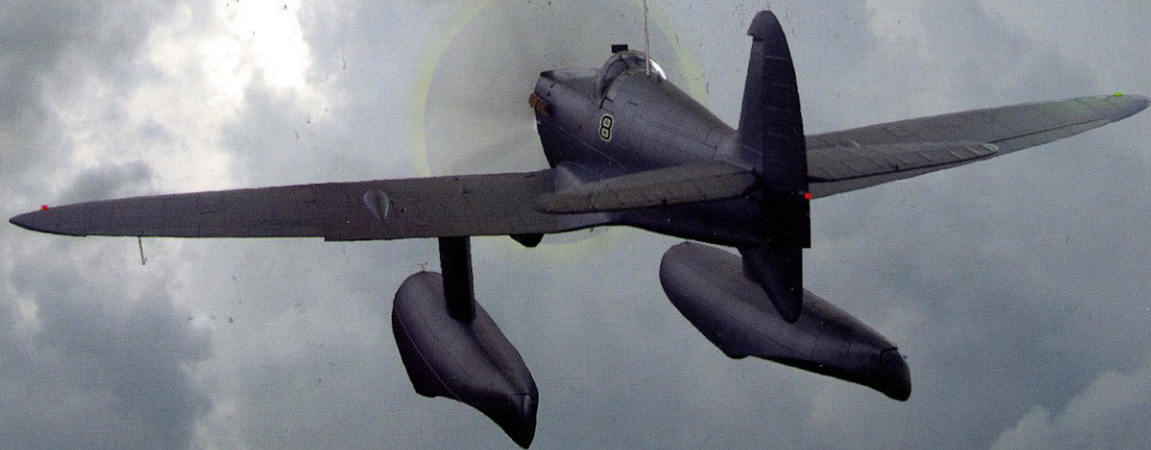


# THE RACE

## TALES IN FLIGHT



Patrick Ryoichi Nagatani



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# THE RACE

## TALES IN FLIGHT

*The Race* is a story about the discovery of fifteen Supermarine Spitfire airplanes buried in Burma at the end of World War II and their subsequent excavation and acquisition by Keiko Kobahashi, the CEO of Japan's Mitsubishi Industries. The aircraft are brought to Tokyo and transformed into state-of-the-art floatplanes, capable of traveling long distances and landing at sea. Kobahashi interviews and selects fifteen women of different backgrounds to pilot the planes in a trans-Pacific race from Tokyo to San Francisco.

This novel is not just about the race per se: each chapter unfolds as one pilot's singular tale. The characters move through their private narratives—sometimes achieving catharsis—as they fly for hours alone across the Pacific Ocean in the confined space of their cockpits. Beyond the personal reflections each woman experiences is a larger dialogue about culture and gender issues, the moral and ecological state of our planet, the human condition and the universal need for compassion.





**Felissia Cappelletti** (*Piccola Uccello—Chartreuse 14*) is a freelance writer, editor, artist, botanist, and herbalist living and working in Denver, Colorado. Her poetry is included in the 50<sup>th</sup> volume of the *Journal of Experimental Fiction*.



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PICCOLA UCCELLO

CHARTREUSE 14

I am thunder. My cockpit, during take off, is in the heart of a deep storm. Through my shaking seat, I can feel each one of those twenty-one hundred horses in this papa Griffon—bareback—as the air whines outside. It screams when I split it. God, I love the feeling of adrenaline coursing through my fingertips straight into the yoke. It's a wild ride and I'm in total control.

Airspeed and altitude good, we are climbing steadily. Nice smooth ascent, pitch and roll, balanced. GPS locked on, all systems going strong, everybody's having fun. *E certo!* Just like that, I'm flying again. What do you know? *Mamma*, you can open your eyes down there, "She's at it again," she's saying. But don't I make it look good? God scooped me up with a finger and flung me up here. Flying, if I come close enough to heaven, I could probably lick His nose if I tried. Someday, in outer space, I'll touch a star. It'll be just like touching His fingertip.

The sound of screaming air has melted into the back of my brain. Now I can relax. *Olio d'Oliva* handles like a dream, a real spitfire! She's such a smooth ride, smooth like olive oil, the perfect color for me. I wonder, if I ask them really nice, maybe the *Agenzia Spaziale Italiana* will paint my rocket ship this color green when they finally decide to send me into space. Or maybe I'll do it myself with spray paint the night before launch.

Mamma would cry for days if I shot into space. She nearly fainted when I told her about this race. Mamma's not built of very strong mortar. She's not sturdy like *Papa* and me. Mamma's made of lace and cotton, a real lady with red ribbons in her veins instead of blood. I don't know what she'll do without me. She'll have to start pestering *Gionni* like she pesters me. "Be sweet and meek," the little girl she always wanted instead of the daughter who turned out like a boy. *Scusa, Mamma*, you tried as hard as you could, but I'm just going to keep doing crazy stuff—*pazza*—I know. I can't help it. If I were in a knitting contest instead of a flight race, I would bring home last place for sure. I swear I would drop every single stitch. But up here in my cockpit, this is where I can do anything. This is where God put my brain and you, *Mamma*, were the one who taught me that we can not question God's will. Only be grateful for the encouragement it gives us.

That was one thing Mamma could never understand about me. I know God's will in my life. It's a clear message—I must fly. It is so natural, so fulfilling, so meaningful to fly. And so close to God, too! But she has a different interpretation of His will. I guess that's where the violence of religion comes from—everyone sees God's truth in a different way. A lot of smart people think that there is only one peak at the top of the mountain of truth and that the most direct way to get there is science. Professor Bianti always taught that way. Science is a direct translation of the language of the universe. But I don't know about that. Reverend Manetti also taught that way—same but opposite. He and Mamma always said the cleanest passage to the peak of wisdom is through God and that close examination of His word held answers to every question. I think they're both right. The real truth has to be somewhere in the middle. Science and God do not have to be mutually exclusive. I think the Reverend would agree that God is a brilliant mathematician and I think Bianti would support my hypothesis that a lot of science is shrouded in the mystery of God's will. That's where the thrill of discovering answers comes from, uncovering truth from the bosom of the greatest mystery.

