

SARA'S DANCE

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1.

»180° 42' 10'' north and 12° 7'36'' east of Paris,« the thought crosses the mind of U.S. Air Force lieutenant John Willkinson in the moment when the airplane engines begin to roar. He repeats the numbers, adds, multiplies, divides them, coming up with different combinations, seeking refuge in the arithmetic, the play of numbers becomes a dagger used to cut up fear and the memory of his burning plane, so that the images are shredded, which is why in his mind he repeats again and again the coordinates of the military airport in Nadlesk, marked on his map as Piccadilly Club, named after the main road in Westminster, even though it was recognized as 100 Piccadilly, one of American establishments on English territory, which provided entertainment for the soldiers during the Second World War, and supplied them with prostitutes, and its operations were even considered a threat to the positive Anglo-American relations.

But in that moment John Willkinson is not thinking about the name of the airport, which he remembered, when the elderly partisan, who was nicknamed Detroit after the American town he used to live in, explained where it was located, and took the chance to throw in a little story of his own, about digging salt at the Detroit Salt Mine, where in the two decades apart from digging salt he had learned the language and caught rheumatism, returning home just before the beginning of the war, lying around in his brother's house, until some night, a few months after Italy's capitulation, the partisans took him with them,

the Americans are coming and they are the ones to talk to, they said, and turned a blind eye on Detroit's brother who was with the White Guard, and so Detroit was talking to the colonel, like he told him, regardless of his officer rank, from the moment he was brought to the partisan hospital.

But there is not even Detroit in the lieutenant's head right now, the coordinates now fighting the idea of being transferred to one of Italian military bases with an airplane for carrying the wounded. As the plane rises, he begins to shiver uncontrollably. Counting doesn't help anymore. The shredded memories instantly turn back to form an image, which he is supposed to clarify later in a report marked 15 August 1944.

One of the engines on his P38 plane ceased functioning already during the photographing of the first target, there was no use wondering why the technicians hadn't discovered the error during the pre-flight safety check, he must forget immediately that errors on a plane can be fatal even in peace, let alone war time, he just needs to go on with the flight, complete the task, you can do without one of the engines, the enemy's targets in Germany are important, he still has to photograph the railway station in Villach, the shooting is still far away, no, it's getting closer, he must lift up, it's not the first time he's been caught in airplane cross fire, it is the seventh time, seven is a lucky number, he's going to save his neck, even though shots have damaged his plane, he has a solution, he can fly towards the Yugoslav coast, he recreates the map in his mind, he can't look back, but turns his head around unintentionally, the fire blinds him, the fire burning in his eyes, his face stings, he must get away from this fire, it is not only people

that die, airplanes die too, he has to jump out, there is no time to say goodbye to the P38, he can get another plane, but still, goodbye old friend, you're howling like a wounded animal, there must be something alive inside its body, perhaps it has a metal heart, one, two, five, count, just count the seconds, because it's time to land, painfully he opens his eyes, assaulted by darkness, the terrain is hilly, in his view the midday summer light fights the black spots, he will have to watch out for his legs, he cannot open his eyes anymore, the pain that severs the legs is worse than the one in his eyes, then there is darkness everywhere, numbness, the weight of the body like lead, eight, nine, eleven, he keeps repeating, to keep himself from losing consciousness, sucking him inside like a vortex, yet just before it happens, he repeats: seven is a lucky number.

Seven is a lucky number, he repeats again, whispering, words become a request, a curse, a prayer, the number seven prancing around somewhere under his skull, like it is turning into a belief in kismet; it is after all akin to the warrior reputation of the hill people in the battles of the Isonzo, he has been told so by Detroit, whose father was in the Austro-Hungarian army, the fate has been predetermined, the realization of predetermination before the battle brings a sense of peace, the Bosnian Muslims knew that if the book says you will fall, you will fall, if it says otherwise, you will live, but lieutenant John Willkinson wants to live, for starters he wants to see again, why on earth did they blindfold him again during the few hours when he was being transferred on a stretcher from the hospital under the Snežna gora hill, conspiracy, said Detroit, who was with him to the very end, goddamn, how would he ever remember all those gaps and cliffs and rocks, the trees and the streams,

