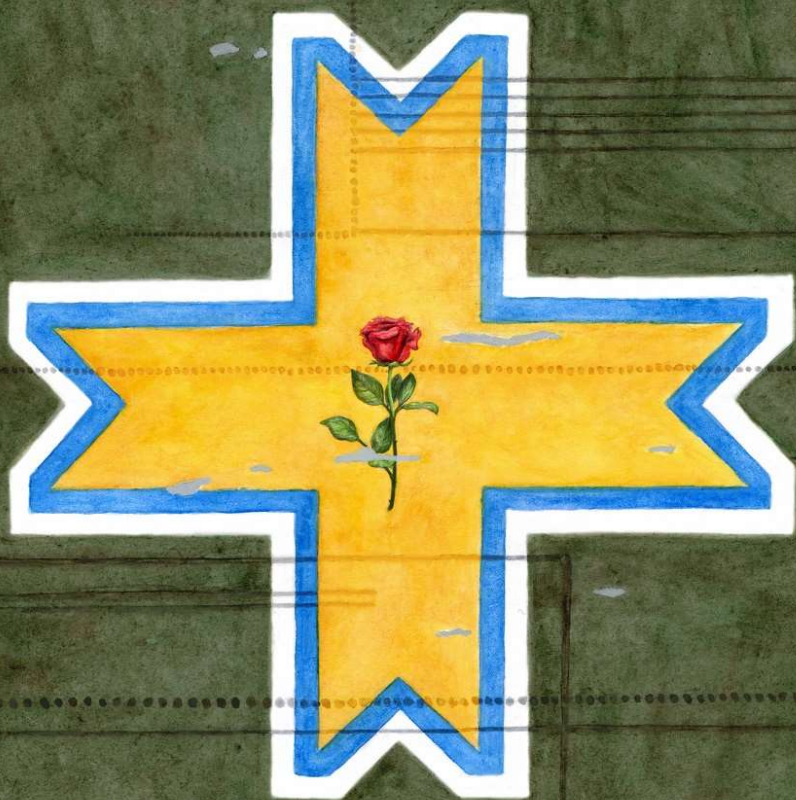


*Eighty flights of a
not-so-much-of-a-fighter pilot*



Catalin Pogaci

EIGHTY FLIGHTS OF A NOT-SO-MUCH-OF-A-FIGHTER-PILOT

By Catalin Pogaci

Cover by Zuzana Konecna

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Introduction

The first time I heard of the IAR-80 was at the start of the 90s, when, as a child, I stumbled upon a magazine which had a cardboard model of the plane inside of it. It wasn't expensive. I bought ten of them. None of my magazines survived. However, the mischief was accomplished. I had fallen in love with the plane.

Later, a full-scale model was exhibited in the Romanian Aviation Museum. Plastic models showed up, and later on, the model was even introduced into flight simulators. Inch by inch, this plane came back from the dead. An entire encyclopedia is available online today. But something was missing.

I wanted badly to read a book *with* the IAR-80. A book which was not about the machine. Not a technical description of it. I wanted a book, fiction or not, where the 80 to be at home as a character.

Pierre Closterman wrote a book. Adolf Galland wrote one, too. It was never translated into English, but Ion Dobran also published his war diary. However, people have yet to write anything similar about the 80. Many short stories were published, some containing only a few lines extracted from a mission report, but I never found a real book. I decided to write one myself.

It is not a book about the war. It does not contain the typical *there I was, at ten thousand feet, when I got jumped by enemy fighters, and I shot them all down* kind of a book. This is a peace story weaved around a war machine. It is not a historical book. Don't look for facts and numbers in it.

Like Patrick O'Brian, I mended historical elements with fiction. Some of the characters in the book existed for real. The context of the book is historical, too, and follows a historical timeline. Other characters are fictitious. It is a pure coincidence if their names match some from real life.

It is also a philosophical book. I did my best to mix the philosophy of peace with the excitement of flying and some historical facts. I hope it all came out nicely.

Acknowledgements

First, the family. Somehow, they managed to withstand my caustic outbursts each time I got disturbed from writing. It happened a lot.

I read many articles published in *Orizont Aviatc*, especially the ones written by Dan Stoian, a former bomber pilot. Everything is in Romanian, but Google can pull wonders these days.

IAR-80, The Unknown Hero, was another source of inspiration for me. I met the book's author, Dan Antoniu, when I was younger. I can say his book is monumental. There is no other like it about the IAR-80.

The IAR-80 FA team, <https://www.iar80flyagain.org/>, which tries to build a full-scale flying replica, published a lot of original documentation on their website. I thank them for that. If you want to support the project, please contact them.

The artist Razvan Dragu has many interesting art pieces depicting the 80. All of them stimulated my imagination. They can be found here - <https://www.artstation.com/artwork/0nOxxK>

Mr. Mihai Andrei, a huge aviation enthusiast, discovered and preserved much of the original IAR-80 documentation. A lot of it was published.

Finally, I a big thanks to all the people who published and wrote on the aviation-dedicated Facebook pages. Some of the posts were really interesting.

Village life

Only the dead saw the end of the war – Platon.

I opened my eyes and looked at the deep, cloudless August sky. The dirt was warm under me. It smelled of grass and dryness, and the air was loaded with fine dust, raised by the explosions of the bombs and the countless feet assaulting the enemy. Thousands of soldiers with guns in their hands were running under the hail of shells and bullets. Some of them were dying, like me, and they were drawing their last gasps in the dirt, thinking about the depth of the sky, and waiting for deliverance. Others covered themselves with glory while bare feet carried them above ditches and dried thorns. At the same time, they shouted *hooray* and held their weapons at ready.

I was fed up with it. I raised myself on an elbow and looked at the battlefield, wondering why I had to die. I had to because I was a *kraut*¹, and I was one of theirs. I noticed I was either a German or a Tartar or belonged to any other invading nation, but I was rarely a Romanian. It happened because I wasn't from the village and the local children didn't consider me to be one of theirs. I wasn't, but Mom was, and even so, there was no reason for any grudge to be held, as I never harmed anyone, and Mom took care of them all the same way she did with me.

She used to say: 'Come here, lonelus, come to mamma and have a doughnut!'

lonelus was not coming at first, pretending not to hear. Eventually, he did, grabbed the doughnut, and made legs.

'Hold on there,' my mom used to say. 'What do you say?'

lonelus got lost, blushed till the tips of his ears, then said:

'God bless!'

'There you go! Now, get out of here!'

The doughnuts were darn good. My Grannie used to bake them inside an earthen stove, where she also baked the bread. She made them from the same dough as the bread but tossed them in powdered sugar when she had any, and the doughnuts came out having that sugar burned on them like a sheet of sandpaper. They tasted like sweetened bread and smelled like the smoked stove. Sometimes, I ate them with a piece of salty cheese, making me drink water with the bucket, but two of those marvels were enough to keep one full for the whole day, and Grannie got rid of me quite cheaply. When it was not a bread-making day, she fried them in lard. They tasted like sweetened pork and went along with sweet cheese.

'Here,' she used to say, 'Fetch the *scovergi*² and eat them!'

‘You don’t call them *scovergi*, Grannie. They are doughnuts!’

‘However, you say,’ she scoffed. ‘Just eat them!’

Grannie’s doughnuts didn’t protect me from the enemy, though. The enemy, under the form of Ionelus, ran me through with the bayonet, pushed me in the dirt, almost spitting on me, and without even saying *a may he rest in peace*, continued to shout and chase other *krauts*.

I used to complain to Grannie that nobody made me a Romanian.

‘Ain’t matter, son! Even the Germans has a soul,’ she was saying.

She knew as she had met them twenty years before. I wasn’t born then. They came from the mountains and passed towards Bucharest with horses, guns, and weapons.

‘How were the Germans, grannie?’ I was asking her because I wanted to be a more authentic *kraut* and know how the real ones were.

‘Like all people are; how else?’

‘Were they big, small, white, black?’ I didn’t quit easily.

‘Black? How could they be black? They were tall and blond.’

Well, here was the problem. I wasn't blond, but Ionelus was.

'There weren't any dark ones too?'

'There was. Let me be, you and your Germans! They took my cow and the chickens away.'

