



REWARDED IN 2011 WITH MEDAL OF THE PRESIDENT OF THE ITALIAN REPUBLIC

## SURVIVED

by Annamaria Guidi

A long time had passed since that terrible tragedy when my sister - almost six years older than me - told me about it for the first time. The collective memory of that fatal event remained so vivid over the years that it led the community to erect a monument in memory of the victims. So on the day it was inaugurated, in houses, in bars, in clubs, everywhere there was even more talk about that event that had upset the ordinary life of the town, everyone remembering where they were or what they were doing on that tragic afternoon of June 1959. Therefore, me too, who at the time of the crash was a child of just a few months, I wanted to know about that story. «You were too young. Me, I remember very well instead!», my sister told me in the tone she used to use when she wanted to tickle my envy. Older sisters, as we know, never miss the opportunity to boast of being older and, as such, of being able to witness things that the little ones are kept from seeing to avoid trauma. That first time was followed by others. I was the one who asked to listen to it again and my sister started again from the beginning, with more details, without ever getting impatient as I feared. Only when I grew up would I understand why. We had risked dying and each of us in our own way tried to exorcise the idea. Although present, I had not experienced the event consciously, I tried to understand to what extent I had been in danger, creating images that were more and more defined each time and testing the emotions that they aroused in me. She, who on the contrary had experienced it, used that repeated narrative to gradually free herself from a nightmare.

At the time, it was true, I was too young to remember what had happened, but by listening to about that plane that crashed a few dozen meters from us, what had only been told to me became over time a sequence of real-life events: the vision of a trail of flames in the sky, that dull noise, that fear that made my skin crawl were not the simple palpable result of a profound identification, but something that I was now convinced I had had direct experience of. So that, when I talked about it, I reconstructed the episode drawing on the images I had created in my head, as if I had experienced them in first person.

I saw myself in my grandmother's arms, on the balcony of our old house - the one where I was born - which stood inside a courtyard close to the valley. It was one of the many summer afternoons, full of light and children's voices, touched only by a light breeze, the one that made the sheets hanging in the sun flutter from the railings on laundry day. Our house, the last one at

the end of the alley, leaned against the wall of the stables of the villa that belonged to the Gonzaga princes in the early twentieth century. The bell tower of the church had just struck five when dark clouds had begun to gather threateningly, tangling tortuously in the sky, above our courtyard where my sister played with her cousins, inevitable companions on summer raids.

I saw her suddenly running up the stairs, wet and out of breath, followed by the other children, also soaked from a sudden, violent and unexpected rain. That June afternoon, in fact, it had started raining from one moment to the next and pouring down heavily in a tumultuous wind that lashed the water in every direction. The light from the lightning and the sound of thunder were so close together that they prevented my sister from counting on her fingers - as her grandfather had taught her - the seconds between lightning and thunder to know how far away or how close a storm was. That storm was right above us. Having quickly abandoned their games, the children had joined us on the balcony there on the second floor, when we heard a horrible roar, like a very strong explosion, and we saw appear up there, amidst lightning and pouring rain, the white shape of a plane falling in pieces above us, crossing the segment of our sky, hissing above the roofs of Villa Gonzaga. A trail of fire followed it. It was frighteningly close to us. Our balcony had become a privileged platform from which to admire a tragedy from the front row. The enormous noise of a metal crash immediately followed. The air had become dark with dense dust, impregnated with an oily smell that covered every surface. For several days, on laundry day, no sheets had fluttered hanging in the sun on the railings.

I saw the children running madly shouting: «Let's go and see!». The shrill screams of the women who tried in vain to stop them followed. «No, you can't come! You are too young!" the cousins shouted to my sister as they rushed down the stairs, in a rush of very fast steps to make themselves unreachable. In an instant, I saw them cross the courtyard door and take the descent that leads downhill towards the column of smoke. The race didn't last long. The carcass of the plane was there, a few hundred meters from us, having fallen near a farmhouse on the edge of the village, missed by a pure miracle. Before the police arrived, many people had already crowded near the crash site. The remains of the gutted fuselage were scattered everywhere and were burning. Then the rescuers, the civil and religious authorities, journalists and photographers arrived.

My memories up until that moment had moved in a dramatic, infernal atmosphere, so much so that the images appeared colored of an intense red, as hot as that fire. But then suddenly, as if due to a sudden change of scene, those images were followed by others, tinged with a completely different colour, also intense but cold like dismay. My mother's words, people's thoughts, their looks and silences, the newspaper articles told of that misfortune with images that contrasted with the fire that was imprinted in my mind. Each story was linked to the other by a single word. «Ice».

My mother left the office in the late afternoon and, as always, went into the grocery store around the corner to do some shopping. I saw her expression suddenly change at the distracted words of the shopkeeper who, while weighing my favorite cheese, asked her if she had already heard about the plane that crashed in Olgiate Olona shortly before. No, she hadn't heard

anything about a plane crashing in Olgiate. In Olgiate... She found herself outside the shop, without shopping, getting on the scooter and while she accelerated as much as she could, she felt the terror attack her. There were only five kilometers to travel, from Busto to Olgiate, but it seemed like a hundred. Our faces flashed before her eyes, mine and my sister's, those of her in-laws and her nephews. She had left us all there a few hours earlier, after lunch, to go back to work. She had found us scared, my sister crying, my grandmother reciting the rosary in terror, my grandfather arguing with the other men, but safe. That evening, at dinner, no one spoke. Then my mother broke the silence, turning to my father: «Today my blood ran cold. I felt out of breath, as if they had thrown ice right here, on my heart».

I heard the most disparate rumors circulating about the cause of the accident. Someone said that a plane could fly through a storm amidst a thousand lightning strikes without damage, but that the real danger was the formation of ice on the wings. That day the change in temperature had been so sudden that no one had difficulty believing that even at a height of a few thousand meters the change had been fatal. In my child's mind I saw it forming inexorably on the wing from the window.

I read in disbelief with wide eyes the headlines of the national newspapers that had the name of my country on the front page. «Very serious plane crash in Olgiate Olona. Sixty-eight confirmed victims» and then the article which began like this: «The terrifying scenario that unfolded yesterday afternoon before the eyes of the citizens of Olgiate, after the TWA aircraft, at 5.33pm...».

Then, on the day of the funeral, I saw the impressive alignment of the coffins in the church of San Giovanni in Busto Arsizio. The gazes lowered, the silence was palpable. The atmosphere was icy, wrote a reporter.

That June 26, 1959, the Athens-Chicago flight, with a stopover in Malpensa, had tragically ended its journey in a meadow on the edge of my town, a few meters from us, due to a lightning strike that had ignited the exhaust fumes of the tank. It wasn't the ice that caused the fall. But I felt that ice. It had settled deep in the hearts of those who, like me, had survived.

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