

# A TREACHERY OF RAVENS

LOOSELY BASED ON THE INCREDIBLE LIFE OF LÉO VALENTIN  
(1919-1956)

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## PART ONE

I heard once that some birds die mid-flight. Their tiny bodies get caught in a sudden up-draft of chilled air, and they freeze to death. I don't remember exactly who told me this, or even whether they were an expert on birds, but I remember it leaving me quite disturbed. I can't stop picturing it even now—their little wings faltering as their skeletons grow cold above the clouds. That's not the part that bothers me though, that upward drift; in fact, it seems almost peaceful, going up and up and up. It's imagining their uninhabited bodies falling back to earth that truly makes me shudder.

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There's no easy way to describe him, so I'll try my best to focus on the important bits.

I was in grade five when I first met Léon—he joined our class halfway through the year. The first time I saw him, he was crouched, balancing precariously atop the highest structure on the playground. A sizable audience had gathered to watch from the ground. His recklessness made me want to look away from his face, and toward his knees which were all scratched up from whatever he had run into that day. Something about this wild-child fascinated me.

After he left his perch on the structure and escaped the hoards of pre-pubescent admirers, he took a seat on a bench just a couple of meters away from where I was reading. I mustered up the courage to look him in the face, and when I did, noticed he was already holding my gaze. I set my attention firmly back on my book. But my god, even with averted eyes, I could tell he was aware of my secret fascination.

I remember that he was the type of boy to subject his wiry frame to all sorts of beatings to determine just how high, fast, or far he could carry himself. A scratch below his brow from a tree he had scaled, a particularly nasty bruise on his shoulder from a tumble off a rocky escarpment near the school.

By the end of spring term, we had developed a sort of friendship, and I learned to embrace a similar boyish energy. We made a good pair but I was keenly aware that he

would have been out having the same adventures whether or not I was there, so I tried to make myself useful. I eventually became his tether, pulling him back to earth when he ventured too far from home.

One summer's day, when the air was still light and the breeze brushed softly against our backs, before teenagehood had hardened our forms, I watched in horror as he swung from a tree branch into the shallow riverbed, seven feet below. We were so far from home that day we could barely hear the cars. Jolting up from the water with a mangled, broken arm by his side, he reassured me that everything would be ok. He wiped the back of his hand across his face like a napkin, smearing the tears and snot off his face, to reveal a shy smile.

"That was fun. I think I need to go to a doctor though," he chuckled through his snuffles. After that day, I could never entirely drop a worried feeling when I was around him.

As we grew, he turned into a burly, strapping young man, and I turned into myself. On the final day of our grade-nine year, we set up for an evening spent hanging out in a parking lot; the kind of leisure one can only find in youth. The clouds of tobacco smoke and car exhaust casually swirled around our little oasis; intensifying the already grayish-blue hues of dusk, hanging low in the sky. I sat, leaning against the trunk of a parked car, and watched as Léon traced circles on the tarmac with his new bicycle.

Through the pearly, hazy plumes of smoke, I could barely see the flash of a bird darting across the lot. It was the light, dull thud though, that drew my eye to it. If only the helpless thing could have seen the window.

As its body fell onto the concrete below the storefront, I watched in awe as Léon threw his bike to the side. He lurched toward the window as if his hands knew they wanted to catch the poor thing before even his brain did. He was too late. The bird's body hit the ground.

We stayed there for a while that day. Me, Léon, and the bird, all gathered on the pavement. He held the tiny sparrow cupped in his palms. Gently. His hands, unaware of his adolescence, had the might of two men, and yet, they trembled. He stroked the bird's

wings ever so slowly, as if his soul couldn't bear to cause any more damage to such an already fragile skeleton. Léon Valentin, a giant, contorted around this tiny fleck of colour.

## PART TWO

Sometimes, when a bird hits a window, it is temporarily stunned but survives without lasting injury. Other times, it suffers damage to its beak, skull, brain, or wings. Internal hemorrhage. Broken bones. Damaged organs. Brain trauma.

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When we enlisted in the air force, I begged him to join me as a pilot, but he assured me that he would never feel at home behind the nose of an aircraft. Pilot or not, however, Léon was going to fly.

“I want an open sky. And *only* an open sky,” he said.

When our river jumping, bike riding, tree climbing days were over, I flew planes for my country, and Léon jumped out of them.

Nobody could say no to him. He had this brutish charm that made even the brawniest of men compete for his affection. New recruits would go to outrageous lengths to impress him, but he wasn't easily won over by impressive stunts or ostentatious displays. More than once, airmen at the base told me they saw generals secretly asking him for advice. As he became the most beloved paratrooper at basecamp, I hung by his side, forever the quieter of the pair.