That was her trouble! They took the cow and the chickens. They also brought Grandpa along. In fact, he came by himself, well ahead of them, leaving a trail of dust behind. This is just a way to put things, as he left half of his foot at Dragoslavele³ and limped home the best he could. The *krauts* let him be after catching up, being content with the cow and the chickens. Later, they made him a gamekeeper, a job he had for life. It also marked my life, too. I got to love the forest, and I liked to listen to his stories in his small forest house. He was guarding the woodland of a boyar, a cove called Clinteanu.

Clinteanu had a big mansion surrounded by an orchard full of fruits when the time was right. Maybe because he knew Grandpa, maybe because he knew Grandma, maybe because he used to say I am a cultivated young man, and I was studying at the same exquisite high school as his daughter, he allowed me to fill my belly and shirt up as I pleased. I always shared with Ionelus, Voicu, Niculae, and so on. But they didn't quit calling me 'City boy' or 'Bucharest boy,' even if my name was Matei, because Mom married a locksmith from Grivita⁴ in

Bucharest. We only visited our country house occasionally. We took the train all the way to Gaesti, and from there, either on foot or in a cart, we went to our home.

When returning, we carried a sack of potatoes, a basket of flour, or maize because life was expensive in Bucharest, and Dad didn't earn much.

We lived on the ground floor in an old house near Kiseleff Boulevard. The street was unpaved at first but was later covered in macadam. Even a small playground was built, where a metal swing was mounted. Almost every afternoon, when the children came to play, the swing had no peace, and the creak made by its ungreased hinges could be heard from the Arc de Triomphe⁵.

'Where are you going? Out to play again?' Mom used to say each time I went out the door. 'Return to your lessons; forget that swing and your rascals! Do you think I work down my knees so you will become like your pa?'

I was not going for the swing each time I went out the door. I was a bit too old for that. I was going to meet my pals. Compared to those living in the village, the ones in Bucharest were of the same spirit as I was. On the playground, I used to meet Iulian, a tall bloke, good at sports but poor at studying, and Taie⁶, whose real name was Mircea, but this is how his little brother called him, and Ilarion. Ilarion was small, barrel-chested, stiff, and

had a rooster stance or the posture of an old, vicious sailor. He was enlisted in the Navy School in Constanta, a school I craved for myself during certain times, as I read Jules Verne and that Moby Dick fellow, Melville, but mom was highly against the idea.

‘What are you going to do there with all those low-class people? Do you think I plan to make a sailor out of you? Grab the books and study to be accepted by a God help us, good high school!’

Just to close her loud mouth, and out of respect for her hard work, as to my dad, any career was the same, I worked my way, not to God Help Us, but not very far either, exactly at St. Sava⁷, where I bumped into Elodia Clinteanu, a boyar’s daughter and our countryside neighbour.

As I was standing on my elbow in the grass, I was thinking precisely at her, as we had a *rendezvous*⁸ in the evening.

‘I am so bored, *mon cher*⁹,’ she had told me. ‘Why don’t you come to my place to drink lemonade in the orchard?’

Whenever Elodia was bored, there was always a good chance to spend a quality evening with her, talking and sitting on the bench under the trees. I knew her from the first high school year, and she was maybe my best friend, a better friend even than Iulian, with whom I could not share any philosophical thoughts; his brain didn’t help him. I used to see Elodia mainly at school in Bucharest.

Still, in the countryside, we were together most of the time, amongst the peasants, as she used to say. She was a tall girl, not too blonde, not too dark, with august eyes and not too long, not too short hair. She usually wore trousers and shoes and used to read travel books. If I had met her later in life, I would have married her; she might have been the woman of my dreams. But under the apple trees, we were only two good giggling friends drinking lemonade; I almost forgot she was a girl dressed up in trousers and wearing shoes as she was.

‘Up you go, let’s go home; I am hungry!’ I heard Niculae’s thundering voice next to me. ‘The war is over; may it be forever damned!’

For me, it was long since it was over, as I was lying butchered in the grass, but Nicolae had kept chasing the ‘krauts’ with his cob-made gun until he got out of breath and hungry. He was a tall lad, not as tall as Iulian from Bucharest, but almost. Like most country folks, Niculae had broad shoulders and palms like shovels, and he possessed a frightening strength. He also sported a fluffy moustache, which went under his lips. He was proud of it. Niculae was two years younger than me, but he looked much older; it was quite a surprise to see him still playing with cob-made guns.

‘Very well, *mon cher*,’ I told him. ‘I felt hungry for a long time!’

‘Hey, watch it, will ya, or I’ll slap you! What are you sayn’ in there?’

Niculae didn’t know Caragiale¹⁰, and I bet he had no clue the French speak a different language. But he was a good fellow, and one day, he saved me from a big ram that wanted to harm me. He saved me from others, too, such as Voicu who used to pick on me constantly; despite being older, Voicu feared Niculae’s immense strength.

‘Tell me, Niculae, what do you have for dinner at home?’ I asked him, lifting my carcass from the dust.

He thought a bit about it. I knew he didn’t have much, so I asked. He had many brothers, and he was the oldest. He helped us with work around our yard, and he received in return bread and doughnuts, or he got his hat filled with eggs and potatoes.

‘Why don’t you come to our house? There is bean soup. Mom cooked it yesterday.’

Niculae pushed his hat up his head and considered the idea for a moment, long enough to avoid being seen as a hungry beggar. Then, letting out a deep sigh, like a grownup, he said - ‘Let’s go.’

It was cool, a pleasant coolness that made you feel alive after the day's heat without making you feel cold. A bug, the size of a finger, was buzzing amongst the trees like a piece of cardboard stuck between the spokes of a bicycle. The hounds started their evening concert, sending telegrams from one end of the village to the other. Many of the messages were threats, as their barking didn't sound friendly to me.

'Hey you, you over there!'

'No, you, you over there!'

Then another one, with a squeaky voice like a screeching railroad track - 'Wad' ya' want? Wad' ya' want?'

Then quiet and the crickets; then again a surly raspy bark - 'Don't ya' hear me? Don't you?'

Finally, a door opened, allowing a beam of light out, and Elodia slipped her thin body into the orchard. Her tomcat, Berica, had been in my lap for quite a while, purring the day's stories.

Elodia got closer, carrying with difficulty a carafe of lemonade, which she dropped on the small table between the benches.

'Just a tad late, Lenuta, aren't we?'

I liked to tease her by calling her Lenuta, as I knew she didn't like it. Only her dad called her so, and she said it makes her feel like a child when called as such, despite being a grownup woman. But she deserved it because I had to wait for one hour, holding the cat, and didn't want to whistle at her from the gate either, as I wasn't courting her.

'Don't worry, *mon cheri*, no harm done! I see you had some company anyway! Berica, come to mamma Berica! Come, my dear, come!'

Berica was way too happy on my warm knees to stir. Still, she mercilessly fetched him, making me feel the cat's claws clutching my skin. She pulled on him until he detached skin and all and gently put him on her knees.

'Maybe you'll pour that lemonade into the cups!'

I reached behind me, where I knew two tin cups were hanging on a branch. I shook them well to remove any caterpillars and other things from them and filled them up. It was a good one - lemon and sugar. Elodia gulped some, coughed, and started.

'*Amuse mois*¹¹, *mon cheri*, I was alone all day, as *Papa* was away to Pitesti; he just arrived. I am like Olguta from *La Medeleni*¹², but I feel like that hoopoe, what's her name, Otilia¹³, caught up in the family business.'

I knew who *Olguta* was, as I liked Teodoreanu too, but I had no idea who the hoopoe was. Maybe she was Elodia's creation.

'I don't even know what else to read during this heat. I would travel far away, where it is cold, maybe Norway, as I am fed up with London. It rains continuously in there, like in Bacovia¹⁴, and if there is a sunny day and you go to the beach, you can't even touch the water. Do you know how cold it is?'

I didn't, but Elodia hugged herself, rubbing her shoulders to show me.

'I heard the government changed again; this is what Papa said. I hope some better ones come to power this time, as what is happening worldwide, let alone in Europe, is scandalous. There are only old farts in power!'

