

Early Birds

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Seven: in which, when everything's said and done, three dimensional specifications no longer make any sense

(Preferred alternative ending)

Why is it often said that Michelle L. Servadac's^a career was pre-determined at birth?

Moments before Michelle's birth a hushed darkness descended. Even the nurses and the birds in the hospital park had fallen silent. No sooner had consultant Roth^b cut the umbilical cord than he dimmed the lights in the delivery room and ventured towards the window. With its flying shadows, the moon was passing ever closer in front of the sun.

The ward sister said the edge of the moon was glistening like the diadem of a Persian Empress. Senior consultant Roth couldn't help but chuckle. This particular diadem, he said, would burn the Empress.

How did Roth react when he realised that during the solar eclipse the young mother Ursula Servadac^c had pulled one of the sterile drapes over her face?

He leaned forward over the drape and said: "Please Miss Servadac! You're through the worst now."

Ursula could only whimper in response. After issuing a few brief instructions, the consultant surgeon exited the delivery room.

Was that the end of the matter for the consultant surgeon?

Gerhild Servadac^d was already waiting behind the double doors of the delivery room. In her arms she held her sleeping son, William^e, who had left the paediatric ward only two weeks before.

“Congratulations, Miss Servadac, we have delivered you a perfectly healthy baby granddaughter,” said Roth. “Though I regret that the circumstances surrounding her birth were unpropitious in the extreme.”

“When even you speak this way, Doctor, I find myself overcome by the fear that we are still living in medieval times,” Gerhild Servadac countered.

In response, Roth immediately stressed that he was referring only to the mental state of the young mother. Despite his prognosis, the birth had brought about no improvement, quite the opposite. Gerhild Servadac emitted such a loud sigh that her son woke up and began to scream hysterically. Michelle and Ursula, who were being wheeled out of the delivery room at precisely that moment, joined in with gusto.

On what had the consultant surgeon based his prognosis?

On equating Ursula’s mental state with adolescent acne and hay fever: he had said everything would be better after giving birth. According to his hypothesis, Ursula’s symptoms were the result of a neurotransmitter or sex hormone imbalance. He cited a genetic predisposition as a possible cause – along with shock, malnutrition and rock ‘n’ roll.

Was the consultant surgeon an expert in this department?

Absolutely not.

Why did Michelle share a playpen with her uncle William?

Michelle was raised by her grandparents in Twickenham. Her mother Ursula, meanwhile, resided in Pensacola, where, under the supervision of Dr Delany^f (honoris causa) she was undergoing treatment by electro-, hot/cold immersion- and gemstone therapy; following a monochrome diet and making hula hoops orbit against the earth’s rotation. Only on public holidays and at the request and risk of her own family was she

granted temporary release from Delany's sanatorium, whereupon she would be conveyed to Twickenham by private nurses.

Was Ursula's motherhood ever discussed at such times in the Servadac household?

About as often as the latest Soviet space achievements. Only in the staff toilets was the matter occasionally brought up.

For a long time Michelle and William called Ursula *Auntie*. With a single pencil or stick of charcoal Auntie could transform the spare room overnight into a space station or operating theatre. What's more, she was a far better storyteller than either Mum (Gerhild) or Dad (Robert Jr), providing clear and vivid detail of the most astonishing things.

Such as?

On Thanksgiving Day 1959, Ursula told a story about extra-terrestrial beings so tiny that you inadvertently swallowed them while breathing. The invasion of these creatures, centuries in its duration, had already triggered several deadly waves of infection across the globe – most recently the so-called *Spanish Flu*. During the Easter of 1960, she spoke about a life form of such gigantic proportions that people were incapable of perceiving it with the naked eye. Our Milky Way was merely one of its air sacs; the vast billion-year expanse of the universe no more than a single, isolated breath.

Michelle complained that Father Mason^s had told them a similar story that morning. She went on to state that none of this interested her anymore, since she wanted to be a natural scientist now. She would rather Auntie told her something about crocodiles or lightning bugs. The subject of bugs got Ursula so excited, however, that her nurses had to sedate her as a precautionary measure.