The reason I'm flying right now is mostly science with a little bit of miracle. But if I win this race, it will be mostly miracle with a little bit of science. *Caro Dio*, please let me win! This victory could change my life. It would mean the difference between getting that internship at the A.S.I., and having my résumé passed over *again* for “lack of experience.” But if I win, there's no way the recruitment officers could ignore me with a victory in the trans-Pacific Spitfire race under my belt.

Here comes the coast... and there it goes. *Bellezza!* How the world opens up beyond the shoreline! Everything solid drops out, and then only the endless continuum of wide open ocean. It is a vastness that I find thrilling. Mountains, oceans, sky, or space, the magnitude of vast places always gives me chills. All that energy swirling around makes me want to jump straight in and be swallowed whole.

Ooh—chills.

From the ocean's depth, and the power of all the hidden life below its surface, I can feel its gravity pull on *Olio d'Oliva* like a great hand. But my gauges are set. I'm a third of the way to my first stop. I had a good start. Let's climb. I want to see what's going on with the Cirrostratus and see if I can outreach the fingers of this great ocean. It is a smooth ascent, I feel the pull of it on my skin.

I want to pull some loops and eight's right now! I'm itching for one. All this space... I've been throwing some loops with *Olio* for the last couple weeks. I know how she likes to do it. and I'm making good time, but do I really want to spend sixty precious seconds on some goofing off? Maybe a barrel roll instead. That way I won't be losing any forward motion. Here we go! Invigorating!

If the A.S.I. recruiters took me on a test flight, they'd already know I'm the best pilot around. I got star reviews from both my flight instructors *and* my test results

for aeronautics, physics, mechanics, and astromathematics are all perfect. All my instructors as well as the Dean have recommended me. I have years of flying experience. I even sent them pictures and schematics of the remote-controlled astro-surfer that I designed and built in my last year of *scuola secondaria di secondo grado*. So I'm a few years under the required age limit, so that should be further incentive for them to accept me. I'm ahead of my peers. I'm qualified in every way for an initial evaluation and possible internship. Why is it taking them so long to acknowledge my application?

I bet the only reason they haven't accepted me into the program yet is because I'm a woman. Unfortunately, the administration takes a patriarchal stance on the issue of groundbreaking scientific endeavors. But one of the administrative heads is about to retire. Maybe he'll be replaced by someone more innovative. I don't see why there is still so much hesitation to include women in problem-solving positions. It's clearly a more efficient way to think about problems—from multiple perspectives, duh. There's no doubt women's brains work differently than men's. Why would any committee aimed at furthering human exploration go about doing it with the power of only half the human race?

It must be for political reasons, or financial ones. Most scientists I've known have had the sensibility to approve of having women in the field. Their hearts are in the passion of learning, not what may or may not look like a stable enterprise to investors. Politics and money bastardize everything with real heart, and all because of the bottom line. Anyone with a passion knows you're ready to give all you have and be broke and in debt if that's what your passion calls for. And with a passion like space travel, a piggy bank doesn't go very far. So scientists have to appeal to businessmen for money and that's where the whole house of cards falls down, because a businessman's passion is the bottom line. It doesn't really include the nationalistic or even humanistic drive to add to the legacy of knowledge and space travel. Ironically, it's the comparative and symbolic pairings of passions that compel people to work together, form societies, grow a base of knowledge together... yet where passions differ, a wedge is stuck between our partnerships.

Women are much better equipped to reconcile those differences constructively than men whose impulses so often lead to fighting. Maybe I should try dating a girl. *Merda!* I'm thinking about it again! It won't go away, it makes too much sense. Francesca is one of the smartest *ragazze* I've ever known. Part of the reason I admire her so much.

Well, it was only a matter of time before she popped back into my head. I haven't stopped thinking about her since I left San Benedetto del Tronto for training. I wonder if she's still mad at me. I miss her so much, but I'm terrified to talk to her again. Eventually, she's going to change my mind. I don't know how much longer I can resist a sin this logical.



But dating a girl is an unspeakable breach of the Church's sacred laws, not to mention Mamma's sacred laws. If Mamma ever found out that Francesca and I had kissed, she would turn away from me. But in many ways, my friendship with Francesca *is* a relationship. We've been very close for so many years. We depend on each other. She was there through everything—my crash and surgery three years ago, and when Papa was sick for so long. She helped me study all through secondary. We spent almost every night together during her spring and summer breaks from school. And I know she loves me. And Mamma loves her. Mamma always tells me I should spend more time with Franchi. She thinks she's a good female influence on me. She thinks if I hang out with her enough, I'll start to wear dresses and let my hair down the way she does. The difference is Franchi is beautiful. She has delicate features and skin like glass and smooth, perfect hair. If I put on the same outfit as Franchi and we stood side by side, it would look like a before and after picture of a girl who turned into a troll.

I guess I broke her heart the last time we were together. When she... kissed me that way I... I don't know what I could have done instead. That feeling was such a rush of everything, the way her kiss made my body feel, it was the same feeling I had had when my Cessna went down. The way my stomach fell straight through the bottom of me, and my head so hot and my hands so cold. My heart was beating so hard I could feel it in my throat, panic, couldn't think. My only impulse was for escape. So I pulled away. I left her standing there without even looking back. The worst timing, too—the day before I left for training, I wasn't even able to explain myself in person! It's so awkward just texting all the time and she knows I'm no good at talking on the phone.

