The Wind is Part of the Sky

Sara Trostobich rolled over half-opening her eyes. That was when she saw the head of the wide-mouthed african viper. Its thick dark body snaked upon the empty chair beside her bed. The chill that bubblelated through her skin instantly quaked her spine then fled to her toes. But the more she stared through the dark, the more she recognized her big leather belt that she'd laid there the night before. It was some time before her bones stopped quivering in her shoulders near the back of her neck.

The golden clock Grampa Aban had given her displayed 6:10. She waited quietly for the two fog horn blasts that would come from the early ferry as it left dock. As the blasts came she saw in her mind the large red and white flags on each side of the boat that always rippled stiffly in the sea wind.

On her back she stared up at the ceiling. Usually at this time she could hear Grampa Aban stirring in the room at the top. But it was quiet now for Grampa Aban was gone. He had died two months ago and lived on only in the sky. He had told her many stories and she had believed them all, even though she knew they were--some of them--just stories. But her favorite ones were about the wind and the sky. It was true, she loved the sky. They had even built the Red Baron, a kite with a three foot long wing span and an even longer tail.

A half hour later Sara took her things to the small bathroom at the end of the hall. She heard the TV in the family room and recognized the happy squeals of the Mr. Piggy show. No doubt her little cousin Ivan had turned on the black and white TV, and was probably sitting on folded legs with two scuffed storm troopers perched on top of his blond hair...

It was just turning light on the hill outside. From the bathroom window she could see the sun was just coming on and it's red glowing was already painting the white houses and windows in Odessa; they sparkled and blazed and she stared at the fixed fire flashes for a long time. It was still warm even for fall this year. And the news people were excited about it; that was all they seemed to talk about--*this was the first time... ten degrees higher.… un-seasonal for Odessa...bad winter expected...*and poor Grampa would not be here to enjoy it.

Grampa Aban was one of the best Generals that the U.S. ever had during the early times when there was world war; and he had travelled alot, --to Africa, and west to Spain. Now, since they had forced him to step down from his post, he had died and was now free to travel without visa. At least his body was. It was as he had said once, "Ashes to air, air to sky, and sky to freedom of all the stars." Sara remembered how each family member had celebrated his burial by scattering his ashes over the bay of Odessia.

Sara heard more fog horns now, and the houses on the far hill had gained color and lost

more shadows, but the bay was hidden by that hill. She saw that the grass on the hill nearest her house was still. If the wind did not come soon it would mean that the Red Baron would not fly this morning. That meant the remains of the General would not come and lift their red bird into the sky till it tugged like a caught fish on the long curved string. She would accept it if that was the way it was, just as she had accepted the General's death--for even he knew he was old, and he was ready to pass on into the wind, into the earth, and into the sky.

She brushed her teeth with Comex. She hated the taste but her mother bought that brand on Grampa Aban's request; he had used it in the wars. Everything seemed to remind her of Grampa: the toothe paste, the silence above her bed in the ceiling. The sky was the worse reminder of all because she loved the sky and it was the sky that Grampa talked about the morning he died. "When I shall pass," he had said with a weak voice, "I will become part of the wind and the wind is part of the sky."

Back in her room she brushed her blond locks until they shined and waved, her mind fixed on the hill. It was now froshed with warm golden sunlight and several birds sang and busied themselves on the wires of the fence at the bottom of the hill. And yes, there was now a breeze bending the stiff bull grasses--barely, but it could be enough to sail the Baron.

Ever since school had started last week she had flown their kite every morning, and there had been a sun every morning. Her teacher had explained that it was because of the tides which came in about the same time in the bay and brought with them the winds from Africa even though there were no clouds. Sara had explained it--in her own mind, at least--as Grampa Aban being in the wind and him wanting her to fly their kite every morning on the hill. She remembered the times they had spent there in the days just after his retirement, and during the months before his death when he would stand beside her and smoke his pipe and watch his watch, --and, of course, send a prideful grin toward her as she pulled hard against the heavy sky-hooked Baron.

As she carried the Red Baron to the hill, it fairly leaped up and down as the cool wind caught in its wings. Several times Sara ran to make it catch more wind. When the kite rose, she leaped with it. She loved seeing it rise into the sky and catch the wind, and the tug gave the feeling of lifting her up, upward toward that far far wide blue.

