



Tobias Elsäßer

Linus Lindbergh and the Rift in Time

(c) S. Fischer Verlag, Frankfurt, 2013. First published by Bibliographisches Institut, Sauerländer 2012.

Sample Translation: Ruth Urbom

CHAPTER ONE

Dogs in Space

Linus rubbed the sleep from his eyes. He kicked off the duvet and sat up. "Have you found the fault?" he asked expectantly. Linus' grandfather, Anton M. Lindbergh, was standing in front of him. As usual, he was wearing a grease-stained boiler suit and a cap with solar cells on it, with his hair sticking out from underneath like rusty steel wool.

"It was the power converter – overloaded," said Anton enthusiastically, brandishing a pair of flat-nose pliers. "Now the root engine is purring like a kitten

again." He tucked the pliers into his top pocket and twiddled impatiently at his beard. "No wind. No rain. Ideal conditions for a second attempt."

"Is Mum still in the lab?"

"Fast asleep. Did you by any chance hear whether the mail plane has gone? Just so it doesn't get in our way again."

Linus glanced in surprise at the flat screen on the ceiling. He couldn't remember switching off the computer. Had he really reached the next level, or did he just dream it?

"Am I gonna get an answer?" asked Anton.

"Erm... the mail plane... it must be running late again." Linus slipped his wristwatch on. It was just past midnight. He pressed a button next to his bedside lamp. The ceiling light changed from blue to orange and as if by magic, the wallpaper vanished and the curved outer wall became as transparent as glass. They could now look out onto a side view of Runway 7L. A plane was just taking off into the night sky: a Boeing 737. The mail plane was the last one permitted to take off from Kesselheim Airport. It hadn't even disappeared into the twinkling sea of stars when the lights in the terminal buildings were switched off. The tower went dark as well. Only Linus' room was gradually getting lighter with every passing second. As if the sun was rising. But no one could see it from outside.

"Ready to go," said Linus, clutching his blue helmet under his arm. He was all set, having slept in his clothes. The only things missing were his shoes. To avoid making any noise, he sidestepped the automatic dressing machine and did up the laces himself. As he realised he was about to take off, a shiver ran down his spine. He felt like a pilot before a secret mission. If he could have things his way, he'd much rather swap dreary school lessons for life as an inventor.

A few minutes later, his drowsiness was gone. Now Linus was wide awake. He tiptoed behind Anton to the lift. Every sound made him jump. If his mother, Anna D. Lindbergh, woke up, there would be an almighty row. After the last crash-landing in a potato field, she absolutely forbade Linus to get into her father-in-law's plane ever again.

"Too dangerous," she said every time Linus asked permission. "Far too dangerous." That's why their night-time flights were a secrete Linus shared only with Anton and his dog, Captain Insight. The shaggy mutt with the eye patch must have

suspected there was another test flight on the agenda tonight. He was curled up in front of the lift doors, snoring. As Linus prodded him with his foot, he reluctantly got up, wagged his tail and started to whine.

"Shhh," Linus hushed, holding a finger to his lips. "Next time."

"He can come along," said Anton in a low voice. "I'm not bothered."

"Really?" Linus' face lit up.

"Sure. He ought to have a chance to enjoy the feeling of flight, the old dog. Otherwise he'll just spend all day lazing around."

All three of them got into the lift and zoomed down nine storeys. Captain Insight pressed right up against Anton's trouser leg. He was trembling. Anton let out a deep sigh. "I hope the Captain is fit to fly again. Don't want to have to abandon things again."

"He's just tired," said Linus.

"Well, let's hope so."

A clear bell tone. The lift braked smoothly to a stop. A whoosh. The doors glided open.

"Come on," said Linus, giving Captain Insight a pat. The dog gave a big yawn, which made Anton and Linus yawn as well. With wide-open mouths they stepped out into the dimly lit corridor. They were met by a surge of warm air. The walkways echoed with the humming and clicking of hundreds of fluorescent lights that flickered on one after another, like in a chain reaction. Down here it smelled like springtime all year round. Like flowers, grass, blossoming meadows and a hint of sea air. That was thanks to *Clean 2.1*, one of Linus' mum's inventions.

