

FROM

## *The Atomic Weight of Love*

BY ELIZABETH J. CHURCH



**F**light requires defiance of gravity and is really, when you think about it, a bold act.”

The professor at the front of the lecture hall paused for dramatic effect, but as far as I could see, I was the only fully engrossed member of the audience. I wasn’t enrolled in the class but had instead taken a seat at another professor’s suggestion. I was enraptured not only because I felt I was looking at a wild man — someone whose long, tussled hair intimated that he had rushed in from a hike along some windblown cliff to lecture to a bunch of physics students — but more so because I knew he could explain mysteries to me, decipher Newton and the others and render them comprehensible on a practical level. My expectations were high, and Alden Whetstone met them.

“We think about vertebrate flight as falling into four categories: parachuting, gliding, actual flight, and soaring. If a bird can soar, generally speaking, it can also perform the three lower forms of flight.” Alden paced the stage. “Don’t confuse gliding and soaring. To soar, an animal must have evolved to possess specific physiological and morphological adaptations, and soaring birds must know how to use the energy of thermals to maintain altitude.”

Oh, Lord, he was speaking my language — a physicist employing Darwin. Professor Matthews had been right to send me here. The smell of wet wool brought about by January snow permeated the room.

“We’ll see, over the course of this and the next several lectures, that the soaring form of flight has been achieved by only a few animals over the entire

course of evolution. We'll examine concepts of drag, thrust, vortices created by the flapping of wings, and the evolution of the flight stroke, without which there is no flight."

Baggy corduroy pants. A broad red, blue, and white tie of abstract design, loosely tied as if in grudging compliance with a dress code. Frayed cuffs beneath his suit coat sleeves. And an audacious mustache that was bushier than most men's entire heads of hair. He was the quintessential absentminded professor, which thoroughly intrigued me. This was not *Jer!* on the make; the professor's attire was not calculated to attract, to stand out. This was a wholly intellectual creature barely cognizant of the physical world and its requirements. I felt myself longing to soar along with him in the realm of pure ideas, of complete and total academic isolation. *I bet he's never worn a polka-dot tie*, I thought with smug satisfaction.

There was a loud knocking noise. It persisted. The class grew restless, and the noise was sufficiently distracting that none of us was any longer listening to the lecture. Alden continued longer than anyone might believe possible given the noisy competition, but finally he returned to earth.

"What's going on?" He faced his students. "No one knows?"

Feet shuffled, but no one responded.

"It's coming from upstairs. What are they doing? Moving furniture or something?" Alden left the stage and went out into the hallway, apparently to confront the person or persons who were interrupting his flow of thoughts. Now, there was outright laughter among the other students, all of whom were male. I looked about, trying to understand the joke.

One of the boys caught my eye. "You don't get it, do you?" he asked me.

"What is there to get?"

"This is the top floor. Whetstone is headed God knows where."

I was immediately embarrassed for the man who'd been speaking so eloquently. I, too, had believed that someone was dragging furniture across an attic floor overhead.

The classroom door opened, and Alden was back. Although the volume subsided, the laughter remained.

"So, no one wanted to tell me that there is no upper floor?" He stood facing us, his hands on his hips. "Top secret?"

Nothing but nervous silence greeted him. I wondered how long he'd been teaching in this particular room.

"Doesn't matter," he said, running a hand through his unruly hair. And then, without missing a beat, he returned to his lecture.

I liked that he was unembarrassed. It bespoke a level of confidence and maturity that I longed to stand beside.

It was known that Alden Whetstone had a reduced teaching load that year because he was working with other scientists on some hush-hush war project. How different Alden was from college boys. How I envied his ability to ignore social convention — or to be so entirely unaware of it so as to have no need to ignore it. Although he was twenty years my senior, he was still young, fired by the practical applications of his hard-earned knowledge and the associations he was forming through his war work with other world-class scientists.

I approached him after that first lecture and accepted an invitation back to his office. After nearly an hour, we left his office to continue talking over coffee. We spoke about what we believed in, what was happening in the world, and what the world might become. It was as though we'd both been starving for that kind of easy conversation and comradeship. When I was with Alden — discussing, listening, leaning across tables, fully animated — life was painted in more vibrant colors; birdsong was more elaborate, rococo.

If I'd played Mrs. Hudson's recommended fawning dumb-girl's role, Alden wouldn't have paid me a moment's notice. I never once thought about feigning stupidity in Alden's presence. Rather, I felt called upon to stretch my mind, to show him I could run alongside him.

Still, I kept dating Jerry. Alden was so high above me. He was such pure intensity and demanding, hard work — work I was not afraid of, but work nevertheless. Jerry was someone with whom I could let off steam, laugh, and maybe even be silly.

IN THE SPRING OF 1942, newsreels that played prior to the start of films at theaters showed us the bravery of our fighting men and touted U.S. victories. *It won't be long now*, we all thought as we sat in the dark, watching and

hopeful, and Jerry squeezed my hand. Mother sent me clippings from the Greensburg paper and filled in details gleaned from her friends at church: Doc, Eddie, Mickey, Dean, Lester, Gabby, Rusty, and Tom — all of them dead or wounded. Mother told me Lisa Jackson, a friend from Girl Scouts, had married Buck Pemberton, who had joined the navy and was about to ship out. *I signed your name to the card, Mother said, and I embroidered a nice pair of pillowcases for them.*

Corregidor fell to the Japanese on May 6, 1942, just as we were finishing final exams. Jerry was horrified by the number of ships sunk by the Japanese, but even more so by the number of ships our navy scuttled or destroyed over the course of just two days, all to keep them out of the hands of the enemy. Corregidor floated just south of Bataan, and we knew that the United States had surrendered Bataan about a month earlier.

I could understand numbers — so many dead or captured. I could look at maps, gauge distances, try to contemplate vast oceans or ships' holds packed with sleepless, sweaty, frightened boys on their way to face death. I could talk with Jerry and other students about the war — the fiery, insane world at war — but I could not *know*. I could never know what it felt like to face mortality.

ALDEN AND I DIDN'T really date. I think we fooled ourselves into thinking we were just spending time together. I didn't tell him about Jerry, and while Alden once referred to an ex-wife, I didn't know if he had a current romantic interest in his life. Nothing so mundane entered our orbit.

I was in awe of Alden. I could only sense the very fringes of concepts that his intellect grasped with such easy, ready fingers. I worshipped his knowledge, his aloof independence and greater world experience. He was my teacher; he led me, and I followed, gladly.

We often walked together between or after classes, when Alden wasn't committed to secret work in his laboratory. I remember an ozone-scented April afternoon when he pulled my hand from my raincoat pocket and held it in his hot, enveloping hands. Abruptly, suddenly aware of his own gesture, he paused in his description of atomic half-life, radioactive decay. We stood

on the rain-darkened campus sidewalk, looked at each other, and I used my free hand to tuck a curl of his hair behind his ear. I felt so calm with Alden. Jerry always felt precarious, but Alden gave me sure footing. *He's solid*, I thought as, wordlessly, we began walking once more.

My thoughts surprised me. Unconscious, unbidden, I was falling in love.

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