What was known about Michelle's father?

Due to a basic lack of reference points, not even Tracer D. Adler^h (the private investigator hired by Frank L. Palucchiⁱ) was able to track down Michelle's biological father – and that despite having gone as far as to search the barn where Ursula claimed to have been abducted for the purposes of artificial alien insemination.

For seven years, Michelle herself believed Robert Servadac Jr^j to be her father, a view reinforced by neighbours, friends and teachers alike, all of whom declared that she had the typical Servadac chin, Bobbie's prominent nose or the same rakish expression as Jeff Servadac. At playgroup, she and William were even referred to as the *Servadac Twins*.

How did Michelle's grandparents react when an unguarded remark from Palucchi led to their granddaughter finally unravelling the true nature of their relationship?

At first they both fell into a concentrated silence. When Michelle successfully inferred the meaning of her godfather's words, Gerhild nodded calmly; Robert Jr, meanwhile, threw the torte-munching Palucchi an icy sidelong glance.

And how did Michelle's godfather react?

Palucchi promptly wiped the cream from his lips and offered to make his private jet available for a weekend visit to Panzacola. He said the pilot would even allow Michelle to fly the plane herself.

Why did the unscheduled meeting between mother and daughter never take place?

Precisely that week, Ursula had managed to flee the sanatorium once again; she wasn't picked up until shortly before Christmas – in Corona, New Mexico.

Since this spontaneous little jaunt had seen Michelle deprived of her maiden flight, she deigned to ignore Ursula for the entire holiday period. Through William, however, she let *Auntie* know that her made-up tales of intergalactic derring-do didn't interest her in the slightest; she wanted to be a polar scientist now.

Did Michelle listen to William telling Ursula's latest stories in secret?

No. She crawled under the bedcovers and covered her ears with fur gloves.

In view of this certainty, why didn't Michelle L. Servadac become a polar scientist?

Anyone who wanted to be a polar scientist had to be able to scale and gut their own catch, not to mention eat porridge and spinach. At least, that was what Robert Servadac Sr^k had told his great-granddaughter. The dust or dried shaving cream that fell like snow from

old Servadac's wrinkles with each individual word only lent further weight to what he was saying.

What was the immediate result of this rather dishonest abridging of the facts?

That very afternoon Michelle gave away her snow goggles and Eskimo dagger to the boy next door.

There were no more joint fishing expeditions to Ten Mile Creek; no more milking, wood cutting or studying of maps. Michelle now spent most of her time lying in the hammock or sitting in front of the TV with her great-grandmother Susan, slurping Pemberton Soda. And not another word about all those holidays in Duncan Switch. Old Servadac let out a gentle sigh.

Why did Bob Sr find his great-granddaughter in neither the hammock nor the former nursery one morning?

That was the day the Air Corps flight training school started up again: the roaring of the engines had lured Michelle out to the tank of the ranch's water tower, from where she could observe the planes manoeuvring up and down the runway.

No sooner had Michelle climbed down from the water tower than she scooped a ladle of porridge into her bowl and told Bob Sr that she badly needed his hunting binoculars.

By the end of the week she had finally managed to persuade old Servadac to drive her over to Steve Murray¹ in order to book a passenger seat on his crop duster. Steve Murray said it wasn't the crop-spraying season and that he didn't take passengers on principle – let alone women and children.

Did Percy Murray find herself obliged to take her husband to one side?

No, Mrs Murray didn't even bother to lower her voice as she explained to her husband that she and his three-quarters done joint couldn't give a rat's arse about the goddamn crop season.

What came of this appeal?

Steve Murray had an innate understanding of subtext. And the very same day Frank L. Palucchi learned of his goddaughter's maiden flight, he ordered her a motor glider.

Why a motorised sailplane?

Michelle was fussy, her grand-/foster mother originally German, and Frank L. Palucchi occasionally very far-sighted.

And then?