That was true. I noticed the same from the history books and Otetea's history lessons. I have no clue how it was, but I've only seen old farts as kings, emperors, or prime ministers, but the problem didn't interest me much. I had no clue who the incumbent prime minister was, but I knew well what film was played at Eforie or Minerva. I also learned how good the pretzels were in Cismigiu Park, and a pint wasn't bad either, from time to time.

'You know I can't stand the beer. I prefer lemonade or some Cotnari¹⁵.'

I knew that, too, but she was still holding Berica¹⁶ on her lap, and he didn't look to be made of wine at all.

'But I miss seeing a film, you know...'

'Hey, Ela, how come you don't miss Cosnita?'

Elodia stopped talking. I think I had spoiled her evening. I could approach many subjects with her, and I liked this about her. She was always informed about the latest books and the political situation; she could speak French and English because she travelled often to London and Paris. She also knew the latest gossip in the village, who died, who was born. But when it came to mathematics and the math teacher, she always got upset.

I tried to fix it somehow.

'They say he slept with two equations without *solving* even one.'

'What a swine you are!'

I felt her smile in the dark, so I swallowed it.

'But I like Demetrescu the same way you like Frederic. By the way, *comment va Frederic*¹⁷?'

'*Il va bien*¹⁸, for you to know! But I heard the next year he'll go back home to France.'

'*Domage*¹⁹! He is the best French teacher in the entire high school.'

'Of course he is, you silly boy. He is French.'

'I didn't mean it this way. It is just...how to put it better... he wants to teach you. He makes jokes, he tells anecdotes; even the worst slackers stay at his classes.'

'They do, but you don't!'

'There was a good film at that hour, and Iulian had already bought the tickets. Anyway, Frederic *understands* these things.'

'Right! How's this Iulian of yours doing, by the way?'

'He still has his head in the clouds. He is two meters tall, after all.'

'You also have your head in the clouds...Why don't you become an aviator, Matei?'

That was a good question. Soon, we had to sustain the maturity exam, and I had no clear idea what I wanted to do afterwards or what I wanted to become. But the aviator idea was alright. I could already imagine myself seated behind a small, steel-framed windscreen, wearing a leather helmet and sporting a confident, spiteful smile like I had seen in the 'Hell's Angels' a few years earlier. What a good film that was!

'I was thinking of becoming a geographer, as I like to wander around anyway, but since you mentioned the

aeroplanes and the aviators, I reckon the idea is pretty good. I can stroll through the air.'

'Look who is a flying Simion Mehedinti²⁰!' She burst into laughter. 'Bravo, you didn't even start and are already developing the science!'

'Look *ma chere*, did you ever fly?'

'Yes, once, with my father to Belgrade! I was sick for a week after, do you hear? For a week! I don't want to hear about flying again!'

'How about the sea? Have you been at sea before?'

She had been with a yacht and some family friends. She liked it, and I knew she had been, but I asked only to hear the story again. Elodia visited many places; I liked it when she talked about it. Apart from the French and the English, she had also visited the Serbs, the Polish, the Germans, and even the Turks, where she said one of them wanted to have her as his third wife. She mostly liked the French and the Germans, saying that the Germans were serious people. I don't think Grannie would have had the same opinion, but I felt flattered as I had been a German for the whole day.

Elodia had also visited the whole of Romania, from the Danube to Iasi. I only knew Bucharest and the city of Sinaia, in the mountains, where I once was with the school.

After being accepted at St. Sava, through circumstances I had difficulties understanding, I noticed quite a few things. One of them was the fact the high school was not like the gymnasium; the second was it was full of rascals in there, and many of them had plenty of money as they came from rich families; the third thing was they may have had the money, but definitely not the brains as most were lagging behind with their studying.

I didn't travel as much as Elodia, but I knew by heart the forests and the fields around the village. I also knew all the animals in the forest, what they ate and drank, and what traces they left on the ground. Grandpa even taught me how to fire his shotgun. I used my imagination to travel, read books, and listened to Elodia's stories. She was different from the rest. Iulian and Taie were also different; we were all in the same classroom.

The door was discretely cracked open, allowing a ray of light to sneak out, and the face of Mrs. Clinteanu showed up.

'Ela dear, are you in the orchard? Why don't you come to bed? It is almost midnight.'

'Just let her be, my dear; she is with that lad from Bucharest. They are young!' I heard the voice of Mr. Clinteanu, as usual.

'All right, but don't stay until daylight, dear! It's a pity not to have a proper rest !'

We didn't stay until daylight, but it was long since the roosters finished their crying when we were done talking. The dew set in, signalling the approach of the fall, and the cricket's chirping had discretely replaced the barking of the dogs.

After two days, we returned to Bucharest in Niculae's carriage. We had a sack of flour with us. Mom was receiving news, and she was happy about it. She and Marin, Niculae's father, were sitting on the front bench while I was basking on top of the flour sack in the back.

'Did ya' hear? That fellow, Ion, the son of Balan from Visina, died!'

'Is dat' so?'

The peasant in Mom always came out when she was amongst other peasants.

'A week ago, he died!'

'Alas! May he rest in peace!'

'But that's alright. His other son will inherit the land. Maybe he'll build a house.'

'Maybe. My Niculae is old enough to get married, but I have nothing to leave him, even if I'd die twice.'

'What can I say? You fathered too many!'

Marin pretended not to hear.

'Maybe this new government will give us something; maybe they'll pass some new laws....'

'They'll give us hell! Can't you see what we've been getting for years?'

'That's right! Like they would come and help us in the garden!'

'Can't you see this country is getting worse and worse?'

'God bless you, Costica! Where are you heading?'

'To hell, I'm heading. Come join me!'

'Just look at him! You think he is penniless, but he spends the whole day in the pub!'

'Maybe he drowns down his bitterness in there!'

'He drowns his luck, not his bitterness!'

A distant rumble started to be heard, and I expected to see an automobile passing by. But the noise grew louder, and instead of the automobile, an aeroplane flew above us. I clearly saw written 'YR' on one of the wings before it disappeared behind the hills.

'Hoooo, hoooo, hold fast there, may your cross be forever damned! Hooo, as you'll turn the carriage into splinters!'

Marin's *stallion* suddenly proved capable of running. The problem was it tried to run off the road and to the fields, carriage and all. The man wrestled the reins, cussing like a gipsy, and then the horse calmed down. Mom had been yelling the whole time she'd lost her flour sack. I didn't even exist. Then Elodia's words came back into my mind...

About gliding flight

Imagination is the only weapon in the war against reality – Lewis Carroll.

All of us were on the playground. Iulian leaned against the swing. All of us were grumpy. It was cold, but the snow refused to fall. Smoke ribbons went up like hemp strings out of the chimneys, and since the street had been paved, there were even automobiles in our neighbourhood. A blue Ford was parked not far away. She had an ugly hole in the radiator where the Ford emblem was supposed to be. The emblem hung in Iulian's bedroom.

We all graduated high school, but none of us was accepted by a college. My dream to become a geographer was foiled.

The fall flew by, the big aviation show at Baneasa also passed, and I saw a new Romanian fighter aircraft darting in the sky like a silver arrow. The Germans had unburied the war hatch again, and everybody was fighting them because they had invaded the Poles. They and the Russians! They had been at war since March, and because of that, the general mobilization started in Romania. Still, I, ignorant of politics, was uninterested in such news. The Germans and the people who dealt with the mobilization let me be.

We've been to see the Polish aero planes at Otopeni. We had read it in a newspaper. It said: *Despite the political pressure from the Germans, the Romanian government accepted to receive the Polish war refugees, both military and civilian. They've been received well, the military personnel having their weapons removed. Many Polish military and civilian aircraft followed the same path, and the machines were to be inspected and subjected to a selection to be next pressed into the aviation service of His Majesty the King.* The turmoil that started inside my soul during the summer resurfaced. Thus, one morning, I urged Iulian and Taie to go and see them. And we went.

We often talked about the future, which looked darker and darker, trying to understand what we wanted to do with our lives.

'Why don't you take a job as a toilet? You're of no good anyway.'

Iulian stood up tall in a threatening stance.

'Can you believe how many asses you'll see?'

