanks and cut all these braces away."

"You intend to stay on Wake Island?" Helen Winthrop seemed unsure of Melville's seriousness, as if listening to an overenthusiastic patient in her surgery chair outlining the elaborate dental treatment he had set his heart on.

"Stay there? Of course ... " Melville prowled along the mantelpiece of the beach-house, slapping the line of photographs. "Look at those runways, everything is there. A big airport like the Wake field is a zone of tremendous possibility—a place of beginnings, by the way, not ends."

Helen Winthrop made no comment on this, watching Melville quietly. She no longer slept in the hangar at the airstrip, and during her weekend visits moved into Melville's beach-house. Needing his help to increase the Cessna's range, and so reduce the number of refuelling stops with their built-in delays, she put up with his restlessness and childlike excitement, only concerned by his growing dependence on her. As he worked on the Cessna, she listened for hours to him describing the runways of the island. However, she was careful never to leave him alone with the ignition keys.

While she was away, working at her dental practice, Mel-ville returned to the dunes, continuing to dig out the crashed bomber. The port and starboard wings were now free of the sand, soon followed by the upper section of the fuselage. The weekends he devoted to preparing the Cessna for its long westward flight. For all his excitability, the state of controlled euphoria which his soon-to-be-realised dream of flying to Wake Island had brought about, his navigation plans and structural modification to the Cessna's airframe were carefully and professionally carried through.

Even the intense migraines that began to disturb Melville's sleep did little to dent his good humour. He assumed that these fragments of the past had been brought to the surface of his mind by the strain of his involvement with this overserious aviatrix, but later he knew that these elements of an unforgotten nightmare had been cued in by the aircraft emerging around him on all sides—Helen Winthrop's Cessna, the Fortress she was exposing to light, the blackened Messerschmitt which the advertising man was lifting from the seabed.

After a storm had disturbed the sand-flats, he stood on the balcony of the beach-house inhaling the carbonated air, trying to free himself from the uneasy dreams that had filled the night, a system of demented metaphors. In front of him the surface of the sand-flats was covered with dozens of pieces of rusting metal, aircraft parts shaken loose by the storm. As Helen Winthrop watched from the bedroom window, he stepped onto the beach and walked across the ruffled sand, counting the fragments of carburettor and exhaust manifold, trim-tab and tail-wheel, that lay around him as if left here by the receding tide of his dreams.

Already other memories were massing around him, fragments that he was certain belonged to another man's life, details from the case-history of an imaginary patient whose role he had been tricked into playing. As he worked on the Fortress high among the dunes, brushing the sand away from the cylinder vanes of the radial engines, he remembered other aircraft he had been involved with, vehicles without wings.

The bomber was completely exposed now. Knowing that
his work was almost over, Melville opened the ventral crew hatch behind the chin turret. Ever since he had first revealed the cockpit of the plane he had been tempted to climb through the broken starboard windshield and take his seat at the controls, but the experience of the Messerschmitt cautioned him. With Helen Winthrop, however, he would be safe.

Throwing down his spade, he clambered across the sand to the beach-house.

"Helen! Come up here!" He pointed with pride to the exposed aircraft on the ridge, poised on its belly as if at the end of a takeoff ramp. While Helen Winthrop tried to calm him, he steered her up the shifting slopes, hand over hand along the rope-line.

As they climbed through the crew hatch, he looked back for the last time across the sand-flats, littered with their rusting aircraft parts. Inside the fuselage they searched their way around the barbette of the roof turret, stepping through the debris of old R/T gear, life-jackets, and ammunition boxes. After all his efforts, the interior of the fuselage seemed to Melville like a magical arbour, the grottolike cavern within some archaic machine.

Sitting beside Helen in the cockpit, happy that she was with him as she would be on their flight across the Pacific, he took her through the controls, moving the throttles and trim wheels.

"Right, now. Mixture rich, carb heat cold, pitch full fine, flaps down for takeoff...