I wonder if she's mad at me. Her texts have been so distant and cool lately. Maybe she's just busy, but what if she's getting used to my not being around? It's been almost two months since I left San Benedetto and I miss her so much. But if I see her again, will she try to kiss me again? I hope so. No! I don't hope so. It would be too easy to fall for that devil's trap. Franchi is no devil's trap! She's an angel... mostly. She's so tender and soft. Not like kissing a boy at all. I already know the way her body fits into mine. We've shared a bed so many times. I even know how slowly she likes to kiss. The way she pauses to look in my eyes before she kisses my cheek with every *ciao e arrivederci*. I always liked the way she keeps her lips on my cheek for three full seconds. It makes me calm. And she always smells like sandalwood.

Maybe she has always loved me? I mean, of course she has always loved me, but it's a different sort of love now. How long has she felt that way? Do my feelings match hers? I want another chance to kiss her. I wonder if I tried to kiss her, would she accept it, or push me away the way I did to her? I have to call her when the race is over. If I win, she'll be so happy for me, maybe she'll forget the way I abandoned her. Then

she'll hug me again and I could put my nose in her hair, *ma no!* Piccola, you are thinking only of what you want, not what makes sense. You are falling into a day-dream, like flying into a cloud, beautiful and bright with sun, but blinding and so temporary. I wonder when I'll see her again. It's a funny thing—the hole made by her absence feels heavy in me.

Love is only an animal impulse. It must be controlled to evolve the higher order human. Society is not set up to accept the silly girlish desires of your perverted fantasy. But is it only a fantasy when it feels so real? There is no doubt Francesca and I need each other. I haven't stopped thinking about her since it happened. But we can't fall in love. Why can't we just be best friends the way we were before? Can we go back to that place? Maybe that would be best. When I see her, I'll tell her I need her to be my best friend, not my lover. It wouldn't be allowed any other way.

GPS says only a few more miles to the refueling station. I think I can see it beneath the clouds. Good. The challenge of landing on this pinhead will give me something else to rest my mind on! Landings and take-offs are the biggest time factors in a race like this. I have to make a perfect landing the first time. I'm coming in a little too high, decelerating. Concentrate, Piccola.

*"Angelo di Dio, mio caro tutore,"*

I keep getting closer and closer but the fuel ship doesn't seem to get very much bigger. It really is a pinhead.

*"Al quale il suo amore mi ha affidato qui, mai questo giorno,"*

Decelerating, keep her balanced. I see the flagger, I see the part of the ocean that I need to land on. It's a runt area.

*"Mai questo giorno essere al mio fianco per illuminare,"*

Decelerating! I'm coming in too fast. *Caro Dio* protect me—please stop my plane safely on the ocean and not in the ocean!

*"Custodisci, reggi e governa. Amen!"*

Floataion gear is solid. Decelerating, almost there, you can do it!

"It's too fast!"

Whoa! *Selvaggio!*

Okay, I made it. I made it! Let me swallow my heart again. They are smiling at me and waving, I did it. Don't be too proud of yourself, Little Bird. Everyone has to make that landing. I hope they have food here. I'm starving.

*"The Bible shows the way to heaven, not the way the heavens go."*

—Galileo Galilei



*Olio d'Oliva*, I'm back! *Caro*, did you miss me? Come on, let's blow this pinhead. We've got a race to win. Giddy up, *Olio*! Systems on, grab me and let's go. I hope all your 2,000 horses are awake and wild because they're gonna sling shoot us off into the ocean and beyond.

"Here we—Whoa! *Dio mio!* What a ride!"

Just like a roller coaster. Well, my senses are peaked now, that's for sure. Every nerve tingles. I'm so awake. I still feel the adrenaline tickling me from the inside. That thrill in my pelvis from rapid acceleration always turns me on. GPS locked onto O'ahu. Let's go.

O'ahu—I never thought I would see Hawai'i. *Nonno* Uccello told me learning to fly was the best way to see the world. He always said, "If you want to get somewhere, Little Bird, you have to fly there yourself." *Nonno* would be so proud of me now. I bet he never thought I'd be a racer. I probably wouldn't even be a pilot if it weren't for him. He taught me everything, took me under his wing. I love you, *Nonno*. He and Mamma were always bickering about my lessons. Every time I would hear *Nonno*'s voice get gravelly, and he'd start into "*Mamma, Piccola Uccello deve imparare a volare!*" I always knew I was getting a ride in the mail plane, because he always won those arguments.

A fair day, blue sky piled on blue coast. I'd sit in the hard little molded plastic seat and put on the five-point harness. Then he would babble at me, talking about seaplanes and seabirds and sailors and he'd holler out those loud, dissonant *Marina Militare* songs to me while initiating take-off. A little bit of his dusty magic and then the old sea bird would lurch a couple times over the rollers and then lift up, like some big hand came and picked us up off the water. And I couldn't think of anything else but the earsplitting roar.

When I was old enough to start working in the garage, he showed me the underbelly of that old seaplane and gave me my first ratchet set. That man's hands never were still. He was always building something, writing something, painting, mending, and tinkering. "*Mani mai inattivo,*" he would tell me, but he was always working with a smile on his face and a song on his lips. Couldn't sing worth a damn and he didn't care. He sang loud!

"Ha ha! Oh, *Nonno, mi manchi tanto.*"

He had a way of teaching without meaning to. Just by spending time together, I learned how an engine worked and all about aerodynamics. He taught me the basic physics of flight although he never called it that. In my young summers when we'd ramble along the coast in the mail plane, he would give me my lessons in stories. Stories from his life and adventures, although now, thinking back on it, there are some things he never talked about. *Nonna*, of course, we never talked about her. He talked about when he was a young man, flying the mail plane in the middle

of national restructuring. But he never really told me anything about the war. We talked mostly about birds, and flying. He taught me how to sort the mail, but I always thought it was a stupid, tedious job. And even though Mamma would swat at him every time with a dish towel, I'm glad he argued with her on my behalf to give me those early lessons. Nonno shaped my life, and this is the shape he gave it... aerodynamic.

I remember a story Mamma once told me about Nonno e Nonna, when they first started dating. He was such a romantic. He would pack a lunch and bring Nonna to the Sibillini Mountains. They'd go flying all day when they were in love. Nonna must have told her that story.