let alone understand the babbling talk around him, he only learnt to say thank you and cheers, when Detroit would offer him a drink, but he can take the bandage off his eyes, he's lifting his arms already, to liberate his sight, but changes his mind, choosing after all not to see how many other wounded are sighing beside him, though he recognizes the voice of the doctor who treated his eyes and set his broken leg, so he just moves, starting again to fight for the supremacy of numbers, fear has already filled up his pores, he discerns its sourish smell, he grits his teeth, he can start counting the breakfasts his mother made for him before he would go to school, it occurs to him, five times a week apple puree, corn flour bread rolls and maple syrup pancakes, twice a week orange juice and scrambled eggs with cheese and bacon, he is getting hungry, still counting the mornings in Connecticut, the sunbathed breakfast table, and he starts to chew the piece of bread someone placed in his hand during the loading, and which until now he had only been clinging onto firmly in his right hand, he got used to being hungry and the scarce portions of food, one needs to chew slowly to keep up with the illusion of a full stomach, he can count the bites, five, six, back, back to numbers, he will defeat his fate, even if he has to do so with the help of bread and his lucky number.

The origin is in the number, this is why numbers are everywhere, in the indications of life and death, in the end the war becomes a datum, a sum of all the victims written down in a history book, the years limit the time that stretches from one victory to the next. Or defeat.

And just like that, the numbers inside John Willkinson's head have a new anchorage, he drops the breakfasts, he returns to the days he has spent

in this unusual land, he landed twenty-three days ago, he calculates swiftly, more precisely 33120 minutes ago, it would be hopeless counting the seconds, but there may no longer be a need for numbers, for he suddenly feels relaxed, as if despite of everything it is safer in the air than on the ground, what must the birds think when they see a plane, but they must be teaching their children the word earth even before they can fly, so that they know where to land, birds, rulers of the sky, some sort of sisterly support to airmen, he mustn't forget he is a pilot after all, a trained member of the American Air Forces. And it would be dishonorable of him to die on board of a transport aircraft. It cannot happen. Such an inglorious death would tarnish his father's pride, which he used every day to polish the medal that was awarded posthumously to his brother David, the only thing that was left behind him, because the body either burned together with the plane, or ended up in the sea. And it was part of the reason he himself had to apply the very next day, hoping the stethoscope would not betray his pounding heart, it's just an accelerated heart beat, he smiled to the doctor, who nodded in haste, the waiting queue was long and impatient, he was able to keep the secret of his heart failure, a genetic condition that will have later led his own father to heaven prematurely, it is the place where good people go, those were words of comfort to his mother, who stared at the sky for hours upon receiving the news about David's death. Is this why he left for war as a pilot? Or was it because of the simple fact that he had passed an introductory flight course, and was suitable for further short-term training, and, finally, was old enough to say yes to the invitation poster, with a blurry image of a pilot outshone by the inscription To Victory U.S. Army Air Force. To victory! To the sky! For David!

Father patted his shoulders, mother was staring back at the sky, as if she was telling herself that John will fly up to David, and while he is there, he should let him know that she still changes the sheets on his bed every week, because even ghosts need to rest somewhere.

The words attack him like a burst of gunfire, he returns to counting the bites, the last is the fifteenth, the piece of bread is gone, with it he ate his fear, his mind begins to work intensely: the plane is high enough so that it is out of the reach of shots fired from land, and the German Luftwaffe has better things to do than to guard the airspace above the Adriatic Sea. It is bound to whistle away sooner or later, after all, there was a whole air weapons contest going up in the sky, his pride is restored, certainly compared to some Fritz his equipment was still flawless, his parachute opened in time, he could have crashed into the winter sea, and still make it in spite of the cold. Although even Luftwaffe probably knew how to take care of its airmen, he must admit nonetheless.