Mircea was the most vulgar man on Earth. He was nasty and good-looking. With his blue eyes and blond hair, he looked like an angel from Murillo's paintings but much bigger. He openly offended people in such funny ways that nobody got upset with him. We pulled for a long time on his sleeve, trying to find out why his family called him Taie. Mircea boiled us without ever telling the true story.

He told us how he had been the midwife of his younger brother, and when the latest came out of the mother, the doctor yelled, 'Taie! (Cut it!)', and he had cut the umbilical cord. That was the first word his little brother learned. He told us other stories as well, each time a different one.

Iulian didn't mind him this time, too. He mimicked he wanted to catch him, while Taie casually dodged his hands around the swing and replied, using his slow mind.

'If I become a toilet, you can be my right hand, the toilet paper! Do you realize how many asses you'll kiss? You're good at it anyway!

That was true. Mircea was a cunning snake, a beautiful, vulgar, cunning snake. He concluded that kissing asses is a real-life skill and he could make a good career out of it.

We drew other conclusions as well. Mircea could sell tickets at hell's Gate, as he could have fooled people into believing there is a paradise inside. Iulian explored, mostly through Mircea's eyes, the career of a professional giraffe kisser so that the poor buggers would not feel lonely, the job of a flag pole – that's an easy one, my boy, all you have to do is to stand up straight! – and finally, the most exotic, the noble job of mayor. Their eyes fell upon me when they debated the best way of holding a pen to sign useless papers. I hadn't said much during the talk, just a shy suggestion here and there.

'Tell me, love! Tell Uncle Mircea what you want to be when you grow up?

I felt uneasy and insecure as he had asked in a too-kind tone.

'That's right! Tell Uncle Iulian too!

Better and better: two against one! Fast and dramatic measures needed to be taken to escape. Therefore, on the one hand, to take them by surprise, on the other because it was somehow true, I took the pupil's stance in front of the blackboard and barked out loud - 'I want to become an aviator!'

Two surprised pairs of eyes glanced at me. The first part of the plan worked out well. Quick, the second part had to be applied before they'd get their bearings again!

'...therefore, I invite you to go to Baneasa to get some info!'

'Is it not too cold?' Mircea noted.

'Is it not too far?' Iulian supported him.

'We can ride our bicycles through the park,' I insisted.

'The park is empty when it's cold! What do you want to see in there? How the river flows?'

During the summer, it was different. There were people, lovers holding hands, and damsels strolling around in

pairs; we used to move around like a pack of hungry wolves. Usually, there was also Ilarion with us, as he was on holiday, like everybody else, and the pond, modest as it was, was a good substitute for the Black Sea. Iulian, tall and slim, was riding his bicycle; Ilarion, short but solid, tried to run somehow next to him, using his ridiculously short legs. Mircea was either riding his own bike or running around singing aloud.

*I love a passionate woman,
Dark brown with fiery black eyes,
But the one with green eyes, like the sea
Gets me drunk every time with her embrace!*

I noticed he used to sing louder when being close to the strolling couples.

'Beat it, you wasters!' Some Don Juan picked on us.
'Watch it, will you?'

'What about it? Aren't we allowed to sing?'

I generally tried to sneak around pretending not to be with them.

'We'll exercise in the cold and set our careers up!'

'It doesn't fit me! Flying is for the birds,' Iulian protested.

'You're not allowed to fly anyway...'

'I'll go by myself, then!

'Who's gonna hire us, loudmouth?'

'If you're so good at talking as you brag you are, we'll soon see!'

Mircea stiffened.

'Let's go. I'll show you how the job is done! If I'll find no job for Iulian today, then my name's not Taie!'

'What kind of a job?' Iulian suspiciously inquired.

'As a ladder! Let's go!'

We knew too well the road through the park: sad and muddy alleys, the dark river slowly flowing between the frozen banks, and the charmless, leafless trees. Our narrow wheels left long tracks in the mud, marking our passage. I noticed how tasteless a man-made place is when the man is missing from the picture, as the park wasn't old. It had been finished only a few years prior. Before that, only the murky shores of the Colentina River were gently slithering among marshes and bushes. After the works were completed, the river became a large lake during the summer, full of boats and people, and a sad river during the winter, flowing through an empty park.

Before having our hearts touched by depression, we got out of the park and followed the main boulevard. We saw the Miorita Fountain in the middle of the road, like a

frozen pie; we looked at the House with Bells; we glanced at the Mogosoaia train station, where the king wandered around sometimes; we went under the railroad bridge like the arrows, and howling like the Indians. We arrived at the Royal Farm, which stretched to the left, unveiling its big mansions between the trees! We looked at the Last Guardian of the City. Finally, the airport! A large field where horses used to run. One could come next to its fence during the summer to watch the aero-planes taking off and landing or have a cold pint.

My father took me to that fence once. While I watched ladies and gents climbing aboard a big white thing with wings parked in front of the building like a post carriage, he was busy with the pint. The thing started up the engine, producing a big cloud of smoke, like a locomotive, and I got scared and ran to my father.

'What are you afraid of, you sissy?'

I was small back then...

The airport's building was there. We stood in front of it and looked. There was one thing to plan something and something else to implement the plan.

'Now what, wise guy?'

'We get in, of course!'

'Just like that?'

To answer him, I pushed the door and got in, sheepishly followed by the rest, after leaving the bicycles outside. We entered a well-lit hall, like a ballroom. All around, there were stands with banners above them, the biggest belonging to LARES. A few gentlemen were sitting on chairs and reading newspapers. It was quiet!

We expected someone to show up and chase us away, 'Scram, you buggers,' but nothing happened. Only a young woman threw us an inquisitive look from behind her coffee and newspapers stand. On the opposite side of her, next to LARES²¹, was written in bold letters: 'TICKETS.' What do you know! Like at the train station!

We discretely pitted Mircea against the ticket boot, as he was the better-looking one, and the ticket-selling people could have known more than the coffee people. Taie spent some time there, talking to another young woman. He didn't fly through the room with a shoe glued to his derriere. We found that to be a good omen.

Iulian leaned over my shoulder, watching him, and whispered in my ear like commenting on a horse race. 'He is flirting with her! He'll get a date for this evening; you'll see!'

'Shush! Don't you see she's older than he is,' I whispered back at him.

'So what? Do you know what a good soup you can make from an old hen? Look at him! He is jotting down her address!'

I was just preparing to tell him I heard nothing about the old hen and the soup when the young female clerk disappeared into an office.

'No way! She already left him,' Iulian whispered. 'He must have told her something bad!'

A door opened, and the woman came accompanied by a gentleman dressed like a ship's captain. She whispered something into his ear and vanished. The gentleman signalled us to approach, smiling at us.

'I hope he's not her husband,' Iulian groaned.

'I heard you want to become aviators,' he said after introducing himself first: Commander X, airline pilot.

'That's right,' Iulian replied. 'Mostly him,' he pointed at me.

'And how did this idea come to you? Are you not scared?'

'No, why should I be scared,' I told him. 'Does it bite?'

'Sometimes it does!'

'I'm not scared! Many other things bite.'

'Right,' he said approvingly. 'How old are you? Did you major? You don't look too old.'

'We didn't. We just finished high school.'

'Aha! And you thought about a career, is that so? Or do you only want to fly a bit?'

'Both.'

'Both,' he mumbled to himself. 'Look here, fellows; I can't really help you much! Why don't you ask at ARPA or go to Giulesti? I think there is a flight school at Pipera, too. But I am warning you, this may be costly! It may be possible without money, but certain conditions must be fulfilled. There is nobody at the local school here, as they don't fly during the winter, but you can come and ask during spring. You'll also need your parent's permission if you are underage.'

We exchanged some sad looks. It seemed more complicated than we thought, but at least we had a lead to follow. The information we received proved to be part of a big affair. After we left the airport, we kept gathering info. We went *here*, and we also went *there*, sometimes alone, sometimes accompanied by my two friends. Despite the encouraging smiles, no special admittance conditions existed for flight schools. Still, happy pockets were willing to swallow the 30000 lei tuition fee. Reading in a magazine how Prince Cantacuzino became a great acrobatic pilot after being a motorcycle racer, Mircea concluded he was neither prince nor princess and owned no cement factory to cast himself a statue. Still, he was

thinking of posing nude to make some dough, the same as Josephine Baker did. For the moment, it looked like we had reached a dead-end.

