ROALD DAHL

A PIECE OF CAKE

I DO not remember much of it; not beforehand anyway; not until it happened.

There was the landing at Fouka, where the Blenheim boys were helpful and gave us tea while we were being refuelled. I remember the quietness of the Blenheim boys, how they came into the mess-tent to get some tea and sat down to drink it without saying anything; how they got up and went out when they had finished drinking and still they did not say anything. And I knew that each one was holding himself together because the going was not very good right then. They were having to go out too often, and there were no replacements coming along.

We thanked them for the tea and went out to see if they had finished refuelling our Gladiators. I remember that there was a wind blowing which made the windsock stand out straight, like a signpost, and the sand was blowing up around our legs and making a rustling noise as it swished against the tents, and the tents flapped in the wind so that they were like canvas men clapping their hands.

“Bomber boys unhappy,” Peter said.

“Not unhappy,” I answered.

“Well, they’re browned off.”

“No. They’ve had it, that’s all. But they’ll keep going. You can see they’re trying to keep going.”

Our two old Gladiators were standing beside each other in the sand and the airmen in their khaki shirts and shorts seemed still to be busy with the refuelling. I was wearing a thin white cotton flying suit and Peter had on a blue one. It wasn’t necessary to fly with anything warmer.

Peter said, “How far away is it?”

“Twenty-one miles beyond Charing Cross,” I answered, “on the right side of the road.” Charing Cross was where the desert road branched north to Mersah Matruh. The Italian army was outside Mersah, and they were doing pretty well. It was about the only time, so far as I know, that the Italians have done pretty well. Their morale goes up and down like a sensitive altimeter, and right then it was at forty thousand because the Axis was on top of the world. We hung around waiting for the refuelling to finish.

Peter said, “It’s a piece of cake.”

“Yes. It ought to be easy.”

We separated and I climbed into my cockpit. I have always remembered the face of the airman who helped me to strap in. He was oldish, about forty, and bald except for a neat patch of golden hair at the back of his head. His face was all wrinkles, his eyes were like my grandmother’s eyes, and he looked as though he had spent his life helping to strap in pilots who never came back. He stood on the wing pulling my straps and said, “Be careful. There isn’t any sense not being careful.”

“Piece of cake,” I said.

“Like hell.”

“Really. It isn’t anything at all. It’s a piece of cake.”

I don’t remember much about the next bit; I only remember about later on. I suppose we took off from Fouka and flew west towards Mersah, and I suppose we flew at about eight hundred feet. I suppose we saw the sea to starboard and I suppose-no, I am certain-that it was blue and that it was beautiful, especially where it rolled up on to the sand and made a long thick white line east and west as far as you could see, I suppose we flew over Charing Cross and flew on for twenty-one miles to where they had said it would be, but I do not know. I know only that there was trouble, lots and lots of trouble, and I know that we had turned round and were coming back when the trouble got worse. The biggest trouble of all was that I was too low to bale out, and it is from that point on that my memory comes back to me. I remember the dipping of the nose of the aircraft and I remember looking down the nose of the machine at the ground and seeing a little clump of camel-thorn growing there all by itself, I remember seeing some rocks lying in the sand beside the camel-thorn, and the camel-thorn and the sand and the rocks leapt out of the ground and came to me. I remember that very clearly.

Then there was a small gap of notremembering. It might have been one second or it might have been thirty; I do not know. I have an idea that it was very short, a second perhaps, and next I heard a crumph on the right as the starboard wing tank caught fire, then another crumph on the left as the port tank did the same. To me that was not significant, and for a while I sat still, feeling comfortable, but a little drowsy. I couldn’t see with my eyes, but that was not significant either. There was nothing to worry about. Nothing at all. Not until I felt the hotness around my legs. At first it was only a warmness and that was all right too, but all at once it was a hotness, a very stinging scorching hotness up and down the sides of each leg.

I knew that the hotness was unpleasant, but that was all I knew. I disliked it, so I curled my legs up under the seat and waited. I think there was something wrong with the telegraph system between the body and the brain. It did not seem to be working very well. Somehow it was a bit slow in telling the brain all about it and in asking for instructions. But I believe a message eventually got through, saying, “Down here there is a great hotness. What shall we do? (Signed) Left Leg and Right Leg.’ For a long time there was no reply. The brain was figuring the matter out.