I wonder if Nonna was a woman like Mamma, so pretty and delicate, so soft and quiet. Or, if she was a woman more like Nonno, loud and boisterous, like me. I bet Nonno preferred a woman who could keep up with him. Although he was always so proud of Mamma's fine virtues, he taught me how to appreciate them without idolizing them. He was a man whose attitudes and thoughts were all his own. It is my noble mission to emulate him.

I loved him then because he was always smiling and singing, because he always had some project to show me. But I love him even more now because he always encouraged me to play with the scrap engine and break apart machinery kept in the barn from before the war. He alone was the savior of dirt! Everyone else, even Papa and Gianni, would holler at me to wipe the grease off my face and put on clean pants, but Nonno never made me do that. Mostly, he wanted to make sure I was learning something. And he was ferocious about my being true to myself.

I'll never tell Mamma the things he whispered in my ear after she laid into him about making me into an undesirable girl. She would say, "You're roughening her up. What boy will want burlap instead of cotton?" And Nonno would whisper in my ear, "Cotton fades and tears. When I go up into the clouds," and he'd wink and grip his age-old flight sack, "I only take what won't blow away."

When I get back to San Benedetto, I'm going to pack a lunch and fly Francesca out over the Sibillini Mountains and we'll talk it all through, there, in the clearing where I took her two summers ago after Nonno died. That place has answers. In a clear sky, middle of spring, after the engines have cooled and the propellers are resting, the movement in the breeze has more to say than any other type of silence. God bless Franchi, she knew when to stay quiet and listen to the valley. Sometimes, silence is the best advice.

I need some advice right now. I feel that I'm losing my grip on who I am. Who do I want to be? All these years, I've been so defiant against Mamma, would never stay still in the dresses she put me in, couldn't keep myself from eating and laughing with my mouth open, and I was forever breaking and building things. She wouldn't even



be happy with the perfect math and science grades I'd bring home because I refused to take home economics and failed literature. But I wonder if there was a reason for all her efforts in shaping me. She must have known all along that something was wrong with me. She must have seen the sin growing in me the whole time. Maybe that's why she always pushed me to be more delicate and feminine. She was trying to save me from myself and I resisted. Now I am so confused.

Radka is a lesbian. It's amazing how much she looks like Leola whom I worked with at the garage. Brilliant mechanic, anything from a toaster to a Ferrari, Leola could fix it. She had huge hands, and the same haircut as Radka. I remember when I found out Leola was a lesbian. What a burden that secret was! But Leola wasn't crazy. She was brilliant. And Radka's not crazy. She's wonderful. She's happy and she's intelligent. I don't know her very well, but her life doesn't seem sinful or unbalanced. Maybe she's hiding demons. I suppose we all are.

I remember when Leola told me that coming out as a lesbian helped her find her greater self. We only talked about it one time, but I remember a lot about that conversation. I was so unsure of what to say. I felt awkward, but Leola talks about everything as if it were just plain fact. She told me coming out was like throwing up, terrible in the process, but so much better afterwards. I should go by the garage when I get home and see how she's doing. Maybe she can tell me if I'm a lesbian. The thought makes me shudder. It's so wrong. Wrong? Or disallowed? The connection between morals and rules is tentative at best.

I could use a little help finding my greater self. I'm used to these thoughts floating through my head by now. They've been there for so long. It's getting harder to ignore them, but I don't know what to do about them. Every relationship I've had with a man over the past few years has fallen short. But I don't want to quit men. I like men. Falling in love with a man is fun! It's like making a new best friend who can also give me an orgasm. I've always been a boy's girl. Because I act like a boy, I think like them. I don't create the drama and stupid emotional shit and play games like so many girls. I don't need them to take care of me. Boys like it that I'm strong—and I love sex too! If I become a lesbian I would have to give up sex! That must be terrible! No, I guess I can't be a lesbian. Dating a girl would just be a big tease. What more can you do but kiss and make out?

Although, boys give girls oral and I guess girls could give girls oral. And, I guess I know how to make myself cum. Maybe that's what they do? Piccola! This thinking has to stop. Enough already! You are conversing with the devil. Just stop. Please. Maybe Radka could tell me. I can't ask her that! Think of something else, think of something else! Think of something else! It is easier to talk to women about sex than men. Men get too distracted by their bodies to actually put thought into the topic. Women are more able to focus their thoughts and think objectively. Am I thinking

objectively? If I forget for a moment about all the mixed bag of nuts that my feelings are, what are really the points of the topic? Papa would tell me to make a pro/con list. That's how he makes decisions.

Pro: women share my perspective. Con: in problem solving, it is better to have multiple perspectives. Pro: women are more able to talk through emotional disagreements. Con: women tend to induce more emotional disagreements. Pro: dating a woman would be new and exciting. I might discover something that helps me to mature like Leola said. Con: if Mamma found out, she would be so hurt and ashamed of me. Pro: I am attracted to women. Con: I am also attracted to men. Pro: lesbianism is progressive, enlightens society to women's rights and choices. Con: The Church is not progressive. I wonder if God were on the A.S.I. board of directors, would he hire female astronauts? Everything I know about The Church suggests not, but God knows my heart. He instilled it with this passion for flight. He gave me the mind and drive to satisfy my passion. Why would he construct a mind and life for me leading up to a clear goal unless he intended me to follow it? But why try to draw comparisons anyway? Space travel is not as unnatural as lesbianism... is it?

*Olio d'Oliva*, you are my closest confidant now. Only you know the poison in my brain. These thoughts are sick ones, greedy for pleasure. Just because I love someone doesn't mean I should be their partner. And just because I love space doesn't mean I should go there.