Ma chere,

This is the first time we have written to each other since you left. In fact, I think this is the first time I have written to you.

I hope you are well where you are and that the current political situation does not affect you. What I read in the papers is quite concerning. What my mother says is even more so. The reports say the crisis will soon end, and Germany will quickly back off in front of the whole of Europe.

Mom says they will never back off, and she's scared it will start like in '16 when she was still a girl. They have a lot of supporters, even here. I don't understand why one needs to take sides, but if needed, I think I would jump in for our people.

But let us put politics aside; better tell me how it is in London and how college life is. You know I failed, but I'll

try again this year. Meanwhile, I thought about what you told me and became interested in aviation.

Let me tell you.

I've checked with Iulian and Mircea. The flight school cost a fortune; you can buy a small mansion for that money. Nobody wants to hear about us; they have other businesses to solve. So, we quit the idea for a while; I didn't want to hear of it again, as I didn't want to have bad blood. I thought they'd soon conscript me into the army anyway, and I could make my way through somehow, even to wipe the dust off the aeroplanes. But, what do you know! Miracles happen! Do you know David? The bloke I helped to cheat at trigonometry? Once, we had a test, and he continuously asked Iulian what I wrote in my paper. Iulian, another genius, took a look and whispered back: he made a circle with a cross inside of it. I have no idea how these two graduated at St. Sava.

Let us not drift off the subject, though! We've been around Cismigiu just to wander around because it is springtime. As we strolled along, what do you know, an aeroplane crossed the sky! I got hit by an amok and almost jumped into the lake, fuming that they are built of gold and only gilded bottoms can fly in them. Out of the blue, David showed up and asked me if I wanted to fly. He took me aside, as I believe he has some consideration for me since the trigonometry classes, and told me he could

arrange something for me. I know his father works at IAR; he's a great engineer, but I need to figure out what can be set. Anyway, he invited me home for a chat. If you don't know, they build aircraft at IAR in Brasov.

Otherwise, I don't know what else to write you. Spring came, and the world got a bit more alive. I think we'll go to the countryside again, as we haven't been in quite a while and everything got expensive again. I am not in the mood to go, but I miss the forest, as I spent too much time inside the house. It feels like being in a shoebox!

Hope to hear from you soon!

I am not sending you any kisses as I know you don't like it, so I bid you meilleures, salutations, or goodbye; however, you say it in there!

Matei.

And there I was in front of the Stambuleanu house, an elegant two-story mansion with a rose garden that had to wait a little longer to blossom. I had a bar of chocolate in my pocket as an offer for the madam, as the flowers hadn't shown up yet, and they would have been a better alternative to the chocolate. I pushed the gate and entered the yard with the courage of a sailor who explores unknown seas.

'Oh! What a pleasant surprise! You didn't have to bother, dear! David, where are you, sugar? A colleague of yours came to visit!'

Some large stairs that started in the middle of the room, a room as large as a small theatre, began to creak as steps approached in a rush. David hastily showed up, without coming down, red in his cheeks and wearing slippers.

'Oh, there you are! Come up here; why are you standing like a marmot over there?'

'Davidut, honey, what can I get for you? Ilinca, Ilinca! Oh dear, where did that hoopoe go! A coffee, maybe? And some cherry jam from our orchard? Or maybe some wine? It is from our vineyard.'

Davidut, from red, turned purple.

'Did I not tell you before *not to call me Davidut*?'

Aha! Another one complexed by his age!

'Oh, come one now, you know how mothers are! Do you think his mother doesn't call him...but what is your name dear?'

'Matei!' The explanation arrived from the top of the stairs.

'Right! Mateut! You see? David is so mean. What do you think, sugar? His folks don't caress him at home, too?'

'That's their business!'

'This is how we all get spoiled at home,' I embarrassedly dared.

'You see Davidut, dear? What a good-behaved young man! I'll fetch some of that good wine for you! Ilinca, where the devil did you disappear,' she squealed, sticking her head in a corridor.

When hearing about the good wine, *Davidut* chilled down, and from *Mr. Hyde*, he became Dr. Jekyll.

'There, there, up you go,' said he in a gentler tone. 'I have a lot to show you. And you should taste that marvellous wine!'

It *really was* marvelous! We leaned over his aviation magazines and sipped the wine drop by drop from two purple, almost bottomless glasses. David's walls were all covered with aeroplane pictures. I was interested in a slick, grey silhouette with rondels on its wings. It had a bulldog-like nose and a giant three-bladed propeller.

'Do you like it,' he asked, pointing at the picture.

'What plane is this?'

'You don't know? You really don't know?'

He asked in a tone like it was a deadly sin not to know.

'I have no clue what it is,' I confessed with serendipity. 'I haven't seen it before. What is it?'

'It is our new fighter plane,' he answered with pride. 'It's built at Brasov. My father works on the project. It is amongst the best in the world, like the English Spitfire or the German Messerschmitt.'

'I think I saw it at last year's airshow. And you say it's a good machine?'

'Amongst the best ones, but I can't tell you more! It is a military secret!'

I looked better at the plane, imagining how flying in one would feel. To fly like a lark at treetop level and maximum speed! If you had met Marin and his horse along the way, both would have been transformed into Olympic runners, like that American black fellow. I forgot his name; I read about him in a sports magazine.

'This is why I called you!'

David put a German magazine on the table. It had written Segelflug or something similar on the cover. A picture of a strange aeroplane with seagull-like wings was also visible. He opened the magazine at a certain article and asked - 'How about this one? Do you know what this is?'

There it was, the seagull aeroplane again. There were more pictures of it in there. I didn't manage to see the

article, but it was written in German, a language I knew less than French.

'An aeroplane, what else?'

'Wrong, mister! It is *a glider*!'

'A glider? What's that?'

'It means it has no engine, *mon cher*! Don't tell me you don't know what it is!'

I vaguely recalled Vlaicu²⁴ also built one: a ball of sticks and wires; I don't remember where I read about it. I had imagined gliders as affairs from the start of aviation when there were no engines. But here, in front of my eyes, was one from our days. It was written in the magazine about it. The article didn't describe only the machine but also the exploits of a certain Kronfeld, an Austrian who flew such a glider and, from one day to another, broke one record after the other. He flew higher, further, faster! Other things were mentioned, too, but I didn't manage to read more as David threw himself into a speech to enlighten me. He described the history of the gliding flight from the early '20s until doomsday. He explained how the Germans – oh dear, these Germans again! – were the ones who started it all, first by a man called Lilienthal, who used to fly off a hill built by himself until he crashed and died one day. Very encouraging, indeed! They built a monument in his honour on the same hill near Berlin. David shuffled another magazine and

showed it to me. It looked like a hat with legs. Since then, the sport of gliding has literally made wings, becoming very popular in Germany and worldwide.

He told me that in the '20s, during a competition, distances greater than two kilometers were reached in gliding flights that lasted even two minutes long – I wasn't so impressed about it – and ten years later, more than two hundred kilometers distances were leniently exceeded.

I sharpened my hearing, as I couldn't understand how such mischief could have been achieved without an engine. I wanted to ask, but David left no time for an intermezzo.

He told me how this engineless business also reached our country in the '30s; first at Sibiu, at Pastior's gliding school, and then next to Petrosani, at Livezeni. Of course, it had gotten here way before, since Vlaicu's time, but as a sport, he said, only in the '30s. At Livezeni, Gustav Stof was a very good engineer who built gliders. Sometimes, they dismantled them and carried them on their shoulders to the top of the Parang Mountains, and then they launched to the valleys below.

But the greatest of them was the school near Brasov, at Sanpetru, where a new record was broken daily. Some people break motorcycle and automobile records. Others break records in the air.

The door opened slowly, and a middle-aged woman entered the room, carrying a tray stacked with jars full of jam.

'The Madam sent me to sweeten you! Where should I leave the tray?'

'On top of my head, Ilinca,' Davidut barked. 'Put them here on the table, and let us be!'

Ilinca put the tray on the table, tenderly touched David's hair, a sign that he was like her own child, and disappeared through the door. I took the opportunity to ask what I had on my mind.