Then slowly, word by word, the answer was tapped over the wires. “The-plane-is-burning. Get out repeat-get-out get-out.’ The order was relayed to the whole system, to all the muscles in the legs, arms and body, and the muscles went to work. They tried their best; they pushed a little and pulled a little, and they strained greatly, but it wasn’t any good. Up went another telegram, “Can’t get out. Something holding us in.’ The answer to this one took even longer in arriving, so I just sat there waiting for it to come, and all the time the hotness increased. Something was holding me down and it was up to the brain to find out what it was. Was it giants’ hands pressing on my shoulders, or heavy stones or houses or steam rollers or filing cabinets or gravity or was it ropes? Wait a minute. Ropes-ropes. The message was beginning to come through. It came very slowly. “Your-straps. Undo-your straps.’ My arms received the message and went to work. They tugged at the straps, but they wouldn’t undo. They tugged again and again, a little feebly, but as hard as they could, and it wasn’t any use. Back went the message. “How do we undo the straps?”

This time I think that I sat there for three or four minutes waiting for the answer. It wasn’t any use hurrying or getting impatient. That was the one thing of which I was sure. But what a long time it was all taking. I said aloud, “Bugger it. I’m going to be burnt. I’m… but I was interrupted. The answer was coming-no, it wasn’t-yes, it was, it was slowly coming through. “Pull-out-the-quick release-pin-you-bloody-fool-and-hurry.’

Out came the pin and the straps were loosed. Now, let’s get out. Let’s get out, let’s get out. But I couldn’t do it. I simply couldn’t lift myself out of the cockpit. Arms and legs tried their best but it wasn’t any use. A last desperate message was flashed upwards and this time it was marked “Urgent.’

“Something else is holding us down,’ it said.

“Something else, something else, something heavy.’

Still the arms and legs did not fight. They seemed to know instinctively that there was no point in using up their strength. They stayed quiet and waited for the answer, and oh what a time it took. Twenty, thirty, forty hot seconds. None of them really white hot yet, no sizzling of flesh or smell of burning meat, but that would come any moment now, because those old Gladiators aren’t made of stressed steel like a Hurricane or a Spit. They have taut canvas wings, covered with magnificently inflammable dope, and

underneath there are hundreds of small thin sticks, the kind you put under the logs for kindling, only these are drier and thinner. If a clever man said, “I am going to build a big thing that will burn better and quicker than anything else in the world,’ and if he applied himself diligently to his task, he would probably finish up by building something very like a Gladiator. I sat still waiting.

Then suddenly the reply, beautiful in its briefness, but at the same time explaining everything. “Your-parachute-turn-the buckle.’

I turned the buckle, released the parachute harness and with some effort hoisted myself up and tumbled over the side of the cockpit. Something seemed to be burning, so I rolled about a bit in the sand, then crawled away from the fire on all fours and lay down.

I heard some of my machine-gun ammunition going off in the heat and I heard some of the bullets thumping into the sand near by. I did not worry about them; I merely heard them.

Things were beginning to hurt. My face hurt most. There was something wrong with my face. Something had happened to it. Slowly I put up a hand to feel it. It was sticky. My nose didn’t seem to be there. I tried to feel my teeth but I cannot remember whether I came to any conclusion about them. I think I dozed off.

All of a sudden there was Peter. I heard his voice and I heard him dancing around and yelling like a madman and shaking my hand and saying “Jesus, I thought you were still inside. I came down half a mile away and ran like hell. Are you all right?”

I said, “Peter, what has happened to my nose?”

I heard him striking a match in the dark. The night comes quickly in the desert. There was a pause.

“It actually doesn’t seem to be there very much,” he said. “Does it hurt?”

“Don’t be a bloody fool, of course it hurts.”

He said he was going back to his machine to get some morphia out of his emergency pack, but he came back again soon, saying he couldn’t find his aircraft in the dark.

“Peter,” I said, “I can’t see anything.”

“It’s night,” he answered. “I can’t see either.”