The months went on and on. Even at an airforce base, monotony eventually settles in. As my brain grew groggy, worn out by my quotidian duties, Léon's effervescence remained. For many men, enlistment is a means to an end. For Léon, it was a means.

On a not-so-particularly important morning, I received message that my regular shipment of supplies to a neighbouring base had been called off. Engine repairs most likely. I hated being grounded, especially on wet hot days where there's little respite from the heat. So, I busied myself the only way I knew how.

I wasn't yet two puffs into my cigarette before a cadet interrupted me. I kept my gaze focused on the burning ember between my fingertips, not bothering to glance up. Whoever it was, stood patiently in front of the bench, nervously waiting for an acknowledgment. I'm a reserved man by nature, but my association with Léon seemed to make everyone think I was as personable as he. The cadet coughed uneasily. A poor excuse for an introduction. I didn't acknowledge him. *Maybe if I pay him no mind, I thought, he'll get the message.* But I had no such luck on that sweltering day.

"Excuse me? Mister? Did you see The Raven today?"

"Hmm?"

"Léon Valentin? The Raven?"

"Ah. No, I haven't."

I considered continuing but didn't want to give any impressions, friendly or otherwise. Still, it didn't look like I was gonna ignore my way out of this conversation.

"Well, he told me you're the guy to go to if something goes wrong. Léon mentioned—"

"—Wait a damn minute. Léon's not even jumping today." I began to feel a panic rise inside of me, but instead of rushing off, took a hearty drag of my cigarette.

"Erm, no, mister, he has the day off. He just took a nasty fall over there by the hill, and he asked me to call for you."

"—Shit!" I flicked what was left of my cigarette.

The man, who I then realized was more of a boy, extinguished the still-burning ember with the toe of his military-issue boots and continued talking.

"He told me to tell you—"

"Don't worry, I'll figure it out. Where did you say he was again?"

"He's over by—"



“Ah yes, thank you...” The poor kid looked bewildered.

“Uh, good day!”

And it was a good day, if you could keep in the shade. The sky was this sort of deep, wistful blue you don’t usually see below the clouds.

I found Léon, or *The Raven* as the young cadets at the base kept calling him, at the bottom of the hill—as promised. Nothing critical seemed to be wrong, at least upon first inspection. It was obvious that something had happened, but it appeared that Léon had, as usual, sorted it out himself. He was reclined on the ground, sipping at his canteen, his tank top soaked with sweat and dirt—as usual. He was massaging his knee with his free hand as I sat next to him. The wingsuit sat in a pile at his side.

I offered him a smoke. Silently, we lit up and squinted at the other airmen, seeking refuge in the cool shadow of buildings and fanning themselves with towels. All futile actions in this breed of heat.

“Thanks, Ernie,” he nodded, letting out a thick cloud of smoke.

“You know I hate that nickname.”

“I know, I know. But I love it,” he winked. I rolled my eyes.

“How’s your flight testing going today? Not lookin’ like it’s going very well,” I teased.

“Prototype 37 is promising.” He wasn’t joking.

“Did you hurt anything? You look like you just fell out of a tree.”

“I look like I just fell out of a tree because I just jumped out of a tree!”

I took another long drag at my cigarette.

“And you’re chipper because?” I asked.

We both grinned. He was always chipper.

“Prototype 37 is why I’m telling you, and not the medic, that I just jumped out of a tree.”

He grimaced as he stood up, his legs creaking for a second under his weight. Then just like that, he was towering over me again. Even when I was fussing over him, he was charming; I dropped the snark.



“How far’d you go?” I asked.

“You tell me! Which of these ol’ oaks do you think I jumped out of?”

I could see a handful of young pilots watching us from the base, all out of earshot. He was something of a legend for his flight testing stunts.

I turned my attention to the trees. There were a few to choose from, spread out all over the hill. The ones closest to us weren’t nearly tall enough. If he wasn’t lying about the species, the only oaks were more than ten feet away. The hill sloped upwards gradually but not at a steep enough angle for him to rely on its height alone for airtime. He’d need a tall one. Climbable.

“Ah jeez, Ernest, you’re takin’ too long. It was that one.” I was always too pensive for his liking. He preferred to keep things moving. I followed his finger to the top of the hill, right next to the mess hall. The tree stood alone, its branches brushing against the sky.

“No way. Bullshit.”

“The only bullshit is that you’re grounded today and didn’t come and find me! Just a few more tweaks to the suit and you’re takin’ me sky high.”

I didn’t know then how long a *few more tweaks* would take. He kept jumping from higher and higher. No tree stood high enough for Léon. I kept up with my flying. Routine stuff. Lots of cargo flights. After a while, I began to feel more comfortable in the sky than I did on the ground. It was almost quiet up there if you could ignore the engine noise and radio squabble. Serene. The attention I garnered at the base as *Léon’s other half* smothered me. The sky was a refuge, though it didn’t feel like I was hiding. The aluminum that separated me from the heavens was no thicker than skin. If I focused just so, I could almost feel the wind on my face.