The sound of their footsteps echoed off the smooth concrete walls. Even the tappity-tap of the dog's paws could be heard clearly. Linus had put special bright yellow trainers on Captain Insight to make it easier for him to walk on cold surfaces. Ever since he had fallen through the ice while ice-skating, the dog had been allergic to the cold. That's why Linus invented a heated blanket for him. Unfortunately, it went up in flames outside the house during the very first test (luckily without the dog). The idea for the heated trainers originated with his mother. It wasn't fair, the way she could come up with inventions so easily.

Anton came to a stop in front of a flashing red line and clapped his hands. An

unmanned electric car came humming out of the semi-darkness. The line on the floor changed to orange. The car pulled up: green. They continued. Coloured beams of light swept over their heads, then crept across the floor in a triangle formation until they came to a stop over the pink Cadillac. The cut-down cruiser was missing not only its roof and doors, but also its wheels. The chassis hovered a few inches off the ground and lit up as soon as anyone touched it.

“Everybody in!” shouted Anton as he put Captain Insight onto the back seat. The safety harnesses had barely tightened round them before they were racing through the underground passageways at lightning speed. Left. Right. Right. Left. Up. Down. Straight ahead. An unpredictable zigzag route through the multi-storey labyrinth that only people who could decipher the encoded traffic signs on the walls could follow. And had six-mirrored wide-angle goggles on. No satnav would work that far under the Earth’s surface, and it would take hours on foot because of the numerous sloping sections. The car leaned to the side like a motorbike whenever it went round a curve.

Captain Insight looked happy. Even he no longer seemed tired. He stuck out his nose and wiggled his nostrils, as if he had sniffed out an interesting scent. Linus sat at the steering wheel. The ceiling lights were reflected in his mirrored goggles as they flickered past. He thought about his father, Peter L. Lindbergh. Just as he did every time he was down here. Linus missed him. There was nothing he wished for more than for his father to return to them someday. Over three years had passed since his disappearance. Three years in which his mother had followed up every tiny clue – with no success.

They entered via a white steel door. Behind it stretched his father’s former domain. Laboratories, workshops, storage areas with inventions, computer game prototypes and thick-walled safes that held plans for countless ideas. Since Peter Lindbergh’s disappearance, Linus was no longer allowed to enter the airlock to W 1-12. His mother had even changed the access code. That made him so furious! After all, he used to spend almost every day down here.

Anton gave him a pat on the head. “Stay in your lane. Always keep looking straight ahead, lad.”

Linus adjusted the steering wheel. The corridor got narrower and curved gradually towards the left. After about a hundred metres they reached a large gate with a traffic light. The light was red. Linus brought the car to a stop and took off his

goggles. A network of beams scanned his eyes. The traffic light leapt to green. Double doors as tall as a house swung inwards, accompanied by a low rumble. Linus drove at a snail's pace into the circular space. Captain Insight drew in his tail between his hind legs and started growling. A dull thud made him jump. The doors had closed again.

"What a scaredy-cat, that Captain," said Anton. "I was hoping he'd managed to pull himself together again. That was just a minor matter last time." He got out of the car, shaking his head. There it stood, gleaming on a platform under a spotlight: the Varius-Hummingbird 4010. Anton's pride and joy. The plane looked like a flat, sharp-nosed helicopter with dragonfly wings. There were only a few places where you could tell that Anton had cobbled the Varius together from yoghurt pots, old plastic chairs and other rubbish. The cockpit was made of thin plastic with a bluish sheen. Anton had installed two bucket seats in front and a narrow seat in back. There were moving rotor blades on the outer edge of the wings, along with several jets with rocket-shaped tips. It didn't take much imagination to realise that Anton had drawn on nature for his design: not only did the two ball-shaped cameras to the left and right of the cockpit resemble an insect's eyes, they also provided a 360-degree panoramic view.

Linus climbed into the co-pilot's seat. Captain Insight was still feeling a bit uneasy about the whole thing. His upright left ear flopped down and turned to the left. Translated into human language, that means: "No! Not this flying contraption again!"

