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LIGHTNING STRIKE

**The memories and emotions of the plane crash of Olgiate Olona of June 26,1959,
told by grandfather Giuseppe *Pinuccio* Gianduia to his granddaughters**

Dearest Alessia and Valentina, on June 26th, 1959...

... while a strong storm is underway, I am sitting in the corridor of my house, sheltered from the rain, in front of the door of what for many years had been Teresa and Stefano's home, my mother's cousins. Mother Lucia and aunt Vicenzina - my mother's sister - are sheltered in front of the entrance to our kitchen. They are reciting the Holy Rosary while burning the Easter olive branch to ask the Madonna for protection against lightning, especially so as not the harvest is not damaged.

I recently turned eleven. I passed with good grades at the end of fifth grade and was enrolled in the middle school of Rotondi College of Gorla Minore. I'm not obeying my mother because I would like to go to watch television to my cousin Giampiero who lives in the nearby courtyard, and who has had the TV for a short time. I am allowed to open the house, to turn on the television, to watch the arrival of the stage of the Tour, the Tour de France, because when Giampiero returns home I have to tell him who won, who is first in the ranking and how the stage went! But it's raining and there's a storm: if the television breaks down there's serious trouble!

Lightning, thunder and rain increase. The fight with my mother also gets harder. Now aunt Vicenzina is also with her. I can't explain why only one of my mother's slippers arrives in my area... Suddenly a louder noise: I raise my eyes and in the direction of the farmhouse I see a gray thing in the sky that rotates on itself surrounded by flames. What is it?

I ask mom and aunt to come and see. "It looks like an airplane", they say almost in chorus and ask help from the Madonna they were praying to. Pierina, Ermelinda, Virginia and the other women who live in the alley also leave the house and, regardless of the rain, discuss with mother what is going on. It really is an airplane that is crashing! I see gray pieces rolling, they look like pieces of cardboard falling from the sky. Luigia - Tiziana's new mum - also leaves the house.

Worries for her and the little girl arise. The women invite her to retreat into the house to protect the child. The gray pieces get bigger and bigger. I am told to be careful. They talk and almost don't notice that one of these pieces, which has become increasingly bigger, hits Giampiero's antenna, slides onto the roof and lands in the center of the two chicken coops that divide my

courtyard from that of my cousins. The women scream: «It's a piece of wing»; «We must be careful: maybe there is petrol inside that catches fire!»; «Stay away!»; «Luigia go back home!». They are probably reliving the tragedies of the war and the American bombings, when they ran away at night at the sound of sirens to avoid the bombs.

Like magic it stops thundering and it stops raining. Those small gray bodies continue to fall from the sky and, once on the ground, become large pieces of aircraft. The agitation in the alley raises to the stars. The women begin to think of their husbands who have not yet returned from work and where the most important part of the plane will have fallen: the fuselage containing the passengers.

Word spreads that the largest part of the airplane has fallen in the valley, near Agnese's home. Someone goes to the Verdi club a hundred meters away from Vicolo Manzoni to get more precise news. Gilberto - a bricklayer and Ermelinda's husband - returns from the club and confirms that he had heard that the fuselage has fallen in the valley next to Agnese's house, and that some large pieces - the engines - came loose and have fallen near Vizzola, the electricity company where dad Giacomo works. Dad works as cable installer, a profession that has occupied him for fifteen years; he was employed by Vizzola with the recommendations of his father, grandfather Stefano, called *pà Celestar* (father Celeste, the grandfather's second name) and carries out a somewhat delicate and particular job: he climbs the poles to install new cables or replace any faulty or broken ones.

Mum's concern increases considerably: with the news we have on the site of the crash of the airplane and its engines and not seeing him return home, she is afraid that something serious may have happened to dad. Aunt tries to reassure her by telling her that, as usual, he will have stopped at the club to drink a few glasses of wine before returning. Mom, however, is not calm. She sends Ottavio to see what happened. My brother gets on his bicycle and sets off towards Castellanza, but not before listening to a series of endless recommendations from his aunt and mother.

Time goes by. The alley is always bustling! You can hear the sirens of ambulances running. Ottavio does not return with new news. Dad can't be seen. Now not just one is missing, but two! It starts raining again without lightning or thunder. Each family retire to their house.

More scolding awaits me because I put a ladder to climb - under the water - onto the roof of the chicken coop to see the piece of the plane that has landed up close. With a lie I try to convince the women that I wanted to see if the chickens and turkey that we will have to eat at Christmas were alive or dead and, rightly, I hear the answer that the chickens are inside the hen-house, not on top!

Luckily everything tends to calm down. Ottavio returns saying that he hasn't found his father, not even at the Verdi club. A few moments later, dad arrives and claims that he too stopped at the club and that he hadn't seen Ottavio. Mysterious mysteries! Thanks to all this, the object of the two women's attentions becomes them and I can escape to Giampiero- who in the meantime has returned from work - to tell him that I couldn't see the stage of the Tour because I was forbidden to, but above all to understand if his television continues to work despite the plane's wing having fallen on the antenna: tomorrow the Tour of France has another important stage scheduled... The television turns on, but the images are a lot bad.