### PART THREE

I remember, my first week in training as a pilot, I hit a bird mid-flight and landed my craft with tears in my eyes. It was a raven. Jet black and beautiful. Intelligent. I knew it was a raven because I locked eyes with the creature a split second before it hit my hull. By the time I knew what it was, it was impossible to maneuver out of the way or change my course. I don't know a lot about those birds, but I do know there was no reason for it to have been flying so high.

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Léon finished an iteration of his suit he deemed satisfactory for a real test flight nearly three years after I stopped flying for the airforce. Though I disapproved of his pursuits, I will admit, the suit looked sleek. Fully black. The cloth wings draped off his back as if they were an extension of his limbs.

“It has to be you, Ernest.”

“I just don't understand why you can't ask somebody else! I don't fly anymore.”

“I won't do it with anyone else. It has to be you. First test. Sky-high. Has to be with you.”

“You can't expect me to say yes to this. Do you understand what the hell you're asking of me? I'll never forgive myself if you—” I couldn't even say it.

“I know what I'm asking of you.”

At least you could always count on him to be direct.

“How high are we talking?”

As much as I didn't want to admit it, I had missed this. Planning adventures with Léon like we were 13 again. His eyes, wild, almost frantic, with anticipation. If I trailed behind, he'd pull me along by my shirt collar. I hesitated and pushed back, but we both knew it was mostly for show.

The first test was a disaster. We started at a low altitude, “just to be safe.” He gave me the signal, I counted down, and then he jumped. And then he fell. Or glided. I don't



know which is a more accurate description. I only remember seeing him twist and spin and go straight down.

He beat me to the ground. There wasn't enough sky for him to orient himself in the tangle of fabric. The parachute had hardly opened by the time the earth hit his feet. The ground always came too soon for him.

His suit was destroyed beyond repair and he suffered three broken bones and a nasty, three-inch gash across his forehead. I thought at that point, we were in agreement: there was no need for a second attempt. This could go nowhere.

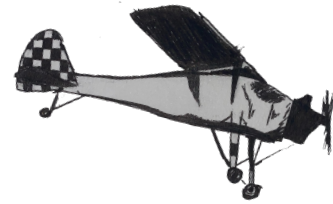
I looked at the crumpled bird at my feet.

Léon grunted. Clutching his arm and his ribs, he flashed me an exhilarated smile.

Then, the man who had just fallen out of the sky, let his head rest on the ground. Exhausted, he rolled onto his back and stayed there, breathing heavy, as he began detaching his torso from the suit.

He removed his goggles, and his eyes caught mine.

“This is promising,” he beamed.



## PART FOUR

I remember in school, we learned about a certain species of bird that jumps out of its nest, high in the trees, to learn how to fly. The little fledglings can only hope their feeble wings will figure it all out before they reach the unforgiving terrain below. Only the strongest survive. Or the luckiest, depending on how you look at it. I used to resent birds for this messiness—it all seemed like one big sick joke. At whose expense, I still do not know.

Strangely, I think it was this resentment that drew me to aviation. I wanted to fly my metal machines as high and as close to the heavens as possible as if to ask, *Don't you see me? Can't you see that there are other ways to soar?*

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I don't want to spoil things for you, but he did it. Léon Valentin was widely known as the first to achieve human flight using bird-like wings. People would later know him as *The Birdman*. A moniker I didn't like as much as *The Raven* from all those years ago. Even his given name, Léon Valentin, for a time was seared in the public psyche, although all these years later, I scarcely hear it spoken anymore. He had real records to his name too, not just acclaim. Longest freefall without a respirator—15 600 ft. Then later, 20 000 feet. Longest night free fall—14 550 feet. He loved to jump at night. Although he always referred to it as *flying*. His black suit made him almost imperceptible against the inky, expansive sky.

My apologies. I realize that I may have glossed over many of the details.

After our first jump failed, Léon realized the problem: “What separates flying from falling,” he declared, “Is forward movement and control.” Precisely the two things he was lacking.

So he scrapped the old cloth suit—and with it, years of prototyping—and moved on to rigid, wooden wings. This worked, it seemed: For the first time, he flew.

He glided nearly three miles on the day of our second test in the new suit. But what followed was one of his worst landings to date; two shattered ankles. He didn't say exactly what went wrong, but my theory is that he forgot he was human for a few minutes and didn't expect the cold jolt as his feet hit the ground.