It was cold now. It was bitter cold, and Peter lay down close alongside so that we

could both keep a little warmer. Every now and then he would say, “I’ve never seen a man without a nose before,” I kept spewing a lot of blood and every time I did it, Peter lit a match. Once he gave me a cigarette, but it got wet and I didn’t want it anyway.

I do not know how long we stayed there and I remember only very little more. I remember that I kept telling Peter that there was a tin of sore throat tablets, in my pocket, and that he should take one, otherwise he would catch my sore throat. I remember asking him where we were and him saying, “We’re between the two armies,” and then I remember English voices from an English patrol asking if we were Italians. Peter said something to them; I cannot remember what he said.

Later I remember hot thick soup and one spoonful making me sick. And all the time the pleasant feeling that Peter was around, being wonderful, doing wonderful things and never going away. That is all that I can remember.

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The men stood beside the airplane painting away and talking about the heat.

“Painting pictures on the aircraft,” I said.

“Yes,” said Peter. “It’s a great idea. It’s subtle.”

“Why?” I said. “Just you tell me.”

“They’re funny pictures,” he said. “The German pilots will all laugh when they see them; they’ll shake so with their laughing that they won’t be able to shoot straight.”

“Oh baloney baloney baloney.”

“No, it’s a great idea. It’s fine. Come and have a look.”

We ran towards the line of aircraft. “Hop, skip, jump,” said Peter. “Hop skip jump, keep in time.”

“Hop skip jump,” I said, “Hop skip jump,” and we danced along.

The painter on the first aeroplane had a straw hat on his head and a sad face. He was copying the drawing out of a magazine, and when Peter saw it he said, “Boy oh boy look at that picture,” and he began to laugh. His laugh began with a rumble and grew quickly into a belly-roar and he slapped his thighs with his hands both at the same time and went on laughing with his body doubled up and his mouth wide open and his eyes shut. His silk top hat fell off his head on to the sand.

“That’s not funny,” I said.

“Not funny!” he cried. “What d’you mean “not funny’? Look at me. Look at me laughing. Laughing like this I couldn’t hit anything. I couldn’t hit a hay wagon or a house or a louse.” And he capered about on the sand, gurgling and shaking with laughter. Then he seized me by the arm and we danced over to the next aeroplane. “Hop skip jump,” he said. “Hop skip jump.”

There was a small man with a crumpled face writing a long story on the fuselage with a red crayon. His straw hat was perched straight on the back of his head and his face was shiny with sweat.

“Good morning,” he said. “Good morning, good morning,” and he swept his hat off his head in a very elegant way.

Peter said, “Shut up,” and bent down and began to read what the little man had been writing. All the time Peter was spluttering and rumbling with laughter, and as he read he began to laugh afresh. He rocked from one side to the other and danced around on the sand slapping his thighs with his hands and bending his body. “Oh my, what a story, what a story, what a story. Look at me. Look at me laughing,” and he hopped about on his toes, shaking his head and chortling like a madman. Then suddenly I saw the joke and I began to laugh with him. I laughed so much that my stomach hurt and I fell down and rolled around on the sand and roared and roared because it was so funny that there was nothing else I could do.

“Peter, you’re marvellous,” I shouted. “But can all those German pilots read English?”

“Oh hell,” he said. “Oh hell. Stop,” he shouted. “Stop your work,” and the painters all stopped their painting and turned round slowly and looked at Peter. They did a little caper on their toes and began to chant in unison. “Rubbishy things-on all the wings, on all the wings, on all the wings,” they chanted.

“Shut up,” said Peter. “We’re in a jam. We must keep calm. Where’s my top hat?”

“What?” I said.

“You can speak German,” he said. “You must translate for us. He will translate for you,” he shouted to the painters. “He will translate.”

Then I saw his black top hat lying in the sand. I looked away, then I looked around and saw it again. It was a silk opera hat and it was lying there on its side in the sand.

“You’re mad,” I shouted. “You’re madder than hell. You don’t know what you’re doing. You’ll get us all killed. You’re absolutely plumb crazy, do you know that? You’re crazier

than hell. My God, you're crazy."

