

The Flying Machine



a short story for English reading and speaking

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Introduction

What is a flying machine?

Would you like to build your own flying machine?

If you could, where would you fly to?

The Flying Machine

Jamie flinched as the screwdriver slipped and dug into his hand.

He cursed quietly to himself.

“I told you.”

He resisted the temptation to turn and look over his shoulder. It would just start another argument.

“You’ll never get that damn thing off the ground.”

Jamie threw the screwdriver into the toolbox, wiped the spot of blood from his hand on his jeans and stepped back.

His machine didn’t look so bad. He was getting there. Making progress.

He nodded at his own handiwork.

It had taken him the last six months to get this far. A couple of failed attempts and then he had to start from scratch again.

But that was fine. He could deal with it.

It was the only thing that kept him sane since leaving college. His one year on an engineering course. Forced to leave because he didn’t have the money to continue.

What he couldn't deal with was the look on his mother's face when he went back into the house.

"I keep telling you, but you don't listen," she said. "You will never get that damn thing off the ground. Might as well try to dig for oil."

Jamie stared ahead, willing himself not to look at her.

The first machine was a failure. No doubt about that.

It moved forward. That was no problem.

He just couldn't get the machine airborne.

No use building a flying machine unless it could fly. If it stays on the ground... it's a ground machine.

Nothing more, nothing less.

But the second one. Well, that was something else.

That did get off the ground. Twice, in fact.

The first flight was brief — *very short* — but he managed to stay in the air for a couple of seconds.

The second flight was longer — almost half a minute. But then it nosedived to the ground and the whole machine just smashed into pieces.

Jamie was lucky he didn't break his neck.

But even as he lay on the bed at night, his body aching from

being thrown to the ground, he had a great moment of pride.

He had succeeded. He had built a flying machine.

Now all he had to do was perfect it. Make it better, improve it and build a flying machine.

One that can fly without careering to the ground.

Jamie picked up the towel hanging off one of the side rails of his machine. He wiped his hands.

The sun was going down. Better to call it a day and make a fresh start tomorrow.

His mother called out from the doorway leading into the house.

“Giving up, huh?”

He didn't say a word. Walked in and went to the bathroom to wash up and get dinner ready.

In the kitchen, he prepared the food. Cutting the vegetables and preparing the chicken that he had bought that morning at the market.

Over dinner, he sat opposite his mother as they ate.

“So tell me, Jamie, when do you plan to start flying again?”

His mother had been drinking. Not as bad as some of the other nights. But to say she had been in her cups would be an understatement.

She lowered her head and sniggered into her hands.

"Just tell me what time lift-off happens," she said. "I have to see it."

Jamie smiled back at her.

"Might be tomorrow," he said.

His mother held her hands up.

"Oh, it speaks." She gave a quiet laugh. "Sure. Anything you say."

Later that evening, Jamie was hunched over the same table. All the dishes were cleaned and put away in the kitchen. And in their place, his plans for the flying machine.

He made calculations of how much work he needed to do.

If he could get through the day without any interruptions, then it looked like he could do a test flight the day after.

Things were looking good.

Jamie turned off the lights and went to bed. As he lay down, he dreamed of taking off in his flying machine. Taking off and flying away.

He awoke the next morning as the cockerel outside crowed.

He pulled the sheets away and got dressed. Opening the curtains, he saw the sun just rising. And down below his beautiful

machine.

Today he would finish it.

In the kitchen, Jamie made some coffee. He sipped from his cup as he stood on the back step of his house. In his mind, he went over the things he had to work on.

A great feeling of confidence washed over him. He knew he would finish this today. He felt certain of it.

Throughout the morning, he worked hard on his machine. His hands flew over the tools and it felt like no effort at all.

It was like he was coming to the end of it, and his mind and hands knew exactly what to do.

“You’re wasting your damn time.”

It was his mother. He half-turned his head to see her standing in the doorway, leaning against the wall.

“I keep telling you — you’ll never get that damn thing off the ground.”

Jamie couldn’t help but look at her.

"Actually, I will," he said. "Today is the day when I take the first flight with my new machine."

His mother let out a laugh.

“Don’t be so damn stupid. You could kill yourself. Like you

nearly did last time.”

Jamie shook his head.

“No. I will fly today. And you are welcome to come with me if you want.”

His mother shook her head and told him she had no intention of getting into his stupid machine. She disappeared back into the house.

Jamie worked through the rest of the day.

Finally, it was ready.

He couldn't wait to try it out.

He got into the seat and started the engine. It burst into life with a loud, spluttering sound. He pulled at the throttle and the engine revved loudly, filling the air with a thunderous rhythm.

His mother appeared in the doorway, a look of shock on her face.

“Jamie! What are you doing?”

He turned to her and smiled. Then he released the handbrake and pulled at the throttle. The machine moved forward.

Jamie steered it into the street and revved the engine again.