Discussions go on in my house. At around seven p.m. we calm down again: the usual soup prepared by aunt Vicenzina is ready, a classic every evening. Just before half past seven, Ottavio turns on the radio to listen to the radio newspaper *Radiosera* which begins with the report of Olgiate Olona plane crash. Sixty people are said to have died. Oh mama! I don't think I'll ever get on a airplane again. A few minutes later we hear Ermelinda's voice calling us to go to her house to watch the news. We are all in there, crowded together to understand something more about what happened just over a hundred meters from our house. After the news theme song, the words *Olgiate Olona* appear: I think about how important we have become. After a few moments I can no longer understand anything: everyone has comments and observations to make. I try to isolate myself and think about the bad end that those poor people ended up with, about the fear that planes give me from today. After the news and some further discussion, all the inhabitants of the alley return to their respective homes. We enter the kitchen and aunt reminds us that the Holy Rosary has not yet been recited this evening. She takes the crown out of his apron pocket, makes the sign of the cross and begins to recite the prayers in Latin dialect. Today the mysteries are the painful ones and mother makes us pray *for those poor people who died*.

Today is Saturday, June 27. It's a sunny day and there's a lot of movement in Olgiate. Last night it took me a while to fall asleep: I always remembered that *gray thing* that was spinning in the sky and that seemed to throw people out of the windows. I was more afraid in bed than while directly observing the scene. Who knows if one day I will have the courage to get on an airplane: today I certainly don't have it. I was told that you can't get close to the plane: there are Carabinieri and Police preventing access. There are also soldiers. Without my parents' knowledge, I go to the road leading to Marnate: it is impossible to pass. There is a strange smell. It's much more intense than when mom or aunt bring the chickens close to the fire to burn the feathers that haven't completely detached from the animals' bodies. A policeman approaches me with a machine gun in his hand and shouts at me to move away. He has a dark dark face. I take a few steps away. I have to be very careful because in front I have the policeman with the machine gun and in the back, if he discovers me, I have my mother with slippers. Next to them there is a group of girls who also tell about the crashed plane. One has a swollen face on one side. I'm very shy, but I pretend nothing happens and listen to their conversations.

The girl with the swollen face is saying that yesterday afternoon she had to go to *Tabruccia*, Dr. Fraenza, the town's doctor who knows how to do everything, so called because of a phrase he often repeats to patients: "Ti brucia?" (trans. Does it burn you?) He can even remove teeth! This girl says that yesterday was a hellish afternoon. The pain in her mouth, in one of her teeth, increased, and her mother Evelina told her that at half past five she would be taken to the doctor to have the tooth removed. She, the girl, says she sat on the doorstep watching the rain that increased in intensity and the river swelling.

Among the various thunders, she also heard a different and very loud noise, as if something had exploded. At the moment she thought something had happened in the Sanitaria Ceschina plant, a factory surrounded by Olona river that produces gauze and bandages. For example, it could have been the explosion of a boiler, because in this factory the water is heated to sterilize the gauze. The people who live in the house opposite this little girl's house came out and noticed that fireball circling in the sky. The story of this young girl attracts me more and more

and I continue to listen to her enraptured by her words. From what I understand she lives right near Olona river, down near the mill, next to the Sanitaria. Mrs. Rosa with her husband Angelo, her neighbors, started screaming to run away and save themselves because it really seemed that this fiery piece coming down from the sky was about to fall among them if not even on her house. The workers of Sanitaria were leaving at that very moment: the siren had just sounded signaling the end of the work shift. Turning to the others, the little girl continues her story by saying that her mother then forced her into the house and told her not to go out because, in the meantime, the flaming piece had probably fallen nearby but not on their house, and a large queue of people running in the direction of Marnate was forming. Along with the people, ambulances also began to pass. The other two friends seem a little shocked and scared by the story. They look at me, I try to remain indifferent, but I am interested in eavesdropping on what they say and worried about the possible arrival of someone from my family.

The story of the first girl continues: she says that his father Lucio returned from work later the evening before because he had to make a wider tour, as the road he usually takes was blocked by various emergency vehicles and the Police. However, he managed to get closer to the place where the piece of fire had fallen and was able to see that it was the cockpit of an airplane. There were still high flames in the woods near Agnese's house, the fire trucks were throwing water on the fire and trying to enter Agnese's house to find out if the residents had been saved. Dad Lucio came home shocked saying that, despite working in the foundry, he had never felt such heat and a bad smell. The young girl says that she was then convinced by her mother and father to keep her toothache because Dr. Fraenza's surgery was closed. The doctor had been called to the scene of the accident to provide assistance to the rescuers and, consequently, the tooth hurt all night, which she spent sleepless due to both the pain and the fright she felt. Dr. *Tabruccia* finally removed her tooth in the morning.

I think and, immersed in my thoughts, I almost don't notice that dad Giacomo is approaching. I try to make up an excuse, but he doesn't buy it. He asks me what I am doing there. I turn red and... he starts laughing. Dad Giacomo is really a good person. He understands my difficulties and invites me, under the attentive and worried gaze of those three girls, to follow him to the Verdi club. We go in together and dad orders a San Pellegrino orange soda, my favorite drink, and a glass of red wine for him. He greets some friends and tells me not to worry: he had been observing me for some time and had understood that it was not my intention to go towards the wreckage of the airplane.

Ah, I forgot: the little girl who lived near the Sanitaria and who had a toothache today is a lady who you love very much and who you call grandmother Ginetta with so much affection.

your grandfather Pinuccio

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