*Merda!* I wish I could take that thought back. It will never be un-thought now and I will forever be guilty for answering questions of passion with logic and ignoring the advice of God. Is this my moment of epiphany? Has God just enlightened me with this inconvenient answer? I can hear Mamma's voice, "He doesn't always say what you want to hear, but you do have to listen." Maybe God has just told me through my own logic that I have been wrong this whole time, all the effort throughout school, all the daydreams and goals. All the fulfillment from learning to fly, and after stubbornly—stupidly—telling my family and friends beyond any doubt that I knew this was the direction of my life, now I have to take it all back. God doesn't want me to be an astronaut. He has given me this problem with women to see through to a different trajectory of thought about what is really most appropriate for my life. And it's not women. And it's not space travel.

*Cazzo!* What the hell is it then?"

Always when the hardest questions scrape the air, silence is the most cold-hearted. What kind of sad and terrible revelation is this? Isn't God's word supposed to be most definite and have the vibrancy of truth? Aren't revelations supposed to provide a sense of unquestioning purpose and vehement drive? But I don't feel that way at all. My heart feels as cold and unresponsive as these sheet metal wings. If passion and space and Francesca are not my life, what on God's Earth is it then? There's nothing I want



more, I guess. God would say it's not about what I want. Is this what it feels like to be called into the service of God?

"This sucks! *Ah! Cosa? Olio*, why are you yelling at me?"

Altitude monitor is off balance. I'm too high! And GPS has me almost 2,000 feet off trajectory. I'm losing focus. Thank you for snapping me back to reality, *Olio*. I'm so glad I have you as a friend now. Let's fix these problems and get back on course. I can't believe Keiko is letting me keep you forever! It's the best gift anyone has ever given me—and she doesn't even really know me! I've heard of this Japanese generosity before. They have a very hospitable culture, but an actual Spitfire to keep! I could hardly believe my ears when she told us. You and I are going to have many, many journeys together. I'll learn everything there is to know about the Spitfire so another mechanic will never lay hands on you. When you feel sick, I will fix everything. I promise. And you, you promise to take me wherever I want to go.

I wonder what Reverend Manetti would say about my little break down just now. I think I know what Papa would say. That is why Mamma always stopped me from talking through these types of discussions with Papa. Papa's not as active in religion as Mamma. They've fought over that so many times. But, which one was trying to protect me from the worse truth? Mamma by telling me God should be my only passion and that all other decisions would fall into place? Or Papa by telling me that passion for greatness and happiness will be looked upon with gladness by God, but not society? That I should fight for the things that make me happy. Why must happiness be such a struggle? If this is enlightenment, I'd rather be dumb. I've never felt so sure that I know nothing. Even as I cling to the integrity and intensity of the goals I've set for myself, they feel as dirty and useless as spent motor oil in my heart.

Well, *merda*. Here I am flying. If I'm not going to become an astronaut then why am I here? I might as well quit the race. Hell, if I decided that all that I am and all that I've worked toward is wrong and against God, then I might as well land my plane right here in the middle of this ocean. Now there's a dark thought.

That thought is the most offensive of all to God. The biggest *vaffanculo* to the creator of the entire world and all things beautiful in it is to refuse to appreciate any of it. Suicide is to take the most glorious and the most immense gift ever given, life and all it implies, and throw it down to the mud, smash and destroy, cut the red ribbons from the package, spit on the love He spent, and drop it into the cesspool of my own blood, dirty with ingratitude.

After Carimen killed herself, Mamma never spoke to that side of the family again. She still won't. One act tainted the family's bond so badly that the blood ties have rotted forever. At least for Mamma. I barely knew Carimen, but I know Mamma's other cousins. They are good people. Was Carimen really so evil? She must have been evil to commit such a deed, but why? Why would anyone? I can certainly understand

moments of hopelessness and bleak frustration and purposelessness and loneliness, terrible uncertainty leaking into the corners of thoughts and imaginings. I can feel the fingers of desperation scratch my brain even now. But what possession could move such a thought to deed? The answer can only be the mystery behind the Devil's tongue.

*Dio* forgive me, I did not really mean to debase my life with such ugly intention to destroy it. But why throw me into such a fit of doubt now? Mamma says all the answers are in God's Word, but the older I get, the more questions I have that are unanswered. If I keep trying to repress the God-given impulses of my heart, am I not suppressing the purity of what God created in me? Do I deign to improve upon God's creation? Of course, people try to improve themselves all the time by trying to become closer to his image. *Non so!* I just don't know. The truth seems so far away, and as mysterious and terrible as the Devil's tongue.

I can't do this anymore. Thinking about this is making me exhausted and sad. I have to concentrate. Check my levels. How is everything going down there *Olio d'Oliva*? Air speed... good, velocity... maintained, pitch and roll... balanced. Gas level...

"Whoa! *Dio mio!*"

Where am I?

"Is that...?"

It is! I almost flew straight past Hawai'i. GPS says O'ahu is impending. You got a little lost for a minute there, *Piccola*. You have a state of the art GPS in front of your face, but nothing can save you from being lost in your own head. *Olio d'Oliva* is hungry. We made it here right on time. I guess I'm hungry, too. Nothing distracts from the appetite like mental anguish.

At least O'ahu has calm seas and Pearl Harbor is so beautiful. This should be a quick and easy landing.

*"We cannot teach people anything; we can only help them discover it within themselves."*

—Galileo Galilei

"Alright *Olio*, back at it."

Deep breath, O'ahu was just what I needed. I was getting a little cabin fever on the last jaunt. This race isn't over yet and I could still win, but not with all those heavy thoughts weighing me down. Maybe once I get to *San Francesca*—I mean! San Francisco.

*Merda.*

Once I get there, maybe I should just... not land. Maybe I should just keep flying. I'll find some small town airstrip and refuel. Then I'll just take off again and fly

straight ahead. I'll just fly and fly for the rest of my life. That way I don't have to go home and deal with stupid love problems. I can just love the sky and my plane. Maybe I could finally enact that vision I've had since childhood, ever since my first flight with Nonno in the CANT Z.509, that old slumdog mail ship, I miss it so much! Such memories of great afternoons in that plane, and that airship was the first place I ever got the vision, the one where I just fly on and on forever.