'How did that fellow fly two hundred kilometers, as you didn't mention.'

David glanced at me like looking at badly cooked food, then replied full of himself - 'On rising air, he flew! Like a stork!'

Not being content with the look in my eyes, he launched a string of explanations again.

'Look. There are many ways to stay aloft. You can use ridge lift. When the wind blows over a hill, it creates lift when it flows over its top. You can fly your glider in that lift like a hawk.'

Damn it! So this is how it was! I have seen plenty of hawks and eagles in my life, as many of them fly above the fields

next to the forest, but I had never asked myself how they fly without flapping their wings.

'You can also use thermals when the air gets heated by the ground and starts to climb. Did you see how the air dances above the fields or above a hot stove? When it warms up, the air becomes lighter and goes up like a balloon. Did you know this?'

That, I knew. Even Niculae knew it, but he called it *the water of the dead*.

'You fly your glider inside such an ascending current, and you spiral like the storks do.'

Aha! So that's why the storks spiralled by the dozens in the air!

'And you did all this?' I asked, envying him.

'Me? No, not really. I only have the A and the B rating. But I am getting ready for the C.'

'What's that, an A or a B rating?'

'It means I know how to fly in a straight line and how to turn.'

'And what else do you need to know?'

'To do circuits, my boy! Ridge soaring, thermal flying! Staying in the air for more than five minutes!'

'Oh, and what rating is all that?'

'The C! Then the silver, the gold, and the diamonds will come!'

I believe he could see the back of my head through my eyes again.

'It means you will fly longer distances, go higher, and stay aloft longer!'

I had no clue how it was with all that, but I knew he definitely got me hooked on this sport. It seemed to be nicer than flying aeroplanes. Like sailing, but in the air. Since I hadn't been able to become a real sailor, why not become a sailor of the air?

David continued to tell me about Hirth²⁵, about Willy Messerschmitt²⁶, about Anokhin²⁷, a bloke who had destroyed a glider in midair just to prove it was possible, about competitions and their prizes, about Sanpetru and Poplaca, about CFR and IAR²⁸, about Cotroceni, about former and current aero clubs, about possibilities and performance, but my mind was far away! My mind was up in the clouds, flying next to the hawks and the storks. Only my body stayed on the ground in front of the magazines on the table, as David seemed to have more aviation magazines than school books...

When I went home, I still had storks and hawks all over my mind. I heard him say from the door, like out of a dream - 'Why don't you come to the aerodrome to have a look. Take a day trip!' I heard him again a tad later - 'Let

me know if you are interested. I can intervene for you!' *He would intervene for me!* Hear this! And why did he have to even ask if I was interested? Had he not seen how much in awe I was?

But it was springtime, and some of my worries flew away, carried by the grey clouds. Our house in the countryside got dressed in bright colours. Niculae, Ionelus, and Voicu had their lives full. They had to attend the pre-military preparation and then go to work in the fields. The childish war games we played looked to be more and more of a reality. The looks on their faces became rough. They worked from dusk till dawn, and their younger brothers took their place on the playground. I didn't play with them. They were too young for me.

Iulian had to find a job, not as a giraffe kisser, but in a carpentry shop, where his father also worked. After a while, the glance in his eyes changed. His entire being changed. He cracked no jokes any longer. He looked like something was pressing down on him, giving him the sad appearance of a worker who lost his happiness.

'Iulian, old friend, let's go for a bike ride. We can go see the airport again.'

'Just let me be, mister! Do you think I have time for your silly things?'

'Tell me, Mircea, why did your brother call you Taie?'

'We were playing cards, and I was just cutting when the stork brought him! Just go away, you and your aeroplanes; can't you see I am busy?'

'What keeps you busy, if you don't mind?'

'The times do!'

Mircea wasn't himself either. He also had things pressing down on him, and he wouldn't discuss them.

'For how long do you intend to stay at home? Can't you see what's going on in this world? Find some work until fall! You want to stay home like a waster?'

That was for me. Mom was working as hard as she could to support the family. Still, strangely enough, each time I approached a business owner or shop to get a job, she backed off, telling me - 'Better stay home and study! Until fall, you should eat only burning embers!' It was her way of saying I should study hard. But I couldn't stay inside when it was sunny and nice.

'Come on, Mircea, old sport, tell me how it is with this Taie thing!'

'I was directing a film with midwives, and when he came out, I yelled: cut!'

'You lost your good mood again?'

'Yup. I am coming from work!'

'From the City Council?'

Taie got hired by the City Council for real, where his father, the General, had a word to say, but he wouldn't say what job they had given him. He used to look at the sky and carry a briefcase with him. Only God knew what was inside of it. He even dressed nicely, wearing a suit with stripes and broad shoulders. It fit him. He looked like Al Capone.

They all had been so brutally grabbed by life or the lack of it. They were becoming greyer and greyer as the days passed, like an old photograph. Later on, the pot belly would come. They would go to the pub and get the fish eyes and the jobs they never wanted.

'From Princiar, I'm coming from! Just go away and mind your own business!'

And away I went! I was revolted and upset! I boarded a fast train to Brasov and hit the tracks! Chitila, the fields, and the village of Peris, sorry dear, *Paris* and Ploiesti's cooling towers slid past my window. I saw Sinaia with its nice train station, where I had been before. I glanced at the village of Busteni, where I had never been before, but I had no time to stop and visit. I looked at the Heroe's Cross, upon the Caraiman Mountain, just a small bug in the distance. The fresh green colour of the forest mixed with the grey of my travel companion's coat, which hung next to the window. He slept and snored most of the trip.

Once, he lit up a cigarette and almost used my cap as an ashtray.

At length, I looked at a farmer tossing a heavy basket on his shoulders on the apron of the Brasov station.

'Good day to you, uncle! Do you know where Sanpetru is?'

'Servus, dear! There it is, where you see that hill in the distance, but far away it is.'

It was far. Got there after two hours of walking in the fields, but that was something I knew how to do. I arrived covered in mud, soaked in sweat from top to bottom, but happy. I sneaked between the village houses to avoid the dogs and kept going until a large field opened before my eyes. A low-lying hill bordered it like a giant lady basking in the sun. On top of it were fir trees, and between them, I could see a large, strange-looking wooden cabin. There were people scattered all around the hill, and somewhere in between them, I could see the silhouette of a flying machine stretching its wings to catch the sky.

I spent time under a tree to rest, take a better look, and clean the mud off my clothes to avoid making a bad impression. A pretty strong wind was blowing. It brought with it the smell of the spring and the forest, and it made the leaves rustle. Clouds passed, and their shades coated the ground in dark hues. The shriek of a hawk came down from the sky, and I was content to hear it. It was a shriek

of the air, as only a bird that knew its ways could make. The hawk did it thrice, and I lifted my eyes off my trousers to see it.

Up on the hill, the people were divided into two groups on both sides of the flying machine, each party with its own wing. Suddenly, like signalled to, they all started downhill, dragging the machine behind them, like chased by Tartars and making me believe they'll all break their bones rolling downhill. The flying machine came after them, and then a spell lifted it into the air, leaving me with an open mouth and staring big eyes. It was like watching Vlaicu being towed on the fields of Bintinti by his fellow villagers! The machine I was watching looked like he had built it. It looked like someone glued wings and wires to a chair, and on the chair, a man was sitting in the wind. It didn't even have wheels! It slowly came downhill, rocked by the wind. The man on the chair skillfully used the rudders to control the flight, brought the machine closer to the ground, and slowed its flight somehow. Still, instead of nicely coming to a halt on the grass, he bumped hard, made a jump back into the air, and then the machine slammed the ground to a standstill so hard I could swear the wings would fall off. Miraculously, it stayed in one piece, but I was already running towards the unlucky fellow on the chair to help him. I had totally forgotten the hawk, the flying, and David. Aviation seemed to be a painful sport!

When I got closer, the unhappy flyer was extricating himself from between the wires, climbing over some sort of a sawhorse on top of which the chair was mounted. Oh, God! *It was David!*

'Oh, hello! You came!'

He was still in one piece! He was even happy!

'That's how it is until you get the hang of it. And this strong wind...' he scoffed.

