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Penumbra

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All I ever wanted to do was fly. I moved towards that aim like a woman walking in her sleep. I saved for a long time, I drew on my share of the family inheritance, indeed I drew on almost everything, she says in the silence of the room, my grandparents gave me some money too, and so I was able to buy the Junkers. 16,000 Reichsmarks. A small fortune. I went into the red as well. It didn't matter to me. Nothing else mattered. This, I told all my well-meaning advisers, is a venture that has to be made. And what a plane the Junkers was, it was wonderful, it was perfection! You just had to hear the engine turn over as it caught, a hesitation and then the regular sound of its running. Perfect proportions, the wings positioned just below the fuselage. Two Plexiglas windshields, one in front of each seat. You sat in the open air, yet you were protected from the wind, that was the wonderful part of it, you literally plunged into the clouds. I had the plane sprayed yellow at the aircraft factory, a lovely deep yellow. The corrugated metal of the fuselage and the wings, with their ten-metre span, the nose with the engine inside it, the carburettors projecting in front. It's the smell of the plane that I like, exhaust fumes, oil, petrol. Unlike horses; I don't care for their sweaty odour. Even if you had a bath directly after riding, that sweetish, greasy smell still clung. Of course I rode a great deal on our grandparents' estate, but I thought horses were stupid animals, always shying like that. To my mind cattle, contrary to the general opinion, are far brighter. My sister loved horses; I didn't. Perhaps because, as a child, I was once kicked by a horse. Then there are those teeth, chunky and yellow as they snap up carrots in that silly way. You have to hold the carrots out on the palm of your hand, keeping your fingers well together. And when you're in the saddle you have to tighten the girth after a little while, because first the horse pumps itself up but then you start slipping about, saddle and all. Then there's all the jolting and shaking. No, that's not for me. Just think, on the other hand, of the moment when you swing the propeller and it begins to turn, the air suction, think of that complex wooden propeller with its many layers glued together. I hung the propeller damaged on the flight to Sicily up on my wall. I stuck the piece that had splintered off back in place. I didn't try to pretend it wasn't there, I let the break show clearly.

And it's so wonderful when the wheels rise from the ground and the plane takes off. I began singing at that moment to keep myself from shouting out loud with glee, as I did at first. Sorry, I'm waxing enthusiastic, and you yourself know what it's like as well as anyone.

He laughed, no, no, I don't, or at least not the way you do. How do you manage for maintenance? You can always put a horse in a stable and let it graze by the roadside, but a yellow Junkers needs a good deal of fuel and servicing.

You can say that again! At first I hoped to bring in the money by writing and piloting short passenger flights. I did have an inquiry for one of those soon after I bought the plane. A businessman in Berlin had missed his train to Vienna, and he had to be there late that evening. He was offering a good fee. I immediately agreed to fly him to Vienna. It was already afternoon and autumn, with the days drawing in. We took off, flew to Prague, where I refuelled, and then turned south-east. It was misty, late afternoon by then. I just had time to compare the compass course given on the map with my own compass, and then twilight came on. The tree-covered mountains beneath us began to blur. Soon I couldn't read the map any more, and was flying by the compass alone. Gradually it grew dark. Lights began to come on in all the towns, villages and hamlets. The autumn night fell, grey against grey, no moon, not a star in sight, a misty layer of cloud covered the sky. At least the horizon could still be clearly made out, and the instruments on my panel began glowing with phosphorescent light. But it was harder and harder to see the compass, the most essential item of equipment at that moment. So we flew through the night. Now and then a mountain ridge stood out, everything else was a dark mass, broken only occasionally by points of light either closer or further away. I gradually began to feel uneasy. After all, I was also responsible for my passenger, who was sitting in front of me. I could hardly see him, and of course we couldn't talk anyway. The idea of an emergency landing in this hilly, wooded country was simply terrifying. I hoped and prayed that the Danube would soon come into view. I couldn't see my watch any more, and I had no real idea what time it was. But then, at last, I did see the Danube, a ribbon shining faintly in the dark. I followed the river for a long time, and suddenly I had a terrible fright. Hadn't I been flying along the Danube forever? Shouldn't I have reached Vienna some time ago? Could I already have flown past the city? All the time I had been following the Danube I hadn't yet seen any city, and in the dark even the smallest light doesn't escape your eye. It was possible that I had made a wide detour and flown around Vienna, coming close to the Danube only later. How that could have happened wasn't clear to me, to be sure, but there was no dismissing the crazy idea. I told myself that if that was indeed the case, Budapest would come next, and I would circle above the city until the airfield put its