My journey would never have to stop. I would pass over all the city skylines of the world. Pass above every monument, brick wall, and wooden house that humans ever built. I could swoop down low over the fields and plains and forests and lakes and follow the course of rivers until it got too messy with towers and trees and power lines, then I would just pull up and head back into the clouds, my highway in the sky. It could be the most epic road trip in history—road not included. I could spiral longitudinally up to the North Pole and fly straight through the *aurora borealis*. Then, double back and spiral all the way down. The circumference of the globe is only 25,000 miles at the equator. All I need is *Olio d'Oliva* and a few sandwiches, and all she needs is me. We would stop for gas and food and that's the only time I would have to talk to anyone else. The rest would just be my thoughts and me. Maybe if I flew forever, eventually, I could figure some things out.

I remember the story Francesca told me about the millionaire who lived in his personal jet plane and followed the sun continuously so he could live in perpetual daytime. If I flew over the world in the opposite direction of its rotation, then it's like I'm flying at double speed, my velocity plus the velocity of the turning Earth below me. If *Olio d'Oliva* could fly as fast as the Concorde, I could stay in the sun forever. Then again, if I flew high enough at a leisurely pace straight east while the earth rotated east beneath me, it would be like I wasn't moving at all. I could be a satellite. Someday I will be. Someday I'll blast into space. Then love won't be able to bother me. It will be a distant thought, a world away. The sweet analytical relief of thinking rationally is so blissful and relaxing for the mind. Emotions are exhausting. I wish I could just remove myself from life on earth and exchange it for life in the air. I wonder how quickly I would go crazy if I tried that. A few hours a day makes my mind feel relaxed. It's like meditating to stare into the sky ahead of me, always changing in its subtle ways, yet always so much the same. But, I confess, if I only looked at the sky for days and days, I think I would go mad. There's nothing to focus on except the inconstant shifting clouds.

Clouds can be very misleading. They are to pilots what waves must be to sailors. I've come to know their personalities and the ones to beware of, like the cumulous towers, big challengers of the little plane. They rise far up against me on both sides. I have to fly straight into their belly. The only way out is through. There are spirits inside cumulus. I see them pass by my windshield every time I go through. Maybe

they're angels. Or maybe they are the souls of Earth's dead. Perhaps the cumulonimbus puffs everyone thinks are so beautiful are actually purgatory, holding the remnants of our souls until Heaven and Hell open up. When it rains, we are drenched with the fallen, on their way down. Just gave myself chills.

Cirrus is my favorite. I like these wisps, like smudges. They remind me of paintbrush strokes, they are so artful. They have such variety of shape that they seem to arrange themselves with disregard for any natural order. Like those over there, crazy snakes zigzagging through the sky. Non-threatening, they don't interfere much with my vision, they are just decoration. When they are bright with sun and the sky is blue, the colors against each other make me so happy. In high wind currents, their motion reflects the wind-blown surface of water. I love the way nature often repeats itself in design. Like how a stretch of cirrocumulus clouds looks just like rows of cotton, or a field of Hydrangeas. And the tops of stratus clouds at dawn echo the leafy heads of woodland trees. The design of nature is so perfect and intelligent. God certainly has an eye for beauty and chaos.

I bet rain clouds never feel guilty for ruining a picnic on a sunny day. They are just themselves, even when it's inconvenient for others. Don't I deserve the same freedom of self as the cloud? But it is cheating logic to anthropomorphize inanimate things and compare their moot imaginary feelings to my own.

Feelings—what a problem they are. That's one frustrating thing about Franchi. She feels so much. We've had so many fights over little comments I made that she took too personally. She could use her energy more effectively if she could resist reacting to her emotions. She needs to spend more time thinking objectively about the situation and making more rational choices instead of speaking as soon as she feels. Mamma does the same thing and it always drives Papa and me *pazzo*. It's not that hard to just remain inactive when there's tension, speak minimally until you've thought about the situation objectively. Too much emotion is why women have a bad rep in serious professions like space exploration and politics. Under high stress, a lot of women succumb to their frustrations and say and do things that are irrational. It's hard to work with someone like that when everything is on the line, so I do understand where a stereotype interferes with real life. That was my problem last time I saw Franchi, too. I reacted to her kiss without thinking. It felt just like falling, scary. I didn't know what to say to her and I just couldn't have her looking at me with her questioning eyes anymore. But if I had planted my feet and been more objective, maybe we could have talked about it together and figured out each other. It's my fault that it's awkward now. I should have trusted her to help me think it through. She is worth the effort it would have taken for me to stand with her and to admit I have no idea where my heart is.



I don't think I want to take what I have with Franchi—our years of trusted friendship—and turn it into something romantic, because if I've learned anything about romance, it's that you can't count on it for shit. People's hearts are so fickle when it comes to romantic love. One day you're in love, the next, you can't stand each other. One fight can finish a relationship you thought was steady. That happened with Michael and me. And it happened with Dominic, too. With Michael, it was his fault. He decided to break our-year-and-a-half relationship for that Roman chick that moved into his building and then she dumped him three weeks later. He should have known better. And luckily, that break-up ended up being the best thing for both of us, even though it took me a couple weeks to realize it. But with Dominic, I have to take most of the blame. I can't explain it. One day everything was fine and then I just woke up realizing I didn't love him, didn't even really care for him, like my heart just changed its mind for no reason. I assessed that relationship for days, trying to figure out why my feelings had changed like that but I still don't really know why. But it's a lie to stay in a relationship I'm not genuine about, so I had to break it off. I feel bad for him but if I don't understand my emotions, I can't fix them, so it's better to just let them go—clear the mind and clear the heart. I know I hurt him, though. I still regret not being able to give him a better explanation of what happened. Just goes to show, even with the best of intentions, and even if both people are honest with each other, it seems inevitable that things fall apart, and usually bitterly. A solid female friendship is much sturdier, less chance of jealousy and destruction. If we change our relationship into a romantic one, I'll have to worry about her breaking up with me and losing everything we have. Maybe I should try a practice run, like date a girl for a while just to see how it feels. Then again, who better to try out something new with than someone I know for sure loves me?