Palucchi took Michelle to a seamstress. While she was being fitted, he sat in the front room and told anecdotes about his own flying days, cheerfully pointing out that there were now planes which weighed less than he did. He repeated this at the cobbler's, the optician's and ultimately the sailplane society – though no-one pretended to be even remotely interested in his, or indeed Michelle's, weight there. The skies were no skating rink, they said; the girl couldn't begin training for another two years at least.

Palucchi bartered, badgered and bitched – to no avail.

“No hard feelings,” he spluttered, and spat into the sand. It was just lucky this great state had been taken over by men like him for the benefit of men like him, and thus made into a beacon of civilisation.

Which state was Frank L. Palucchi talking about?

Alabama, the heart of Dixieland.

What were the implications of this statement?

Before he'd even left the airport, Frank L. Palucchi had called a builder friend and instructed him to build a runway. It was to be located on Palucchi's estate and finished by the weekend.

Had all hurdles now been overcome?

No. When everything was ready and waiting, Robert Jr raised the age issue once more. Palucchi swallowed, sweated and felt his great Sicilian heart clench. Michelle curled her bottom lip to the tip of her nose. Gerhild refused to be drawn into this tiresome debate –

but insisted nevertheless that her granddaughter receive professional training and be initially accompanied by a co-pilot.

“So be it,” Palucchi wheezed, and the purple blotches on his jowls and tear sacs faded once more.

How did Palucchi entice Vivian Davenport?

Neither party was prepared to divulge the exact conditions of the contract. However, it is known that Miss Davenport^m was paid a handsome yearly salary in advance, including board and lodging, and received free rein for a series of articles entitled *Women and Aviation*, to be published in the *Twickenham Post*. Her biplane and trophies were stored in the shed on Palucchi’s estate formerly reserved for agricultural machinery, which had been cleared, sealed and newly whitewashed.

Why was Palucchi always seen with a fresh flower in his lapel from this point onwards?

Because Miss Davenport, so he’d told the Servadacs, was not only the best female pilot in the northern hemisphere, but also the only woman to have won the legendary Columbus Lipstick Air Race on four separate occasions.

On top of that, she was the holder of numerous officially recognised flight altitude-, distance- and speed records, as well as being – albeit under a male alias – the first female stunt pilot in Hollywood. Palucchi himself had had the honour of being shot down by Miss Davenport in an extremely dramatic film scene. What’s more, by flying bombers and fighter planes to the British front during the First World War, she had made an outstanding contribution to world peace.

How were the lessons structured?

Michelle’s first class took place the morning after her ninth birthday. Yet the motor glider and its runway were nowhere to be seen. Miss Davenport started with the basics of thermals, taking several days for cloud formation, soil colour and dust devils alone. It wasn’t until after the twelfth session, when she confirmed to Michelle that El Palucchi had

once been so slim that he'd fitted into a fighter plane with ease and set women's hearts racing, that Miss Davenport actually said anything about flying.

Nevertheless, Michelle remained just as eager to learn in the weeks that followed, safe in the knowledge that after spinach there came something far tastier. She studied birds, measured wind speeds and read Miss Davenport's latest articles once a week, before delivering them straight to the editorial office of the *Twickenham Post*.

At what point on the syllabus was the first practical scheduled?

Only after Michelle had successfully learned how to:

- ✓ take her motor glider fully apart and correctly reassemble it piece by piece within a single day
- ✓ label her tools and spare parts in five foreign languages
- ✓ survive alone in the desert, on ice and in water
- ✓ operate an engine using replacement substances
- ✓ shake off irritating fighter pilots, rivals and correspondents
- ✓ use a parachute in the approved manner

did Miss Davenport wheel her *Stearman* onto the runway.

Then what happened?

Once Michelle had put on her uniform and checked the wind, clouds and her ripcord, Miss Davenport said all she had to do now was put everything she'd learned into practice. Then she took her foot off the brake pedal and sprang into the co-pilot's seat. Michelle stepped on the gas.

In the months that followed she came to master both the biplane and her motor glider – pushing each to the limit imposed by its respective design – and at Christmas she arrived home by parachute for the first time.