night lighting on for me – which of course was a pointless notion, because my fuel wouldn't hold out that long. My uneasiness was growing by the minute, until I suddenly saw the city lit up ahead of us, a huge, gleaming, radiant sea of lights. I clearly saw the Prater shimmering ahead, with the giant Ferris wheel. And there, out in Aspern, the countless little red lights surrounding the periphery of the airfield were beckoning to me. A single circle, and we landed smoothly in the blaze of the searchlights. They had had the lights on for us for the last hour, since darkness fell, and were expecting us; our take-off had been announced from Prague. It was so dark that the people waiting down there had heard us approaching, but didn't see us until we came down and landed on the lighted runway. And now I discovered from my passenger, who climbed out with some relief, that he hadn't been able to see a thing for the last hour, not since twilight fell. He suffered from night blindness.

Later I flew the same route as a co-pilot for Lufthansa. That was doing it in comfort. Sitting there sheltered from rain and snow in a closed cockpit. But flying in a cockpit open to the air is still the best of all. And I particularly like flying low. The lower you are, the more you can feel your own speed.

I like to hear you go into raptures about the joys of flying, he said. Personally, as I told you, I just wanted to get out of the mud. Now I fly only if I absolutely must. If I'm honest with myself, he said, walking is the right form of locomotion for me. I like to walk, I don't mean hiking, just walking, in cities too, inner cities, not in the country and certainly not in the suburbs where the outskirts of town meet the open countryside. Those are the places I hate most.

This is the centre of the city, says the grey man, here's the canal and the Humboldt harbour, over there the Charité hospital, the prison used to stand on the other side of the canal, political prisoners were held there. The buildings have been demolished now. You can still see the high perimeter wall. Over there, where these days there's a place for children to play and dogs to run about, that was once the prison yard. At the end of April, just a few days before the end of the war, the Gestapo was still shooting Resistance fighters. Their corpses lay in the rubble and were buried here days later, by the brick wall, you can see the plaque: *In memory of the Resistance fighters buried here on 20 July 1944.* And on the day when Berlin surrendered, 2 May, a group of SS soldiers, including many

volunteers from Norway, Denmark and France, tried to break out of the city from here and go west. You can still see gravestones pitted with holes left by machine guns and shell splinters. Is it mere coincidence that the last battles were fought here in the Invaliden Cemetery, where all the military men lie? Or that it was first destroyed and later cut off from the rest of the city by the Wall? They are all gathered here, the military leaders, the heroes of the air, Resistance fighters, reactionaries and reformers, democrats and Nazis. Over there, not a hundred metres from the murdered members of the Resistance, in badly damaged Field A, lies Reinhardt Heydrich, compiler of the card index of opponents of the Nazis. Here's General Schlieffen, over there Moltke the younger, with Udet and Mölders very close, and General Winterfeldt, Frederick the Great's friend, a brave man who was wounded six times and died of his last wound. A cemetery of heroes, it used to be called. Many of those who lie here were killed, many of them killed others first, and if you will allow me the rather obvious turn of phrase, some of them killed themselves. A place of violence. She too lies in this place, one woman, the woman aviator, a little lonely among all these men, don't you think? On the other hand, she was also one of the first women to break into aviation. The Berlin Wall ran right past her grave. After the building of the Anti-Fascist Protective Rampart, as it was so grandly called in East German propaganda, the first fugitive was shot here. He had tried to reach the western part of the city by swimming the canal, and during his attempt to get away the Berlin police shot an East German border guard from the opposite bank of the canal. A place that attracted killing, it would seem. After reunification the Wall was torn down, although a section has now been rebuilt at Marga von Etzdorf's feet. Prefabricated concrete blocks painted greyish white, not three metres away. You could say she has a view of that section of the Wall. Flying is worth your life.