Two minutes was enough to get the kite aloft and feel the air current that was now coming in with the tide. The Red Baron now knew the gentle part of the sky that stroked without killing. This was that part of the sky which commanded attention of king and queen alike or poor girls like Sara who had nothing to cling to but a red kite and a room full of memories of a General who had been her only father. She owned little, but then nobody owned the sky. Not the United States. Not England. Not even mighty Russia.

And the sky was the greatest treasure of all for it held everything in its depths. Flat earth was pressed down by the sky, and all the far galaxies spinning in space were surrounded by the black inky space we call night sky.

Her mother's call was faint but when Sara heard it she pulled against the wind and fought the tears that welled in her eyes; every day this happened, as their kite had to climb down: she would let the tears come and then stop them from falling—let them come and then stop them from falling. Then she stood still a moment, the Red Baron trying to leap out of her hands. The wind pressed her jacket against her stomach and it gently blew her hair. The breeze iced into the rims of her wet eyes and she just knew that Grampa Aban's dust was in that wind. It warmed her inside to know that he was there. And as she chunked down the hill she whispered to herself, "Thank you, Grampa. Thank you, Grampa. Thank you, Grampa."

After breakfast she went to Grampa Aban's room to choose something from his 'room' for Ancient Tales Time; thinking perhaps something from when he ventured to the north pole, or the caribbean.

She sauntered through remembering her first time. She was about four years old and he had just come to live with them. She had never seen so many clocks and brass swords and medals. There were pictures on the walls of him when he was with the Bureau. And she remembered that it was the Bureau that had forced him to retire. He thought that 85 was not too old to be a world adventurer. He lived seven years longer, and two months after Sara's 12th birthday he died in this room. Her mother had asked that his things be left this way as a memorium to him and the things he had accomplished for the U.S.

She opened the drawer on his desk and the watches in it started ticking. When she saw the drawer full of gold and silver colored watches she knew she would choose a watch today. The one she chose fit too loosely on her small wrist, but then its gold-like heaviness would all the more remind her of Grampa. The wind would cool the inside of the band and she knew it would be cold on her wrist. But it would be free like a kite, like the wind, and like the General. Now all she had to do was invent a tale to go with the watch. Something fantastic, something that would get her an 'A' from Mrs. Annaker.

Even before the bell rang some of the students on the playground, especially the boys, wanted to wear the gold watch. They wanted to feel what it felt like to wear a watch that Napoleon's right hand general had owned just before her Grampa had stripped it off him in battle--which was her invented tale about the unrepairable gold watch. She could hardly wait to see the gleams of wonder in her classmates eyes as she told the whole story during Ancient Tales Time twenty minutes after roll call.

When they entered the toasty classroom and headed for the coat room on the side, everyone noticed the tall new girl standing by the teacher’s desk.... Sara felt a painful ripple down the front of her chest, for she just knew that the entrance of a new student meant the loss of time--Ancient Tales Time. Her eyes nearly misted and she grimaced very hard because she had dreamed up a good one this time.

Mrs. Annaker stood when everyone was seated. Sara eyed the tall thin black featured girl who was about as tall as sara's mother.

"Class, this is Janella. Her parents call her Jani for short. Janella means happy soul among the countries of Africa.."

The class: "We welcome you, John-ee."

"Class, Jani speaks four different languages, so those of you who are bilingual may wish to speak to her."

Mrs. Annaker paused and scanned the room then. Sara's underarms became itchy when Mrs. Annaker said, "Ah, there's a seat beside Sara. Sara raise your hand so Jani may see where you are."

The watch with the good story scraped down her arm as Sara raised her scrawny hand. Both her underarms exploded. Everyone now looked at Sara as the towering dark girl walked down the aisle. Sara had long ago lowered her hand but she still felt the coolness of the drying sweat in her right underarm.

When the tall slender girl laid her note pad on her desk and turned to place herself in the wood seat, Sara smelled the distinct perfume of almonds. The girl fairly reeked of almonds. That in itself wasn't bad for it was the down side of the year and almonds were so hard to get in Odessa --same as peanut butter. The child's parents must have been quite rich for her to have worn perfume laced with almonds.

Sara eyed her but barely moved her head. She was a giant with very pretty short cropped hair, dark as the black shells found at the shore. Her skin on her long thin bones was smooth and straight as a Queen's. The dress too she wore was one that even Sara would want to wear on her wedding day. The white and pink flowers around the neckline lay contrasted with her smooth sinewy neck. She hadn't spoken yet but the half smile she gave Sara made Sara's underarms explode again, for she had been caught staring. When Sara looked again and saw the smile still there she returned the smile. Sara had just said 'hello' to a Queen. A rich Queen. Both of them had just said 'hello.'