Finally, at Easter, Michelle set off on her first solo flight: Vivian Davenport and Frank L. Palucchi were standing on the black-and-white tiled garden patio, two characters from a cryptic eye test that immediately blended into one. A little later the runway and her godfather's sprawling estate had also faded from view. Michelle described the scene to her uncle William by radio: to the left was the Tennessee, to the right the Cumberland Plateau;

and in the far west, the moon was rising out of a bank of cloud. Then she held her breath and pulled hard on the joystick.

What was the result?

Her map fell into the cockpit. It had been unsecured – a failing Miss Davenport later held against her. The Cumberland Plateau was now on the left; and the Tennessee on the right. Michelle squealed with delight.

Why did Palucchi lose 92 pounds the following summer?

When the year came to an end, no amount of flowers, raises or lovers' oaths could make any difference: Vivian Davenport deemed that she had taught Michelle everything there was to know; her immediate priority now lay in exploring the towering clouds of the Amazon. She packed her trophies, hats and trousers, cleared her *Stearman* for take-off and gave Frank L. Palucchi a kiss goodbye.

^a **Michelle L. Servadac** – Ursula Servadac's daughter

Her gravestone carried the simple epitaph:
Michelle L. Servadac
S.A.I.N.T.

According to Father Mason, the acronym stood for *Still Alive In Nascent Times* – that is, for Judgement Day and her resurrection in the Lord.

Leroy Dwixter objected that Michelle's mother was an atheist. He was of the opinion that the abbreviated inscription was a paraphrase of a Scottish proverb, which aims to preserve the memory of each individual by showing that time is a subjective concept (... *In Nain Time*, English: in her own time).

Rumours circulated in Twickenham, meanwhile, that it was a kind of anagram or abbreviation devised to conceal the identity of her father.

^b **Dr Nathaniel Roth** – consultant surgeon

Despite having far more pressing cases to deal with, Dr Dave Opperton spent a good quarter of an hour trying to convince the retired surgeon. Roth was sceptical of the young doctor's diagnosis, repeatedly branding him a pessimist: he wasn't about to let himself be cut open for nothing. As soon as his ailments were cured, he would challenge Opperton to a swimming contest – then they would see.

Opperton withdrew, having resolved to place Roth in the hands of the senior doctor. The latter had already finished work, however, and didn't reappear until Monday morning, when his first task was to reprimand Opperton for not having operated sooner.

^c ***Ursula Sevadac*** née *Leudoldt*, alias *Ursel* – daughter of Theodor and Gerhild Leudoldt, see: Emanuel Lasker.

^d ***Dr Gerhild Sevadac*** née *Hausdorf*, widowed *Leudoldt* – Theodor Leudoldt's third wife and Ursula Leudoldt's mother

In autumn 1996, Jan Pavel Švatarák visited the New Mexico Museum of Space History. In one of the exhibitions he spied Gerhild Sevadac's biography. This informed readers vaguely that Sevadac had been inducted into the Space Hall of Fame as early as 1979 for services to space medicine along with her contribution to the development of a life support system for the first lunar module.

The photographs, Jan Švatarák explained to the relevant museum committee shortly afterwards, left him in no doubt that this was the very same Frau Doktor Leudoldt whom he had known from the rocket assembly facility in Kohnstein Mountain, where he had been made to work as a slave and later been crippled. An examination of documents from the Nuremberg Trials confirmed all these statements.

While David Carlson, the committee chairman, shared the view that criminals had no place in the Hall of Fame, he pointed to the fact that Mrs Sevadac was not only a distinguished scientist but also the grandmother of the first female American astronaut in space. Proceedings were temporarily adjourned. In 2001, the committee voted unanimously that Gerhild Sevadac's name be removed from the list; and that her entire research team be included in her place.

^e ***William Sevadac*** – son of Gerhild and Robert Sevadac Jr

After the collision, darkness reigned and everything was silent. When Sevadac regained consciousness, he found himself enveloped by a blinding light; he squinted. A woman leaned down towards him, prized his right eyelid wide open and cried: "Quick, he's coming to."