I heard a voice from somewhere - 'Why didn't you land directly on top of the hangar? That's how high you bounced, old bloke!'

Young folks surrounded the glider and brought a strange cart with them. A few got the bird up on the cart, and the whole bunch started back on the hill, pushing the machine. I stayed behind with David.

'Oy, you two there! Why are you idling around? Lay a hand here! Lay a hand!'

I found a space between a wire and a small boy whose hands were hardly reaching the wing and started to push.

'Did you ever see a worse landing,' he told me between two gasps. 'The boy's got two left hands!'

I mumbled something about the wind, but my mind was wandering. So, this was a glider! Wood, canvas, and wires! But where were the seagull wings, the small steel-

framed windscreen, the eye goggles, and the spiteful smile? I felt mercy even to push this thing, concerned my hands would go through the canvas.

We got back uphill, creaking and panting, where another bunch was pushing outside the hangar a different glider. That one was a tad fancier, even cute, having the body of a dragonfly, built out of polished plywood and sporting a small, coquette cockpit, unlike the open chair one we just finished pushing uphill. It looked like the machine I had seen in magazines, but the bird was definitely not for everybody's use. I stood in the crowd of young folks roving around the gliders, moving my eyes from one bird to another and thinking that before meeting God, you have to deal with the saints first when I suddenly found out who God was, as a young man emerged from the crowd and started to prepare the cute glider for flying.

'Novitchi! You are to take the *Baby*³⁰ and try to stay aloft! I believe there may be a good lift above the ridge. The rest of you will go downhill and practice ground handling in the wind. The wind became too strong for you! You there! Did I have the honour before?

It was me he was addressing.

'He is the young man I told you about earlier, Sir!' I heard David's voice from somewhere.

'Aha! Take him with you and show him the basics. We'll do the theory later. Take good care of him, Mr. Stambuleanu. Is that understood?'

'Yes, Sir, understood!'

I got lost in the crowd of flyers swarming the hill. I worked the bungee, helped people balance the gliders on the ground, and even rode the Icar as David explained the controls. The day flew, and I felt no hunger or thirst. Ground handling was practised down on the plains, while up on the hill, the Baby was washing like a hawk, making elegant curves into the wind.

I was dead tired when I got home late in the evening. I was hungry and dehydrated like a bone-dry well. I slowly closed the door behind me.

'Where have you been until this hour? Why are you so dirty?'

My smile swallowed the whole room.

The canopy made a noise, like when someone pulled the blinders on a window when I closed it. Strangely, I was sitting uncomfortably on my chair, and when I looked at it, I discovered I was sitting on a normal kitchen chair

made of yellow wood. It seemed that I was inside a box and not an aircraft. Even the wings were very short and looked like they were made of paper.

I added power to take off and wanted to check the airspeed, but I had only a big fuzzy clock instead of an instrument panel. I tried to open the cockpit and stick my head out to feel the wind, but I realized it was gone, and instead of being in an aeroplane, I was running alone on the fields, having my arms stretched like wings. I pushed my feet against the ground and lifted off in a giant leap. I levitated left and right as I pleased and pushed my feet against the trees, hopping like a soap bubble. Then I woke up!

A blinding light lit the dormitory, and I knew it would be a great day for flying. My body was sore from running up and down the hill all day; my knees and back hurt, but I was happy. Andrei The Hunter snored in the bed next to mine. He was a small, baby-faced but agile lad who looked younger than he was. We called him The Hunter because he hunted everything: girls - they were his primary targets; storks – he was the first one to notice them and to conclude one should get under them, as for sure there was lift over there; hawks, bumpy landings, buns, apples and of course punches from the others.

I don't remember how I befriended him. He was from Sacele, not far away, but he was too lazy to go home every day. His interior agitation, like a stormy atmosphere

full of cumulonimbus clouds, meaning those big mean ones, complimented my annoying inside calm. I needed to keep things balanced. I contemplated his sleep, figuring out what joke to pull on him this time. I had pushed a corn stem, cobs and all, under his blanket not long ago, but the idea backfired on me. Whenever he turned, he made a noise like he had the whole cornfield in this bed. He continued to snore, but I couldn't close an eye for the entire night. Later, when he woke up, hungry and scrooge-like as he had always been, he baked the corn, and the bastard didn't share!

He used to work as many as seven people together. We were usually the first to open the hangar and park the gliders outside before the rest arrived.

There has been a long and intricate story till then. I had been lucky with Stambuleanu and his connections! There had been tests to pass, and before the tests, approvals were to be signed, as I wasn't twenty-one yet.

'What do you want to do? Fly aeroplanes? To become a pilot?' Words shouted out loud quickly while I baked under her volcanic eyes, holding the dreaded paper in my hands. I hadn't told her my noble pilot job was not paid and the aeroplanes had no engine. She would not have understood anyway.

'Just let him learn whatever trade he wants! Who else on the whole God damned street is a pilot?'

'What if he'll break his bones?'

'If he'll break them, he'll break them! Better to break his bones with an aeroplane instead of chipping metal or wood in a factory!'

'Like you have ever cared! All you know is how to go to the pub!'

She was right about it. He wasted a lot of time in that pub, and his credibility was at a record low, but despite all this - 'Give me that, to sign it!'

Victory! To the skies now!

I held my hands under my head and looked at the ceiling, thinking about my first flight with the Icar³¹ glider. Novitchi³² had been my instructor, a very technical fellow. Being at his first job as an instructor, it was difficult to understand him sometimes. He knew a lot but didn't know how to explain. While they prepared the bungee, he stood next to me at a lower level of the hill, from where beginners were launched, to avoid having them too high from the start.

'Beware that the controls will be stiffer and the glider more responsive! Don't work the controls like stirring into a pot! Do it nicely, like touching a girl! Do you know how to handle a girl? The bird will bring you back in one piece if you don't spoil its flight. Keep the wings level when landing.'

The bungee was stretched, and when the sign was given, the bunch pulling it was set in motion. The rubber fibres eased, my head went backwards, and in an instant, I was flying!

The Icar buzzed with life in a way I never heard it before. The controls stiffened, not the way Andrei had predicted, pointing at his groin but in a pleasant way. *The student pilot maintains the normal glide path and observes the effect of the controls.* This is what was written in the book! I slowly moved the stick left and right, and the glider obeyed, tipping its wings. The ground got closer, and I jumped to the next paragraph. *We gradually look from the landing spot to the line of the horizon.* I must have done it too fast, as before I knew it, the music generated by the air current through the bracing wires disappeared, the controls became limp, and the poor Icar pancaked me from one meter to the ground. Bang! From a bird of the skies, it became a speechless heap of wood and wires.

'Good job, old boy! One more time!'

Up and down, this is how the day went! In the evening, stretched on my bed, I still felt the rocking of the wings while my mind was busy absorbing the new sensations of the day. The Icar was no longer the ugly creature I found it to be at the start. It became a trustworthy friend, giving me a few minutes of freedom daily. I sat on the little chair, listening to the shriek of the wind among the bracing

wires. It meant that I flew; I flew for real with the wind and being a part of it. You look to the left and see the blunt tip of the wing pointing to the forest. You look to the right and see the other wing touching the fields. You look down and see your feet on the rudder pedals and nothing else but the abyss under them. Then you look at the horizon, and you feel the wind. You are flying! You fly this bird, and as the days pass, it becomes a part of you, an extension of your arms and legs, wings which will never grow out of your own body but will carry you aloft.

Straight lines, gentle turns, landings – they are mandatory anyhow – bigger or smaller bounces at landing. This is how you learn. It felt like I wasn't myself any longer. I wasn't the ignorant man who had arrived at the airfield three months prior, caked in mud, and watching with a finger in the mouth how the *aeroplanes* flew. Now I knew. I had found out.

I took lessons with the rest. I took lessons *from* the rest, and I grew up with the rest at the same pace as our wings grew. We were not so childish anymore, and still...

Bang! A pillow landed on my head!

Andrei had woken up and began his hunting routine.

'What are you doing in there? Daydreaming again? Looking at green horses on the walls?'

'I see only mares on the walls! But they are not green! They are like a bunch of fairies, dressed in white robes through which I can see their breasts dancing like raindrops.'