At mid-morning the recess bell rang and Sara caught her Grampa's watch on the corner of her desk as she got up to go get her sweater. Jani was getting up slowly and Sara was nearly out of the door when Mrs. Annaker called her to her desk. Sara lost all her bounce and was filled with grey lead for she just knew Mrs. Annaker was going to stick her with the new girl. And that would most definitely prevent her from showing off the watch. They had missed the Ancient Tales Time for that day and Sara had planned to tell her tale anyway on the playfield. She knew that her genius would not bring her glory this day, and tomorrow the surprise of the watch would be old news.

"Jani, could you wait in the hall for a moment," Mrs. Annaker said over the din of young voices. Sara knew for sure what was coming: the ice that splashed with those words to Jani now fell on Sara's feet.

"Sara," she whispered, "I want you to show the new girl around and be nice to her. A member of her family died recently this summer and that is why their family was late getting their visa to come to the U.S. So Jani is new here and everything. Can I count on you to do this?"

Sara pursed her lip and nodded, noticing that for the first time Mrs. Annaker's breath smelled bad. For an instant she felt two sadnesses. One for the poor new face in class and one for herself. Now she knew someone else who had just lost a loved one. Now, for the first time since Grampa Aban died, Sara felt sadness greater in mystery than her own. Jani's loved one could have been a rich King or a leader of the rich. This new girl was fast becoming a Queen of Mystery as rich in fascination as the queens and heads of state in the stories that Grampa Aban had told. Only now Sara was determined to be the great General Aban and solve this wonder of the 'African Queen'; just her unpreparedness for the task worried her.

"Go. She is waiting." Another ghasp of bad breath angled across Sara's cheek, but it was attended by a gentle hand to Sara's shoulder, and a smile.

There was tingling in both of Sara's bloodless legs. She stood in front of the tall 'African Queen' her nose filling again with the scent of almonds. Sara's wooden tongue nearly clacked against her teeth as she explained to Jani what the teacher told her; and her own words of her own personal grief spilled out as well. For a few seconds Jani stared at the ten inches of empty space above Sara that was the difference in their height. Then the girl said, "They did a horrible thing to him, and he died in that place." The girl said something in a foreign language and Sara's underarms again turned into a sauna, and she felt something hot like blood run down the side of her ribs.

Sara squeezed her elbows in to steady herself, then weakly said, "I will show you where the other rooms are in the building."

When they walked out into the warm sunlight, she was asking the 'Queen' why her parents had decided to come to the U.S. and Odessa. Sara was playing the part of the General quite enjoyably now; and she found she liked the mannerisms of the 'Queen', the way she moved her head, her husky tall voice and the long accenting tone of her words. Truly if her father were still alive he must be a powerful man of presence and Sara was sure that Grampa Aban would have liked him.

Only before the bell rang did Sara inquire about the relative who had died. "There is war in my country, and my brother was a leader in this war. He was caught, him and his soldiers and when the captors found out he was part of the freedom movement led by my father they said, 'We will keep a piece of the wind from blowing over this country, and

your father, the sky, will know it." Jani paused, then she repeated the same foreign words she had before. "I say it in my native tongue when I speak of it to honour my brother. For he dearly loved the sky."

They were silent for a while. The thrill Sara felt at that moment was surpassed only by the sight of the Red Baron noding lazily back and forth across the blue. She continued to squint up at the brightness of the sky on the 'Queen's' shoulder; and her blue eyes gleamed through her narrowed lashes with a wonderment that did not change even though the dull pain came as usual when they passed from the sunlight to the dark hallway. She was gorged with pride at the thought that they both had so much in common; that Mrs. Annaker had given them to each other. She locked her hands behind her, the way the General always had, and fingered the heavy watch. "I have so many things, Jani, that I wish to tell you..." And they continued to talk as they journeyed down the hall.

(Thank you for reading this story..

I wrote this story in 1988 for my daughter's 3rd, 4th and 5th grade class. She wanted me to write a story for her (my) parent's day visit to her class. After two weeks of writing, I finally read this story to her class. There were 73 students and two teachers in her Horizon class at John Muir Elementary School. The story takes place in Odessa, Russia not Odessa, Florida. That was one of the many surprises in the story that we discussed after I had read the story.)