What's she saying now?

Lights began to come on in all the towns, villages and hamlets. The autumn night fell, grey against grey, no moon, not a star in sight, a misty layer of cloud covered the sky. At least the horizon could still be clearly made out.

That last remark, the grey man asks me, did you hear it? The instruments on my panel began glowing with phosphorescent light.

She read poetry. Earlier, she wrote poems herself, but to her, says Miller, to her flying is poetry.

Flying is poetry, what nonsense! It was fun, it was my lust for adventure. Surely that's enough.

Yuku sora mo
ari ya satsuki no
ama-garasu

How about the other voices?

They're saying what they remember, what they've always told us. It's slow to fade away. Repetition is the terrible part of memory. They always come out with the same things. That is Hell. Everything finished and done with for ever. The eternal present is intolerable. No guilt, no forgiveness. How can we recognize evil if we know only good? Isn't the one contained in the other? Here it's all the same. People blown up by bombs, people burnt in cellars, prisoners shot. The victims and their murderers. All lying in order here, with imposing memorial stones. The others lie over there, higgledy-piggledy, as I said, jumbled up and yet united. A little further away.

Yoru no kasa
tsuki mo kuru tote
kakashi kana

Who's that speaking?

The Japanese. Buried over there, the only Japanese in this place. Knows a little German, but it's best to ask no questions, just let him recite his haikus.

Once, Dahlem said, he had been in Rabat. And in the winding alleys of the Old Town a man approached him, shouting out loud. This man wore a long, torn coat, he was shouting, gesticulating, reeling in his madness, but everyone tolerated him, no one grinned behind his back, children did not mock or tease the man as children in Germany so often mock anyone conspicuous. Here in Japan, on the other hand, even those whose minds are disturbed are at peace, they withdraw into themselves, their protest is evident

only in their actions, and it was the same with her, the woman who was married to a man she didn't love and said no more about it, but drew her nourishment from flying.

I wandered far and wide before I came here. The wind died down, then my friend came, he came with a storm lantern and dug, he found me.

And that voice, very far away, brittle, who's that?

See his epitaph. Made of iron, a memorial in the form of the Iron Cross. Friedrich Friesen, Lieutenant and Adjutant in the former Lützow Volunteers, b. 25 Sept 1784 in Magdeburg, d. in battle 16 March 1814 at La Lobbe, France.

I heard the spade, it crunched, sometimes a clearer sound came when the steel struck stone, or there was a dull vibration as a root was severed. That was how he found me. Gathered me up, my dearest friend. We had sworn under an oak tree that if one of us fell, the other would see that he was buried on German soil. For twenty-six years my friend went from garrison to garrison, taking me with him in that little oak casket. My dearest friend, he sometimes raised his glass to me, and I stood on a little table beside his bed. Every sixteenth of March he lit a candle. Snow had fallen, fine snow, covering fields and meadows so that my black coat stood out distinctly. Our men were scattered, the French came and took us prisoner. For no one's love, for no one's life. Freedom. A man who surrenders loses his honour, so I fought until the treacherous bullet hit me, dealt me a blow. *In tyrannos*, we cried. Napoleon. The arch-enemy from France.

The worthiest of the young beside the worthiest of the old.

Driving and thrusting the spade in with brief, fast, firm movements, powerful and tireless once his hands had caught hold of the iron. But now Alexander Humboldt's Mexican atlas is unfinished for ever. No rivers, no mountains.