"Goodness, what a noise you're making. You mustn't shout like that: it's not good for you." This was a woman's voice. "You've made yourself all hot," she said, and I felt someone wiping my forehead with a handkerchief. "You mustn't work yourself up like that."

Then she was gone and I saw only the sky, which was pale blue. There were no clouds and all around were the German fighters. They were above, below and on every side and there was no way I could go; there was nothing I could do. They took it in turns to come in to attack and they flew their aircraft carelessly, banking and looping and dancing in the air. But I was not frightened, because of the funny pictures on my wings. I was confident and I thought, "I am going to fight a hundred of them alone and I'll shoot them all down. I'll shoot them while they are laughing; that's what I'll do.'

Then they flew closer. The whole sky was full of them. There were so many that I did not know which ones to watch and which ones to attack. There were so many that they made a black curtain over the sky and only here and there could I see a little of the blue showing through. But there was enough to patch a Dutchman's trousers, which was all that mattered. So long as there was enough to do that, then everything was all right.

Still they flew closer. They came nearer and nearer, right up in front of my face so that I saw only the black crosses which stood out brightly against the colour of the Messerschmitts and against the blue of the sky; and as I turned my head quickly from one side to the other I saw more aircraft and more crosses and then I saw nothing but the arms of the crosses and the blue of the sky. The arms had hands and they joined together and made a circle and danced around my Gladiator, while the engines of the Messerschmitts sang joyfully in a deep voice. They were playing Oranges and Lemons and every now and then two would detach themselves and come out into the middle of the floor and make an attack and I knew then that it was Oranges and Lemons. They banked and swerved and danced upon their toes and they leant against the air first to one side, then to the other. " Oranges and Lemons said the bells of St Clements," sang the engines.

But I was still confident. I could dance better than they and I had a better partner. She was the most beautiful girl in the world. I looked down and saw the curve of her neck and the gentle slope of her pale shoulders and I saw her slender arms eager and outstretched.

Suddenly I saw some bullet holes in my starboard wing and I got angry and scared both at the same time; but mostly I got angry. Then I got confident and I said, "The German who did that had no sense of humour. There's always one man in a party who has no sense of humour. But there's nothing to worry about; there's nothing at all to

worry about."

Then I saw more bullet holes and I got scared. I slid back the hood of the cockpit and stood up and shouted, "You fools, look at the funny pictures. Look at the one on my tail; look at the story on my fuselage. Please look at the story on my fuselage."

But they kept on coming. They tripped into the middle of the floor in twos, shooting at me as they came. And the engines of the Messerschmitts sang loudly. "When will you pay me, said the bells of Old Bailey?" sang the engines, and as they sang the black crosses danced and swayed to the rhythm of the music. There were more holes in my wings, in the engine cowling and in the cockpit.

Then suddenly there were some in my body.

But there was no pain, even when I went into a spin, when the wings of my plane went flip, flip, flip flip, faster and faster, when the blue sky and the black sea chased each other round and round until there was no longer any sky or sea but just the flashing of the sun as I turned. But the black crosses were following me down, still dancing and still holding hands and I could still hear the singing of their engines. "Here comes a candle to light you to bed, here comes a chopper to chop off your head," sang the engines.

Still the wings went flip, flip, flip flip, and there was neither sky nor sea around me, but only the sun.

Then there was only the sea. I could see it below me and I could see the white horses, and I said to myself, "Those are white horses riding a rough sea." I knew then that my brain was going well because of the white horses and because of the sea. I knew that there was not much time because the sea and the white horses were nearer, the white horses were bigger and the sea was like a sea and like water, not like a smooth plate. Then there was only one white horse, rushing forward madly with his bit in his teeth, foaming at the mouth, scattering the spray with his hooves and arching his neck as he ran. He galloped on madly over the sea, riderless and uncontrollable, and I could tell that we were going to crash.

After that it was warmer, and there were no black crosses and there was no sky. But it was only warm because it was not hot and it was not cold. I was sitting in a great red chair made of velvet and it was evening. There was a wind blowing from behind.

"Where am I?" I said.

"You are missing. You are missing, believed killed."

"Then I must tell my mother."

“You can’t. You can’t use that phone.”