Then, with one last pull on the throttle, Jamie drove his flying machine at full speed down the road.

Reading Comprehension Questions

Who are the two people in the story?

What is Jamie doing in the story?

How does Jamie hurt his hand at the beginning?

How long has he been working on his flying machine in the story?

What was Jamie doing before making his flying machine?

Why did he leave university?

What happened to Jamie's first flying machine?

What happened to his second flying machine?

Did Jamie hurt himself in the second flying machine?

What did Jamie do when he went back into the house?

His mother might have a problem. What is it?

In the story, when does Jamie plan to try out his flying machine?

Where does Jamie look at all his plans for his machine?

What does he think about in his bedroom?

What sound wakes him up in the morning?

What does he drink in the kitchen?

Is Jamie confident he can fly in his machine? How do you know?

Does he invite his mother to get into the machine with him?

How does she reply?

What does Jamie do at the very end of the story?

Essential Vocabulary

flinched	engineering	wasting
screwdriver	failure	intention
cursed	aching	stupid
temptation	pride	disappeared
argument	perfect	engine
machine	lift-off	spluttering
progress	interruptions	throttle
handiwork	cockerel	revved
attempts	confidence	handbrake
street		

Exercise

There may be a lot of new or unfamiliar vocabulary to you in the story. This is the perfect time to get to know these new and strange words and phrases.

Write down all the new words and phrases in your vocabulary notebook. Look up the meaning of the new vocabulary in a dictionary or online and write down the meaning next to the word or phrase.

It should look something like this:

Flinched – *Past tense of flinch. To make a sudden, small movement, usually because of fear, pain, surprise, or discomfort.*

Engineering – *The application of scientific and mathematical principles to design, develop, and maintain structures, machines, systems, and processes.*

Then write a sentence of your own that uses the new word or phrase correctly.

When the loud noise startled her, she flinched and covered her ears.

He studied engineering at university and now designs bridges and buildings.

If you do this correctly, it will help you learn many new words and phrases. This will build your English vocabulary and writing down all the words and phrases, and making sentences of your own, will all help you to remember all of this new vocabulary.

Discussion Questions

What did you think of this story?

Is it a story of hope? Or failure?

What kind of person is Jamie? Describe him in your own words.

What kind of person is his mother?

What happened when Jamie went to university?

Why did he leave?

How do you think he felt about it?

What do you think of Jamie's home life?

Why is he building a flying machine?

What does he want to do with it?

Why does his mother drink so much?

Is she happy, do you think?

Would you like to build a flying machine?

Would you like to just fly away somewhere?

Where would you go?

Role Play

This is a role play activity.

There are two people in the role play.

Jamie

His Mother

The Situation

In the role play, Jamie is talking to his mother about her drinking.

He said that it has come to a point where he cannot deal with it anymore.

It is making his life unbearable — plus; it is not good for his mother at all.

Jamie sits down at the kitchen table and talks to his mother. He tells her he is leaving. He is going to another town and he will restart his life there.

He refuses to tell her where he is going.

At first, his mother mocks him. She reminds him how he failed at university and he will fail at everything he does.

But then, when she realises he is serious, she begs him not to leave.

What does Jamie do?

Does he leave?

Or does he agree to stay with his mother?

How does this story end?

Get into pairs and choose which characters you will be.

Take some time to prepare your role play.

When you are ready, show the class.

The Use of Metaphors in English

It could be said that the flying machine in the short story above is a metaphor for Jamie's life.

Jamie is unhappy with his life and he wants to change it. His mother drinks too much and offers him no support. He was only able to complete one year of his engineering course at university.

The flying machine acts as a metaphor that describes Jamie's life and how he wants to escape.

What is a Metaphor?

A metaphor is a figure of speech that compares two unrelated things, but the two things share the same quality or characteristics.

So, for example, you might hear someone describe their wife by saying.

She's a rock.

Of course, he doesn't mean that his wife is a rock. But she shares the same qualities — ***strong, steady, supportive.***

Metaphors in Fiction

Writers often use metaphors in their stories.

Metaphors make the writing more interesting and creative.

Now You Try!

Take a look at the common metaphors below.

Get into small groups of three or four students and try to explain what you think they mean.

When you are ready, stand in front of the class and make a presentation.

Common Metaphors

1. She is good as gold
2. My love for you burns like a volcano
3. I am over the moon
4. Life is a highway
5. Baby, you are a firecracker!
6. Life ain't no picnic
7. Math and science are branches of the same tree
8. The boy was king of the English test at school
9. I feel like a lion!

Writing

This is a writing activity.

You are going to write a letter.

Imagine you are Jamie in the story above.

You have finished your flying machine and you want to get in it and leave.

You write a letter to your mother explaining clearly why you are leaving and what your plans are for your life.

Take your time and write your letter.

When you are ready, you can read your letter out in the class.

Credits

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