Only once Anton had put a helmet and parachute on him was the dog prepared to climb into the back seat. Linus could start the engine. It took two tries, and then the rotors stood up straight and began to turn, making a steady purring sound. It really did sound like a happy cat. Then there was a slight judder, and the platform rose up.

"How come you changed the name?" asked Linus.

"Because of the converter," said Anton cheerfully. "It's nearly as energy-efficient as a hummingbird now."

Linus grinned. "A hummingbird. Not a dragonfly anymore. I see." He tilted his head back. The lights went out below them. Above them the dome opened up, revealing the clear, starry night sky. If only the other pupils from his class could see

this!

"Two grams of nectar for 800 kilometres," Anton continued. "That's a world record. But what's the inventor's motto?"

"Everything is possible!" shouted Linus, and then he laughed.

"Precisely. Everything is possible!"

The Varius positioned itself vertically, like a rocket. Captain Insight was now yapping with excitement, not out of fear. The high pitch of his yelps indicated his mood. Even when some little thing went wrong, flying was enormous fun for him. In fact, he often envied flying foxes – his fellow members of the animal kingdom – for their wings.

"We'll do without the countdown today," said Anton as he pulled back on the joystick and roared: "Clear the runway for the Lindberghs!"

Nothing happened. Anton shrugged. He pulled back further on the joystick. The Varius shuddered. A loud hiss. First steam shot out of the tail section, then fire. The entire cockpit shook, and then they zoomed up towards the stars. Amazingly fast. Linus was pressed into his seat with a force several times greater than his own body weight. He had a sense of being gripped by invisible forces. He held his breath in terror. They'd never flown this fast before. He was quite sure of that.

"Keep breathing normally," Anton ordered in a strained voice. His face looked funny and stretched out. His cheeks were making little waves that spread all the way up to his eyes. He was obviously having to make an effort to reach the monitor. "Bit of oxygen. We're nearly there. Let's see if this app thingy of your mother's is up to anything."

A brief jolt – the Varius slowed right down and rotated into a horizontal position. Linus felt all the weight ebb away from his body. Fascinated, he observed his left arm as it hung weightlessly in the air. "Amazing," he said and then looked out. The stars were twinkling all around them. Right in front of them: the moon! Close enough to touch. Linus' entire face was beaming. "Are we..."

"In orbit!" Anton proudly finished the sentence for him and switched over to jet propulsion. "Over there, the Plough. There's the Milky Way. And out there..." Anton left a dramatic pause and pointed out in front, "is *infinity*." He looked back at the monitor. The blink of an eye. His expression darkened. "Could I possibly have..." He bit his lower lip and wrinkled his nose. A bad sign.

"... forgotten something?" Linus asked tentatively.

"Well... erm... perhaps... erm," Anton stammered. "It could be that I got the mixture ratio muddled up. One part to two. Three parts to one. I might possibly have not put enough river algae in the tank."

"River algae?"

"They're brilliant at storing energy and don't produce any muck." He twiddled at his beard and wrinkled his forehead. "Got to... got to prepare it with cow dung."

"*Cow dung?*" Linus wasn't sure he'd heard right.

"Recycling is key."

"But the mixture is wrong?"

"I suspect so." Anton tapped on the monitor. The display flickered. "This wouldn't have happened with my old program."

Linus made a face. "Will we... will we be able to get back?"

"Well. We'll need to... to improvise a tiny bit. No need to panic." Anton swiped his hand across the monitor. The fuel reserve gauge was in the red zone. "All right." He switched to manual control. A warning message lit up. He pressed the switch on top. The screen went dark.

Linus could hardly believe his eyes. "Are you really planning to –"

"Hold on tight!" Anton interrupted. "Re-entry into the Earth's atmosphere can be a little bumpy. On the count of three, I'm going to start the thrust rocket. There'll be enough for that anyway. I can just feel it."