As she held his shoulders, trying to pull him away from the controls, Melville could hear the engines of the Fortress starting up within his head. As if watching a film, he remembered his years as a military test-pilot, and his single abortive mission as an astronaut. By some grotesque turn of fate, he had become the first astronaut to suffer a mental breakdown in space. His nightmare ramblings had disturbed millions of television viewers around the world, as if the terrifying image of a man going mad in space had triggered off some long-buried innate releasing mechanism.

Later that evening, Melville lay by the window in his bedroom, watching the calm sea that covered the sand-flats. He remembered Helen Winthrop leaving him in the cockpit, and running away along the beach to find Dr. Laing. Careful though he was, the physician was no more successful at dealing with Melville than the doctors at the institute of aviation medicine, who had tried to free him from his obsession that he had seen a fourth figure on board the three-man craft. This mysterious figure, either man or bird, he was convinced he had killed. Had he, also, committed the first murder in space? After his release he resolved to make his worldwide journey, externally to Wake Island, and internally across the planets of his mind.

As the summer ended and the time of their departure drew nearer, Melville was forced to renew his efforts at digging out the crashed Fortress. In the cooler weather the night winds moved the sand across the ridge, once again covering the fuselage of the aircraft.

Dr. Laing visited him more frequently. Worried by Melville's deteriorating condition, he watched him struggle with the tons of sliding sand.

"Melville, you're exhausting yourself." Laing took the spade from him and began to shovel away. Melville sat down on the wing. He was careful now never to enter the cockpit. Across the sand-flats Tennant and his team were leaving for the winter, the broken-backed Me 109 carried away on two trucks. Conserving his strength, he waited for the day when he and Helen Winthrop would leave this abandoned resort and take off into the western sky.

"All the radio aids are ready," he told her on the weekend before they were due to leave. "All you need to do now is file your flight plan."

Helen Winthrop watched him sympathetically as he stood by the mantelpiece. Unable to stand his nervous vomiting, she had moved back to the hangar. Despite, or perhaps because of, their brief sexual involvement, their relationship now was almost matter-of-factly neutral, but she tried to reassure him.

"How much luggage have you got? You've packed nothing."

"I'm taking nothing—only the photographs."

"My Dream of Flying to Wake Island"
"You won't need them once you get to Wake Island."
"Perhaps—they're more real for me now than the island could ever be."

When Helen Winthrop left without him, Melville was surprised, but not disappointed. He was working up on the dunes as the heavily laden Cessna, fitted with the wing tanks he had installed, took off from the airstrip. He knew immediately from the pitch of the engine that this was not a trial flight. Sitting on the roof turret of the Fortress, he watched her climb away across the sand-flats, make a steady right-hand turn towards the sea and set off downwind across the Channel.

Long before she was out of sight, Melville had forgotten her. He would make his own way to the Pacific. During the following weeks he spent much of his time sheltering under the aircraft, watching the wind blow the sand back across the fuselage. With the departure of Helen Winthrop and the advertising executive with his Messerschmitt he found that his dreams grew calmer, shutting away his memories of the spaceflights. At times he was certain that his entire memory of having trained as an astronaut was a fantasy, part of some complex delusional system, an extreme metaphor of his real ambition. This conviction brought about a marked improvement in his health and self-confidence.

Even when Dr. Laing climbed the dunes and told him that Helen Winthrop had died two weeks after crashing her Cessna at Nairobi airport, Melville had recovered sufficiently to feel several days of true grief. He drove to the airfield and wandered around the empty hangar. Traces of her overhurried departure, a suitcase of clothes and a spare set of rescue flares, lay among the empty oil-drums.

Returning to the dunes, he continued to dig the crashed bomber from the sand, careful not to expose too much of it to the air. Although often exhausted in the damp winter air, he felt increasingly calm, sustained by the huge bulk of the Fortress, whose cockpit he never entered, and by his dream of flying to Wake Island.