What does he mean, no rivers, no mountains?

Friesen, a very good draughtsman, was to have drawn in the rivers and mountains on the Humboldt atlas.

What's that whispering?

I can't hear anything.

There is something. Over there. By the wall. A wailing. Sighing. Weeping. All very far away.

Carried here on the east wind. It blows less often than the west wind. The east wind is hot from the steppes in summer, cold and dry in winter.

Yitgadal veytkadash sh'mei rabah

Right by the wall, where the hawthorn stands, that weathered tree, remarkably strong and tall. That's where the whispering comes from.

B'allma di v'ra.

It's the east wind, it's the ashes. The ashes have settled there.

You just have to listen.

I believe only in what I see.

But how about hearing?

Entirely unreliable, my dear fellow. A mere clamour of voices.

And who says that we're the only ones listening?

Exactly, I've heard them very well, the boots up there above us, sometimes even dogs' claws scraping on the Postenweg. There must be paving stones there now. Further on, a hollow, harsh sound of echoing footsteps as if boards had been laid down. Always at the same time of day. Patrols on tours of inspection, changing the guard. Then it was quiet, very quiet. And then, later, came the steps, faltering steps, stopping again and again. After that there were more of them and these days, more and more frequently, groups come, I hear footsteps, irregular footsteps, I hear where they stop. And stand there. Then they go on, sometimes stepping quickly, sometimes slow and dragging.

As we walk on, the grey man says: I'll read you a passage from the German consul's report.

The officer took Frl. von Etdorf to the officers' mess and placed the supervising officer's room at her disposal. Before Frl. von Etdorf entered the room she said she would like to send 1 telegram. In addition, she said, she must inform the Shell representative. The

latter was done at once, and a mess orderly held a note block for her to write the text of the telegram. It was sent to "Isobars", Berlin, and said she had made a crash landing but had suffered no injury herself. She signed the telegram "Marga". Then she went into the room while the officer returned to the aircraft. 2 minutes later the orderly heard 2 shots in the room to which Frl. von Etdorf had withdrawn, and hurried after the officer. The latter turned back at once, knocked on the door, which was not locked, and opened it at once. He found Frl. von Etdorf lying on the bed, her head on the pillow next to the window, while her legs dangled over the side of the bed. She was lying in a large pool of blood, 2 shots had been fired into her head, in her left hand she held a 9 mm calibre sub-machine gun with its muzzle against the left side of her face. She drew a few more rattling breaths and then immediately died. The shots were fired exactly 23 minutes after her landing.

None of the announcements and newspaper reports of her death mentioned any sub-machine gun. The assumption was that she had shot herself with a pistol which she carried for self-defence. She had a permit for the pistol. Suddenly this sub-machine gun turns up in the report from the German consul in Beirut.

She had the sub-machine gun in the plane with her?

Yes, when she flew to Syria she had a sub-machine gun in the aircraft, which of course was strictly forbidden. The government of France, which held the Syrian mandate at the time, had granted her permission to fly over the area, but expressly on condition that no guns could be taken on board.

Gun-smuggling?

Yes. She even had price lists with her. Ammunition. Instructions for use.

Did Dahlem have anything to do with that?

Dahlem never said anything at all about his heroic deeds, Miller interrupts, or about his friends and acquaintances, his love affairs, his business deals, you never knew exactly what he was doing at any time. It was impossible to ask him direct questions, and not because he had requested anyone to refrain, his whole attitude simply ruled it out. He was always courteous but reserved in matters of his private business. Anything said about him was rumour and conjecture.

Rumour had it, the grey man says, that he went to China by sea at the end of the twenties to train pilots there. This was at the end of the Chinese civil war. The warlords fighting each other needed guns and experts on warfare, while the military academy under Chiang Kai-shek wanted instructors and strategists like General Seeckt, who also lies here, her neighbour.

I have nothing in common with the man, it was purely by chance that I was anywhere near him at the time.