The Hunter lifted himself on an elbow to check if I was still sane. Maybe the pillow had done some damage to my brain.

'You must be in need of a woman, old chap! Why don't you come to Sacele? I'll get you married in an instant!'

'I'll come, but before that, let's eat something. I feel like I'm in the middle of the Easter Fast. This flying really drains you!'

Andrei searched under his pillow and produced a crumpled baguette, which only God knew where he had *borrowed* it from. He broke it in half and offered me the bigger piece.

'Here! Put it into you,' he barked and did the same with his half. 'Let's see what else we can find!'

After settling it with our stomachs, we climbed the hill to open the hangar. As usual, Ol' Emil, the mechanic, was on the little bench under the fir trees, puffing on his never-ending cigarette.

'A bit late, aren't we, lads,' he said in his whiskey voice. 'Where have you been until now?'

'Good morning, Sir! Where have we been? In the village, in a lover's boudoir, of course!'

'Is that so? It was morning when *I woke up, not you!* You have lovers in the village?'

'Yes, Sir, we have!'

Ol' Emil thought a bit, trying to figure out how to outsmart us, but probably not finding anything worth saying, he followed with his raspy voice - 'Why don't you fall in love with the hangar door too and open it!'

'We'll even fly on it if it pleases you, Sir! The weather promises to be excellent today.'

Ol' Emil stood up from his bench, blowing the smoke from under his fluffy walrus-like moustache and sniffing the air.

'Sure will! A darned good day to fly today! Who's going to stay aloft for longer,' he softly wondered. Then suddenly, his raspy voice thundered - 'Lively, my engineers, lively with that door! Look at them standing there!'

The door was eventually opened in a helter-skelter way. At the same time, Ol' Emil watched, puffing on his cigarette like a philosopher whose sole role was to monitor the airdrome's life. Glider sportsmen started to trickle one by one up the hill, stepping on the grass still soaked by the morning dew. We lined the gliders up one by one at the start line while Andrei mumbled to himself,

imitating Ol' Emil: 'A bit late, aren't we? It was morning when Matei and I arrived here, not you!'

We sat in a semicircle around the instructors to prepare for the flight. The mornings were reserved for beginners who needed smooth air. I wasn't in their ranks anymore, so I got assigned to the ground party. The rest were divided among the instructors, each with his own students. I went through the routine of each launch while waiting for my turn to come. My mind wandered, waiting for the moment when I was to be released from the ground and reminded why life's worth to be lived for. Without realizing it, I lived from one flight to another and only existed in between.

A tall and slim boy, Mihail, occupied the Icar for a few flights. He reminded me of Niculae. He had the same simplicity - a farmer dressed in city clothes, riding a wooden bird in the air. He was almost taller than the glider's wing, and his shoulder straps were always set at the last adjustment hole. His gestures were also similar to Niculae's. Where was Niculae at that moment? Working on the fields?

From Niculae, my thoughts drifted towards Elodia. Did the Germans get her? The newspapers were full of war-related news describing the bombings of England. Why do people fight anyway, and why are they never happy with what they have? Andrei The Hunter said they should

have been beaten one year ago, but they weren't, and the opposite happened.

Another launch, another run downhill, pulling on the bungee cord; Mihail acted like he had two left hands, and as someone said, he flew the Icar like driving a carriage on the waves. I should ask Ilarion - 'How are you, mate, still driving that carriage of yours on the waves?' He'd turn into molten metal!

Despite giving us a lot of groundwork, Mihail was a good chap. He shared everything he had, especially pretzels, which he brought from the city centre. He worked in Ghimbav, at the aeroplane factory, at the assembly line, and once, he took us to show us the airfield there. I stood next to a PZL-11³³ for the first time in my life, and its seagull wing reminded me of the glider I had seen in David's magazines. Mihail was dreaming of flying the PZL one day, but Andrei quickly predicted that he would first need to chop off his head to fit in the cockpit. They quarreled like Mircea and Iulian! How were those two doing, I wondered? It had been months since I had last seen them, and I still hadn't found out why Mircea was called Taie.

Finally, the lunch break arrived! The beginners and those with too many left hands took a break, and I started to sniff the air like a hound. A warm summer wind was blowing up on the hill, and the gliders not anchored to the ground were bouncing their wings, signalling they

wanted to fly. Cumulus clouds were lazily floating above, and they threatened to bring rain far away over Tampa Mountain. The Postavarul Peak was entirely covered in clouds. Hot air, hot air everywhere!

A last piece of pretzel and a mouthful of water ended my lunch. Novitchi, the instructor, showed up, dressed in his white overalls, and inspected the air. I assumed he would tell us to line up the Baby at the start line, but he signalled us to approach him instead and said - 'Matei, get the Icar and prepare to launch. Turn right and then left. If the ridge holds and you don't lose much height, do two more turns. If it doesn't, just go and land. Do you understand me? You have three launches today. After you finish, help Andrei to strap in.'

'Yes, Sir!'

'Don't do anything silly! Don't make me shout at you!'

'Yes, Sir,' I bleated submissively.

'Mind your glide slope! Listen to the bracing wires and keep your eyes on the horizon!'

The Icar didn't have any flight instruments. The only way to determine the airspeed was to hear the shriek of the wind between the bracing wires and hold the normal gliding angle. I used to judge it by the pitch my knees made with the horizon line.

My wooden friend was lined up at the start line. I slowly inhaled, held the air inside and released it like an actor who needed to enter the stage. Hot summer air! I strapped myself on the little chair. Somebody punched my shoulder. Andrei said something I didn't understand, but it didn't matter anyway. I felt the smoke of an unfiltered cigarette and Ol' Emil's presence.

'Go a bit longer, close to the fir trees on the right! Do your turn there!'

The bungee was hooked to the glider, and the ground team started to stretch it. I signalled to have my wings levelled, my muscles tensing like the bungee. The air stood still for a second, and I felt the sun on my head. Then, a rosehip bush started to rustle in the valley, and somebody signalled to launch. The Icar sprang loose, and I was in the air in a second. My hands and feet worked the right turn before my mind realized I was flying. The right wing pointed towards the hill, to the fir trees, the left pointed towards the fields, eyes were on the horizon, and the ears were listening to the wire's music. I was flying!

I got closer to the fir trees indicated by Ol' Emil. I pushed the left rudder pedal, coordinated the turn with the stick and turned left. The fields took a stroll in front of my eyes, and then it was the left wing's turn to drag along the trees and the right one's to fly above the fields. The start line showed up ahead of me. Novitchi was watching, his arms

stuck to his hips. Ol' Emil was watching, too, with one hand shading his eyes. I felt a bump, like when you rode a swing or jumped over a hill with the bicycle and the right wing was pushed upwards. The wind's whisper amongst the wires went crazy. It was exciting.

I turned right, almost on the spot, feeling the hot air on my cheeks. *This is where it is!* The right wing was on the trees again, and the trees started to become smaller. The left wing got pushed upwards, but I controlled it with the stick. *This is where it is!* My stomach went down to my heels! The tops of the trees dropped below, further and further, and the sky embraced me. Another turn to the left, way above the trees, way above the start line, way above the heads watching with palms above their eyes. *This is where it is!* The cloud above cast a shadow upon Lempes Hill, pulling me towards the sky! I wasn't allowed to spiral, but I didn't need to. I was climbing in a straight line. A turn to the right and a straight line. A turn to the left and another straight line! The wind started to feel cold on my cheeks and on my knees. It entered under my pants, above the shoes and went to a place I cannot mention.

A second glider was being prepared at the start line. I looked like a small insect, ready to take to the skies.

A left turn, a straight climb, a right turn, and a straight climb! I wasn't scared anymore by the new sensations. I was thirstily looking for them. Now I knew how it was

when *I was climbing*. Then, the shadow of the cloud passed, leaving only cold, heavy air behind it. The trees got bigger. The start line and the hangar got bigger. The people got bigger. I felt the smell of the fields, and my cheeks warmed up again. I looked for the second glider to avoid a collision but didn't see it. When the Lempes got me in its yellowish-green embrace, I took to the fields and rebecame a being of the earth.

Only my body reached the ground after the flight. The mind remained high in the sky.