Sevadac didn't see the oxygen mask being placed over his mouth, but felt only its elastic edge. Then darkness reigned once more.

^f ***Dr Cecilia Delany*** (honoris causa) – head of private sanatorium in Panzacola

Determined to crown her success with a second pioneering method, Cecilia Delany modified her neo-Hippocratic nutritional therapy to comply with Goethe's theory of colours.

Contrary to expectations, her new diet – based on physiological responses to colour – was greeted with some reservation by both patients and staff; even her colleagues, who had supplied her with a steady stream of patients over the years, warned Delany against making any changes in her treatment programme – it was popular precisely because it was so easy to understand. Moreover, they continued, Hippocrates was a doctor whose work was borne out by practice; Goethe a poet whose theories were refuted by Newton. Still, Delany wouldn't have been Delany if she had allowed herself to be thwarted. In order to prove the diet's effectiveness, she decided to undergo twelve months of self-experimentation.

Following her enforced hospitalisation, Donald Leibowitz, consultant surgeon at Panzacola City Hospital, cautiously stressed to the ninety-two year-old's next of kin that medicine and mortal hands alone could not avert the consequences of such a sustained period of malnutrition; all they could do was ease the final suffering.

^g ***John Mason*** – parish priest

For decades, Mason had looked on unimpressed as he followed newspaper and TV reports about people splitting atomic nuclei, exchanging organs and churning up the heavens with their missiles. He had prayed and preached as earnestly, as thoroughly as he had cleaned his teeth: eighty-seven and not a single filling! Why, then, did he suddenly think it possible that the heart was just a nervously controlled muscle; that the human body was made from the remains of exploded stars; and that *his* end might really mean *the* end?

^h **Tracer D. Adler** – private detective and bounty hunter

Adler had overcome his reluctance and redeemed his mother's voucher: that's right, he had gone to see the astrologist. His stars looked pretty favourable – except for Jupiter, that is. Which isn't actually a star, Adler had noted, not even a real planet.

That's the right attitude, the astrologist had replied; Adler ought to remain sceptical – after all, the universe was no machine.

The constellations were displayed on his bedside table and the crucial dates had been underlined. Accordingly, Adler knew exactly what was coming, and could just as easily have stayed in bed.

ⁱ **Frank L. Palucchi** aka *El* – former fighter-, stunt- and dung pilot; publisher and record company owner, see page 163

^j **Robert Servadac Jr** aka *Bob* – Gerhild Leudoldt's work colleague and second husband

The thing that lingered longest in the memory of his step-daughter Ursula was not Bob's face, but the way he would tap his thumb against the table top or back of a chair every third or fourth word whenever he was telling you about something that concerned him.

"I know exactly what you mean," said Ursula's step-sister Debby, "to this day I still can't see a single bassist slapping without thinking of Dad."

^k **Robert** aka *Bob Sr* and **Susan Servadac** née *Kindel* – Robert and Timothy Servadac's mother and father

She awoke just after 4am. Outside the first birds were already singing: *purdy, purdy, purdy...whoit, whoit whoit*; and her husband was snoring in the next room. The inner disquiet, which she put down to her dream, grew further. What's more, her arm was tingling; seemed to have fallen asleep. Again and again she felt her pulse and wiped her brow and upper lip with a handkerchief.

Finally she stood up, took something to calm her nerves and sat down in the rocking chair on the veranda. The cardinals fell silent for a while. Then they began to whistle again: *purdy, purdy, purdy...whoit, whoit, whoit*.

^l **Steve** and **Percy Murray** – agricultural pilot and his wife

The hepatitis stemmed from a blood transfusion he had undergone in 1961 following a riding accident. Years later, as the liver damage worsened and his eyes and skin grew ever more yellow, his business slowly began to crumble. Most of the neighbours assumed he was an alcoholic and didn't want him flying over their farms.

^m **Vivian Davenport** aka *Ormer Learlock* – record-breaking pilot, Michelle Servadac's flying instructor; see page 169.