But what lieutenant John Willkinson is not aware of is the fact that the German army equipment had been perfected on the basis of results obtained from experiments that were conducted in concentration camps. Dr. Sigismund Rascher, who was responsible directly to the Reichsführer SS Heinrich Himmler, used the prisoners in a simulation of the conditions occurring above 20.000 meters altitude, on the brains of the victims who survived the first experiment he was using state-of-the-art medical equipment to perform vivisection, so that his findings could serve as a basis for perfecting the air force equipment. The tested subjects were always wearing Luftwaffe suits.

The American side may not have had concentration camps, but it did have a propaganda machinery that could compete with the demonic apparatus of Reichstag itself. At the U.S. Navy boot camp, eighteen-year-olds were asked whether they would consider participating in testing the effectiveness of the new protective clothing and masks against poison gas, which have proven so horrifying in World War One, and have thus helped to speed up the end of the Second World War. Nearly all of the participants suffered severe internal and external burns, their participation conditioned by an oath of silence, or they would be treated under the espionage act. Even worse experiments were performed on Gulag inmates in the hidden laboratories of the Soviet Union, where they were exposed to numerous poisons with the aim of establishing which poisons left no taste or smell of the deadly chemicals behind after the killing. And notwithstanding the numerous occasions in history when such "horrific and disgusting" poisonous weapons were banned, or centuries back, when the first international agreement banning the use of chemical weapons was signed between France and the Holy Roman Empire.

Yet one of the most absurd accidents related to the use of poison gas occurred in the Italian port of Bari. Because of a fierce air raid by the German air forces, which caused utter devastation to the city in its own right, it is sometimes known as "Little Pearl Harbor". But what remained hidden from the eyes of history for a long time was the destruction of the American SS John Harvey, which was carrying a huge amount of Yperite intended to be used as a retaliation measure against the Germans, should they begin to use chemical weapons. The ship's cargo was a closely guarded secret and one of the reasons why the medical staff was unable to treat adequately

the first six hundred and twenty-eight patients who reported poisoning symptoms like blindness and chemical burns. The full extent of civilian casualties in the Bari region was never known.

And it was precisely to Bari that the transportation aircraft from Nadlesk was headed. "One hour... we will be landing... one hour... Bari," says dr. Mirko Rakovnik, to whom treating the American pilot is not only important because he is a doctor, but saving the life of an American pilot by the partisans is another proof of the validity of the agreements between American military missions and the partisans.

The lieutenant is overwhelmed with gratitude, the doctor's words in poor English are reinforced by a handshake, and the lieutenant repeats the information to himself, he hears loud burbling voices, the doctor must be explaining something to somebody, to the right of him a person is whistling a tune, he tries to make out the melody, the wounded used to sing it, he even tried to learn it himself, but it didn't happen, so he preferred to sing with Detroit a song from his childhood, the Wabash Cannon Ball: From the great Atlantic ocean to the wide Pacific shore/She climbs flowery mountain, o'er hills and by the shore/She's mighty tall and handsome, and she's known quite well by all/ You can set your watch to - the Wabash Cannonball ...

Among other things he was singing so that the childhood would continue to live inside him, the carefree evenings when mom would listen to the radio and so in the desire to have her listen to him just as eagerly, he taught himself a folk song about an imaginary train, and enhanced it with a locomotive sound, so that his singing was mixed with mom's laughter, because, it's always nice to have

mom laughing. And this is especially true of Mrs. Mary Willkinson, who has placed all her deep devotion and strictness into raising her two sons.