At least gay people help with overpopulation. More people should be conscious of overpopulation anyway. Gay couples take in adopted kids, which is much better for everyone than making more babies. The planet can barely sustain the amount of people we have as it is.

We even had a discussion about this during training, when Ryoichi brought up the Pacific Garbage Patch, which should, come to think of it, be right around here somewhere. The thought disgusts me, a huge floating island of people's crap that collects in the ocean and stays there, trapped by water currents. I've always had limited respect for people who litter. It's so shortsighted, selfish, dirty, and disrespectful. But even people who throw their trash in a can are only sending it somewhere they don't have to see it anymore. It still exists, decaying over decades, taking up space, leaving chemicals in the ground.

There's another progressive idea—recycling! I wish everyone knew how important it was. That's one thing I can't stand about my family. They don't recycle. Even after I

put the separate container in the kitchen next to the trash, they still don't. Ridiculous! The amount of times I've fought with Gionni about rinsing out his soda cans and putting them in the recycling, you'd think he would get it by now. But he doesn't. Not even Mamma—clean, orderly, precise Mamma, who loves animals and plants. I keep catching her throwing her plastic away. And, Papa's the worst. He gets all those daily papers in the mail, barely looks at them, and then he puts them in the trash. It pisses me off! I've tried to explain to them why it's important, but they don't listen. At least Nonno used to keep a compost heap in his backyard. But I'm pretty sure the family who bought the house after he died got rid of it—fools.

There are so many things my family doesn't understand about me, and about what's important to me. It's like they don't take me seriously. Papa tells me to get a "real" job when I've told him a million times about my applications to A.S.I. "Something steady in the meantime," he says. As if school and flight school aren't enough to keep me busy. They think flying is a hobby to me even though I tell everybody flying is my life. When I win this race, maybe they'll see how serious I am. And when I get home, I'm going to show them all pictures of the Garbage Patch and tell them that's where their plastic is ending up. I wonder what it will take for people to finally realize their own impact on the Earth.

God filled the Earth from the center out to the crust with everything we need to cultivate and grow. The world really is Eden, an endless garden of resources, with healing plants, delicious fruit, and clear water. I guess innovation is one of those ouroboros human qualities, of which we have many—the silly serpent that eats itself. He satisfies his hunger, but to what end? Human ingenuity keeps building and destroying, building and destroying in the process—so shortsighted. It's childish, the impulse to keep going in one direction because it's good now, but with no thought for the future. Why isn't littering a sin?

The Commandments need an overhaul. I see where they're well intentioned to guide morality, but after a certain amount of time, doesn't any piece of advice become outdated? Life was different when Moses was alive. They couldn't even imagine a society like ours, just as I can't imagine a society 2,000 years after this. My guess is, either there won't be one—I want to be off of Earth when it finally explodes—or, they will have evolved in ways that bring us even further from the original Word. And why is it that societies seem to naturally move away from holy advice? Even the most faithful people I know admit that it's hard to keep the faith all the time. I know sin is a challenge God places in our souls to determine the pureness of the heart. I understand that free will is a blessing and a curse. But I wonder, if the love of God is so compelling, why even good people stray? Is it because evil is easier and people are lazy? Is it because evil feels more satisfying than goodness? Is it because human nature is truly closer to a state of evil than to a state of good? Or is it because our unit of measurement for

goodness hasn't been updated in 2,000 years and maybe it's possible to still have a pure heart even outside the strict guidelines of the Bible. Are these thoughts blasphemy? My man, Galileo, said, "I do not feel obliged to believe that the same God who has endowed us with sense, reason, and intellect has intended us to forego their use." It's almost as if we're set up to fail. Simply by thinking and wondering, I find myself breaking the rules. And even though I use the Bible as a basis for my moral decisions, I still feel like my life and choices can be made well outside of religion. Exploration—mental, scientific, and worldly—is a pure progression.

Talk about progression. This leg of my journey is closing. I see the refueling ship. My body is aching. So is my mind. I need to break this silence. I am a difficult conversation partner for myself.

*"Passion is the genesis of genius." —Galileo Galilei*

*Salve, Olio.* I am back again for you. My new partner and dear friend, let us share a deep breath of fresh air in my cockpit, good food in my body, and something new to think about. It's the last leg of our first journey together. What shall we find in the air and ocean this time? I'm so glad I tried the acupuncture on the refueling ship! I've never been keen on trying it before. Those needles look like something out of a horror movie. I never thought pin-pricks would be something I'd volunteer for, but I feel amazing. Probably what helped more than the needles was talking to Dr. Kaz. What a special person he is, very wise. He suits my vision of an Eastern medicine man, aging gracefully, with calm hands and ancient wisdom. Everything he says leads to non-sectarian spirituality. I can't get it out of my mind, what he told me after he asked me about God. I said, "I can't be frustrated with God because I trust there's a purpose for everything he's sending me, but I do get frustrated with religion for all my unanswered questions. It leaves me so unsatisfied sometimes. Sometimes, when I pray, I feel unheard." It spilled out of my mouth like a mess. I didn't even know I was going to say it until it was said. Then, as I lay there feeling guilty, I realized it was actually true. He told me, "Religion is not for you alone. Religion is for you, along with others. Religion is a common ground where many meet to journey together. It is not where the answers are—the answers are already in you and in your spirit. The answers will be easy to find when you understand spirit. In English, it is called Spirituality. Don't ask God to tell you the answers. When God flows through you, the answers will be found." No one had ever put it that way to me before. It's true, isn't it? Religion is for the masses. It's what people gather around. But the private part of religion feels different. When there's no pomp and circumstance of church tradition or dressing up, or holding hands, when it's just God and I alone together in my mind, it feels different. It feels more potent, more intimate and more spiritual. And it's usually when I

ask God a question in silent prayer that I receive a satisfying response, as opposed to asking Reverend Manetti or the Bible. It makes sense. It's logical. The truest answer to satisfy my soul would come from within my soul. I only need to turn on the searchlight of my spirituality inside me, and invite God to speak inside my thoughts and memories. That's when I feel closest to God, when we are alone. Not when I am singing hymns next to *Mamma e Papa*, and certainly not when I'm searching verse after verse for a solution.