The Varius pointed itself vertically towards the Earth. A plume of flames came sputtering out of the tail, and the craft headed downwards. Faster and bumpier than any roller coaster. The joystick slipped out of Anton's grasp. The craft twisted and turned and looped the loop, until it was impossible to tell which way was up. Captain Insight looked like he might be sick at any moment. A protective covering made of superfine bits of cork enveloped the cockpit. Anton regained his grip on the joystick. They came out of their uncontrolled tailspin. But now the seats began to vibrate, as though they were about to break free of their fixings. Linus gripped the armrests with all his strength. It was getting hotter in the cockpit with every passing second. The heat was searing their eyes. Even the tiny hairs on their arms were starting to frizzle. Beads of sweat formed on their skin. The gauges rattled. A small oxygen tank came loose from its bracket, narrowly missed Linus' head and crashed into one of the

screens. The glass shattered. The Varius started lurching again. One of the ball-shaped cameras was torn loose and whizzed off, vanishing into the void. After several minutes that felt like an eternity, the three of them made it back into the Earth's atmosphere. Still none of them said a word. The only sound was the crackling of the heat shields cooling off. As indecisive as a hoverfly on holiday, the Varius hung between the sky and the Earth. The rotor blades had started up again. It seemed to Linus that they were turning more slowly than when they started. Anton seemed to be thinking the same thing. His tense expression did not bode well. He tutted. "Crumbs! I must have been wrong. But that can't be."

A slight jolt. First the rotor on the left-hand side stopped. The Varius pitched to one side. Silence. An irregular chugging that got slower and slowed, like an old tractor. *Chug ...chu-chug...chug...chug.....chug.* Then the rotor on the right-hand side gave up the ghost as well. Anton took hold of the joystick with both hands and stretched his back. "Gliding is the true art of flying!" he boomed like a proud captain of a sinking ship. Linus glanced over anxiously at his grandfather. If only he'd listened to his mother... Then he'd be lying in bed right now, dreaming of his first invention and not about to crash at any moment. Captain Insight clambered up between the seats and lay down in Linus' lap. He had undone his safety harness himself. A faint whimper emerged from his throat.

"Hey, you two. Don't make that face. In the worst-case scenario, we've each got a parachute." Anton reached under his seat, pulled out a deflated life vest and shrugged apologetically. "Probably still in the submarine. Shame, that." He scratched his head. "But there was something else..." he muttered. "There was something." The Varius started moving, accelerating furiously. The wind screamed over the cockpit. The wings flexed upwards. They groaned, as if they might break off at any moment. Anton was having trouble holding onto the joystick. He had to strain with all his might.

"Linus. What have I taught you?" Anton wheezed. "What should you do if you're scared?"

"Sing?" This answer seemed completely ridiculous to Linus.

"That's right. Let's sing," said Anton, straining. "Music is the answer." The nose of the Varius was pointing almost straight downwards. Now they could make out Kesselheim Airport and the flickering lights of Kesselstadt. They were approaching

fast. Much too fast. "Over the clouds..." sang Anton, missing almost every note of the tune.

"Not that ancient song," Linus protested against the groaning of the Hummingbird.

"No arguments! Sing!"

Linus obeyed. Captain Insight began to howl. Harsh sounds, like a hungry wolf would make. He gave Linus an accusing look. An accusing look that only tracker dogs who have put thousands of smugglers behind bars could give. Suddenly, in the midst of all the chaos, Anton's face froze. He looked as if he had lost his mind. In fact, that's exactly what Linus was thinking right now: *Grandad's lost his mind*. He wondered what he should do. Whether he should take control of the joystick himself and steer upwards. Or whether it was already too late for that. He glanced over at the juddering joystick in Anton's hands. It had a golden cap on top. Linus couldn't remember that cap being there last time. "What's that for?" he asked breathlessly, pointing at the joystick. "That cap is new," he said.

No reaction.

"GRANDAD!"

Suddenly Anton snapped out of his daze. "Er, yes, yes, my lad, of course," he said, his whole face beaming. "What a fool I am!" He laughed out loud. Anton flipped the cap up with one thumb and pressed the button underneath. A loud *plop*. A huge parachute opened up over the cockpit. Linus felt an unpleasant tug in his belly. The Varius slowed down. "A new invention?" he asked, relieved.

"The rescue chute," said Anton, as if nothing had happened. "Of course. Could've come up with that myself." He smiled. "We'll make it down to Naples if the thermal currents are right."