I will have to write a letter to mother, so that she knows I am not yet playing football with my brother up above the clouds, he smiles, perhaps he will tell her in a rush of tenderness that he met a girl in the partisan hospital, a young nurse with violet eyes like her own, and keep back from her that the face of the woman he saw after the failed landing and the waking up from the unconsciousness, looked like her face. It was an illusion, he brushed his hand against the soil, cold, rough, with stone bits in it, as real as the trees and the wind that blew softly over the burns on his skin, letting him know that he was alive, oh right, seven is a lucky number, even though every attempt to open the eyes was an enormous strain... He insisted in looking at her, the image of a woman cannot disappear, he told himself, she kept twittering something in a strange language, no, this language is not twittering, it is burbling, a little spring rolling over the stones, although the woman was pointing to the sky. Tito, partisans, he said, how's it going, every American parachutist was equipped with this parole, the sign of an alliance, the woman was nodding, she helped him get up, she was strong, he leaned against her shoulder, closed his eyes every once in a while, he was jumping up and down next to her, his leg hurt like hell, but the woman kept burbling and dragging him along the way, as if she knew exactly where they were going. He was uncomfortable because he depended on her, an old woman, who looked like his mother, and at the same time liberated by the idea that the responsibility for his life lay on her shoulders. She placed him in a broken-down stable, no cattle anywhere, just smelly straw, the woman was trying to tell him something,

he shrugged his shoulders, what else was he supposed to do, the light was disappearing from his view again, he closed his eyes, perhaps he fell asleep, he definitely fell asleep, as dusk was falling when a man's face with a cap on his head was leaning over him, a cap with a red star, he was excited about the star more than he was about the man, who later arranged his transportation to the partisan hospital.

A star, a five-point star, a pentagram announcing that the sacred is part of man, a symbol of the five wounds of Christ, protecting against witches and demons, as Mrs. Mary Willkinson used to assure her son, when she would ordain him to the secrets of faith and teach him the five knightly virtues, and so how could the lieutenant not be excited about the star, and if it is red, it is a sign of partisan allies, although it was first worn by the Red Army members to spread the victorious path of socialism, and although just before the founding of the Soviet Union it was also used by the aviation department of the U.S. Army on their airplanes during the overflights above the marches of Mexican revolutionary Pancho Villa, an interesting changeover of symbols, remarked one of the officers at his air force boot camp, where the recruits were also being taught the importance of recognizing a symbol in the right moment. And that was the right moment.

All the other days spent at the partisan hospital had become submerged inside a long-lasting darkness, during which he would observe the changing of days only through the regular morning changing of bandages, until one morning, ten days after the crashing of his plane, dr. Mirko Rakovnik removed the bandages, and he was able to blink into the light with relief, seeing for the first time Detroit, who had been entertaining him from the very beginning

with his singing and mining stories, in case he wasn't asking him more weighty questions whenever he was accompanied by someone else, a man with a raspy voice, who wanted to know where from, where to, what and why, so that he felt like he was being interrogated, but still answered with calm, besides, there was nothing that seemed better kept unmentioned. And he would sometimes wonder whether Detroit understood everything he was saying. But all of it didn't even matter up to the moment when he noticed the nurse with the violet eyes, who once tripped over his bed, uttering what was probably a curse word, so that Detroit grinned from the bed next to his, and then still served as a translator for them until the girl began to use English expressions herself, like she was trying to communicate to him so much more than just bed, food, sun, eyes, nose, star.

I did not say goodbye to her, lieutenant John Willkinson is saddened, it all happened in a hurry, on the day of his departure he didn't even see her, or she was there when they blindfolded him and transferred him onto the stretcher, as his leg was still placed inside a wooden brace, which was a substitute for a cast, just like sips of the herbal brandy from Detroit's flask were a substitute for pain relievers, the pain miraculously disappearing every time he would gently brush up against his nurse's arm. His nurse's arm. So what if she was giving away her care also to the others around her, she used to sit by his bed a little longer, it was definitely longer, or else Detroit would not have commented 'she is making eyes at you', which made him laugh inside, because even in war time, wonderful things could happen.

And now he is reviving the memory of her laughter, a chortling kind of laughter that accompanied her attempts to learn English words, suddenly he feels that the plane began to descend, the shivering is back, he knows the coordinates of Bari, 16° 45' 57", 41° 08' 21", again, he is playing with the numbers, the plane descends, enough darkness, he reaches for the bandage, but a pair of hands is faster, a familiar pair of a girl's hands freeing his eyes, so that he cries out in surprise: "Martina!"