"Where God flows through me, the answers will be found." I like that. It kind of takes the pressure off trying to figure out these questions I've been churning over. Dr. Kaz said, "The more you know, the less you understand." That is what it feels like when I try to apply the knowledge of doctrine that I have learned to my questions—the more I think about it, the further I am from understanding it.

There are storm clouds brewing ahead and more clouds blowing my way from the north. Is this a sign? Is it some sort of metaphor? Or is it just unfortunate weather patterns? Deep breath, *Olio*, I've flown through worse storms, although none over the insatiable mouth of an ocean. I'm a good pilot and *Olio* is a remarkable plane. This storm is becoming ugly, but I don't believe it is here to kill me, so the only way out is through. Batten down the hatches, *Olio*. We're going in.

Raindrops like firecrackers on my windshield. I can hear the hail against her body like enemy fire. I'm sorry, *Olio*, my beautiful prize. It can be buffed. To fly through a storm well, you can't bully your way through in a straight line. You have to feel the motion of the air currents and let them guide you without losing control. Use the storm's own force to keep you moving through it. Wind and water have their own rhythm. If we follow the flow of the natural current, we will stay synced with the storm instead of being completely at odds with it.

When I fly, I feel a synchronicity with the sky. I am more certain of everything in a cockpit than in any other place. My cockpit, just big enough for me, with all the tools I need within an arm's length. Once I get the flight sequence started, I don't have to do anything else. I know all the procedures by heart. When I encounter a problem in the air, *lo so*, I know just how to fix it because I *feel* the solution. Planes have become second nature to me. I don't have to think too hard about them anymore. This ease makes me feel freer than anything else in the world.

This storm is beginning to scare me a little bit. It is vicious outside, and it is getting harder to hear myself think with all that howling and rattling. But there is no need for panic because I know what to do. If it's possible to fly through this storm, I know I will. I am a good pilot. It is because I'm not entirely certain it is possible to fly through this storm that I'm afraid. Even the best pilot in the world might be blown down by the fury of nature through no fault of her own. My course is set. If I deviate at all, I could be thrown off course by hundreds of miles, especially with such low



visibility. I could easily get lost over this ocean, and I only have enough fuel to make it to America.

America. I've heard so much about it. It sounds like a carnival of dreams and nightmares, a place where anything can happen—the best and the worst. It is a grin that bares sharp teeth, a country of the richest, happiest, freest idiots in the world. Do they even deserve what they have? Do I? Or, has everything that I thought I earned, simply been given to me?

Well, I suppose the only thing I've truly earned is what I've made of myself. I have earned every bit of my character. And I like who I am when I'm flying, and I like who I am when I'm fixing things. And I love myself most when I'm with Francesca.

There it is. The answer God has left for me. What I have most to be proud of in the world is my integrity as a person, my trustworthiness as a friend, and my natural ability to fly. It is good to be who I am, a well-oiled machine. I can fix myself continuously and make that my truest mission, because that's what I have control over. And because my mind is the temple that I offer up to God, I will make it the most splendid place it can be.

I feel invincible. The cracking hail and furious rain are shaking me up like a toy. This gray monster could easily swallow up this plane. I could crash out here and die before anyone knew what had happened. But I'm not worried about dying. I know I won't, especially not right now, after rethinking all these answers, I am ripe with possibility, I've never felt more alive. I will ride out this storm like a roller coaster. I am on a trapeze without a net, inside the gigantic maw of this endless ocean, which is hungry enough to swallow me whole. I dance on the edge of mortality, but finally I am sure-footed. I cannot slip because I dance with God in me.

I was meant to fly. I was meant to find this storm in the sky, and for it to shake and destroy all the order in my thoughts. But the maelstrom has left me clean. I am crying. I am crying as furiously as this storm. I am finally one with the sky as I've tried to be all along—such vastness, such open freedom, the everywhere of the wind, and the life-giving breath of air. Of course, it is in me, I am a pilot. I move through it as it moves the same through me. Endless as it is, it is all and nothing. The sky is a wonder because of its emptiness and its fullness. Sweat dampens my clothes. Tears pool beneath my chin. My heart aches and I am ravaged by the violent uncertainty of all the things in life that fall down on top of me. The rain and hail of questions, pressure—Mamma, Reverend Manetti, A.S.I., school, love, and loss, doesn't matter. I am Piccola Uccello, "Little Bird." I have always been a child of the air. When everything is falling down, I fly. Up and up. The sky will grab and hold me, like God. I only needed to be certain. And now I am. My revelation has been hiding behind these storm clouds the whole time.

*"Dio! Dio mio. Tutta la bellezza!"*

Just look, Little Bird. Look what the world has left for you, a gift beyond all imagining! The storm has spit you out into Heaven. Never has blue been this blue. Never have the clouds looked so golden. This air is smooth as silk—do you feel that, *Olio*, this sky, like candy, so kind, so welcoming. The sun has dried my tears and all the violence and black-green tumult is suddenly behind us. We are picking up speed again. I can practically feel the storm opening my heart and freeing my spirit. This must be it—the Cloud Nine Nonno always told me about, a childhood story brought to life! Flying has always been my greatest blessing. *Olio d'Oliva*, my closest friend and confidant, you promise to take me anywhere in the world? I think I'm ready to go home. I have something to tell Francesca, and something to give her.

But, one last stop before all that! I see San Francisco Bay waving me in. I will have to remember to bow deeply to Keiko for inviting me on this journey! I wonder if I won the race.

The End