“Why not?”

“It goes only to God.”

“What did you say I was?”

“Missing, believed killed.”

“That’s not true. It’s a lie. It’s a lousy lie because here I am and I’m not missing. You’re just trying to frighten me and you won’t succeed. You won’t succeed, I tell you, because I know it’s a lie and I’m going back to my squadron. You can’t stop me because I’ll just go. I’m going, you see, I’m going.”

I got up from the red chair and began to run.

“Let me see those X-rays again, nurse.”

“They’re here, doctor.” This was the woman’s voice again, and now it came closer. “You have been making a noise tonight, haven’t you? Let me straighten your pillow for you, you’re pushing it on to the floor.” The voice was close and it was very soft and nice.

“Am I missing?”

“No, of course not. You’re fine.”

“They said I was missing.”

“Don’t be silly; you’re fine.”

Oh everyone’s silly, silly, silly, but it was a lovely day, and I did not want to run but I couldn’t stop because my legs were carrying me and I had no control over them. It was as if they did not belong to me, although when I looked down I saw that they were mine, that the shoes on the feet were mine and that the legs were joined to my body. But they would not do what I wanted; they just went on running across the field and I had to go with them. I ran and ran and ran, and although in some places the field was rough and bumpy, I never stumbled. I ran past trees and hedges and in one field there were some sheep which stopped their eating and scampered off as I ran past them. Once I saw my mother in a pale grey dress bending down picking mushrooms, and as I ran past she looked up and said, “My basket’s nearly full; shall we go home soon?” but my legs wouldn’t stop and I had to go on.

Then I saw the cliff ahead and I saw how dark it was beyond the cliff. There was the great cliff and beyond it there was nothing but darkness, although the sun was shining in the field where I was running. The light of the sun stopped dead at the edge of the cliff and there was only darkness beyond. “That must be where the night begins,’ I thought, and once more I tried to stop but it was not any good. My legs began to go faster towards the cliff and they began to take longer strides, and I reached down with my hand and tried to stop them by clutching the cloth of my trousers, but it did not work; then I tried to fall down. But my legs were nimble, and each time I threw myself I landed on my toes and went on running.

Now the cliff and the darkness were much nearer and I could see that unless I stopped quickly I should go over the edge. Once more I tried to throw myself to the ground and once more I landed on my toes and went on running.

I was going fast as I came to the edge and I went straight on over it into the darkness and began to fall.

At first it was not quite dark. I could see little trees growing out of the face of the cliff, and I grabbed at them with my hands as I went down. Several times I managed to catch hold of a branch, but it always broke off at once because I was so heavy and because I was falling so fast, and once I caught a thick branch with both hands and the tree leaned forward and I heard the snapping of the roots one by one until it came away from the cliff and I went on falling. Then it became darker because the sun and the day were in the fields far away at the top of the cliff, and as I fell I kept my eyes open and watched the darkness turn from grey-black to black, from black to jet black and from jet black to pure liquid blackness which I could touch with my hands but which I could not see. But I went on falling, and it was so black that there was nothing anywhere and it was not any use doing anything or caring or thinking because of the blackness and because of the falling. It was not any use.

“You’re better this morning. You’re much better.” It was the woman’s voice again.

“Hallo.”

“Hallo; we thought you were never going to get conscious.”

“Where am I?”

“In Alexandria; in hospital.”

“How long have I been here?”

“Four days.”

“9XThat time is it?”

“Seven o’clock in the morning.”

“Why can’t I see?”

I heard her walking a little closer.

“Oh, we’ve just put a bandage around your eyes for a bit.”

“How long for?”

“Just for a while. Don’t worry. You’re fine. You were very lucky, you know.”

I was feeling my face with my fingers but I couldn’t feel it; I could only feel something else.

“What’s wrong with my face?”

I heard her coming up to the side of my bed and I felt her hand touching my shoulder.

“You mustn’t talk any more. You’re not allowed to talk. It’s bad for you. Just lie still and don’t worry. You’re fine.”

I heard the sound of her footsteps as she walked across the floor and I heard her open the door and shut it again.

“Nurse,” I said. “Nurse.”

But she was gone.