“Ernest, you have no idea how good that felt. It was as if I caught gravity off guard!” Even with all the adrenaline, he groaned a bit as he spoke. I helped him into the car and took him to the hospital.

That day, for the first time, I beat him to the ground. After landing, as I looked to the sky and watched his descent, I could barely discern him from the autumn ravens circling overhead.

## PART FIVE

A flock of ravens is often called an *unkindness* or sometimes, a *treachery*; both unfortunate names for a group of such incredible creatures. Their roots in mythology are often associated with evil. But for those who have the pleasure of truly knowing the birds, this can't be further from the truth. In fact, research shows that ravens seem to exhibit signs of empathy. When a raven is hurt in a fight, the wounded bird is reassured and consoled by the other birds in the treachery. Ravens are believed to sustain lifelong friendships.

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I kept waiting for him to be satisfied. But no matter how much press he received or how many records he earned to his name, he continued working. Once when he needed more space to work, I let him convert my shed into a workshop. I would hear him late at night, feverishly tinkering away.

“This next design is promising. More aerodynamic. The pocket for the parachute is smaller and more compact, so it won't cause as much turbulence in the wind.”

That morning, I didn't want to hear it anymore.

“When will it be enough for you?” I asked.

“When will it be enough for me?”

“You heard me.”

His eyes softened. I didn't usually question his intent, just his process.

“That's a fair question, Ernest. I think....” he considered his response thoughtfully, “I think it'll be enough when I don't have to come down.”

## PART SIX

We were almost at altitude.

The sky was a beautiful velvet blue. I say this because I don't know any other way to begin recounting this day. A pilot, even a retired one, always notices the sky. Its conditions are the difference between life and death, so I'd be damned if I didn't take note of the airspace when Léon asked me to make another ascent with him.

It had been a few years. After he found general success with his new designs, he let me rest and took on a slew of young pilot admirers who would bring him to the heavens any day he pleased. No resistance.

It was to be his most remarkable jump to date. 100 000 people watched from below but from the sky, you could barely see them. You can't always guarantee the weather in Liverpool but that day in May the winds were light and warm. It felt like spring.

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"Alright, we're at 9000 ft. I'm ready when you are. You sure you want to go ahead with this?"

I was terrified, and he knew it, but his excitement always cut through my nerves. I saw his lips move, but over the roar of the engines and the scream of the wind rushing through the open door, I couldn't make out his answer. He grinned at me expectantly, awaiting my response. I didn't have one.

"...Ok, if you're ready Léon, I'm ready. When you're good to jump, just give me the signal!"

He gave me one last smile, turning to face the gaping hole in the aircraft. He gave the hull three methodic taps. He was ready to jump.

I always did the count down. We both knew that I needed reassurance more than he.

"FIVE," I yelled.

Deep breath in.

“FOUR”

And out.

“THREE”

In.

“TWO”

I don't like to watch this part.

“ONE”



But this time, I didn't look away. I kept looking right at him. He seemed to sense it and glanced back at the cockpit to lock eyes with me. He didn't say anything—just gave me a final slight nod.

Before I could avert my eyes, he was gone. Swallowed by the velvet blue.


The sky was too beautiful that day to ignore. The kind of beauty that washed over you. I kept my eyes forward and navigated my way away from Léon's expected route. The last thing I wanted was to cross his path. The quiet swept over me, and I could breathe for the first time that day.

I only really found out how it happened days later. Someone watching from the ground wrote a piece describing the event. His plan to glide for a few miles and then deploy his parachute was cut short immediately. The second he left my craft, I learned, his wing hit my landing gear, and he spun out of control.

The parachute didn't deploy. He fell. It was a long fall for those watching below but shorter than he had planned.

You know what happened next.

I imagine it now and then. When I do, late at night, it takes him forever to fall. I keep waiting for his parachute to open, but it won't unfurl. His body seems so small. Not the burly man he is on the ground, not the crinkly eyes that tell you what comes

The page is decorated with several black silhouettes of birds in flight, scattered across the white background. Some are positioned near the text, while others are further away, creating a sense of movement and depth.

next is *promising*. In my mind, as he falls, I don't see the compelling force who made me yearn to become a pilot, I see a fledgling with blind faith, jumping off a tree branch into the unknown.

These days, I don't find Léon crossing my mind as often as he once did. But on some spring days when the sky is that same, still, velvet blue, I like to sit outside to watch the ravens spiralling overhead. Perhaps my memory is twisting things but when I picture him there, folded in his wings, falling from my aircraft towards the earth, he looks so inconsequential against the expanse of the mid-May sky. If I really focus, I can just about make him small enough. If I focus more still, he gets so tiny that I can barely see him anymore. Reduced to just a speck of black, he becomes light enough for even a gentle gust of wind to pick him up and carry him. Up and up and up.