

[...]

9

Following the Airbus A320 of Air Intel with his eyes, Gaston Lemierre slowly began to calm down. Two shifts are in the control room now — guys will cope. They will certainly sort everything out.

Hastily looking around the flight control room, the man made sure that nobody required his help and, turning back to the window, stared at the snow-covered airfield. Over the last few minutes, the visibility became even worse, so Gaston could not distinguish anything. Airplanes were landing instinctively, relying only on onboard instruments and airport ILS data. Sometimes Gaston imagined himself in the pilot's shoes, who should land a plane in such weather conditions. How does it feel, when you see nothing, rely solely on instruments, and descend to the ground, desperately hoping that the runway will pop out right where you expect? They are not the ones to envy now...

With his peripheral vision, Gaston caught a movement on the left side of the airport. Something immense was crawling through the blizzard across the airfield. To have a better view the man moved to the left and drew his face nearer to the sloping glass.

“A sweeper?” assumed Lemierre. It was difficult to identify unmistakably, but judging by the size and diffused yellow light of the marker lamps that was possible to distinguish through the snowstorm, it was *Øveraasen*. Currently, nothing else could be on runways. The senior air traffic control officer squinted, peering into the windswept snowy mess that was filling the area between the air traffic control tower and the airfield. Suddenly something clicked in Gaston's head. A metallic flavor appeared in his mouth, and he had ants in his pants. As well as a minute ago Noel Legras felt that he had crossed the runway 04L-22R not noticing it, Gaston Lemierre also subconsciously comprehended that he discerned a vehicle in the wrong place. Lemierre saw the airfield from the control tower — the same place where he was standing — so many times, that he could estimate the location of the sweeper without seeing the airport and taxiways. Through the flickering of snowflakes, Gaston could not define where exactly *Øveraasen* was (snow distorted the distance), but he was willing to bet that not at 04L-22R.

“Where's that damn asshole gone?” Gaston was not in a panic yet. He assumed that for some reason the sweeper had driven on the taxiway Alpha-Hotel.

Instinctively Lemierre reached for the binoculars attached to a special holder by the window. He took it, turned in his hands, and placed it back. The reflection from glass, darkness, and poor visibility stultified all attempts to look over the airfield through the magnifying glass. There was no surface movement radar in the Paris-Nord airport, so everything Gaston could do was rely on his own eyes.

Flaring his nostrils out of tension, the man looked to the right, peered at the building of the auxiliary fire station located behind two runways, approximately in front of Terminal 1, and compared it with the location of the sweeper.

“Close... Why, the hell, he's so close to it?” the fear grew. Gaston felt as if someone was brandishing a very long piece of steel cable in his head.

And then a sudden gust of wind tore a snow cloud, unclosing the central part of the airfield. Lemierre saw two parallel strips of blue lights that framed the Alpha-Hotel taxiway and was horrified, realizing that it was empty. No *Øveraasen* on it. That meant that the sweeper was somewhere between Alpha-Hotel and the fire station. So, if to reject the absurd assumption that

Øveraasen was making its way straight across the field, the only place where it could be — the runway 04R-22L.

Gaston was stunned. “It cannot be!”

“Listen, he... h...e...” the officer was speaking loudly enough that all room could hear him, but out of fear, he started stammering (the next evening Jean Lebrun, a meteorologist, during a conversation with investigators will claim that Gaston Lemierre was turning gray already then). “Is i-i... it p-precisely o-on 22R?” the man clutched a throat with his hand as if trying to smother himself, harshly strayed from the window, and shouted, “Tell me that the s-sweeper is one the runway, w-hitch is closer to terminals!!!”

The noise died away in the air traffic control room. Dispatchers were silently straightening above their seats and peering into the darkness outside.

Gaston rushed to the radio transmitter.

“What’s the channel?” the man was trembling. At that moment not only Jean Lebrun but everybody close to the senior of the shift saw that the hair of thirty-nine-year-old Lemierre was getting white.

“Eleventh,” one of the dispatchers said quietly.

Gaston clicked the button and, pressing the headset to the ear, rushed back to the window. “RS 400! *Øveraasen* RS 400! Report immediately: on what runway are you now?!”

The answer Gaston Luis Lumierre has chased on his memory for the rest of his life. It will come in his dream every night, ring in his head every time he will be alone and face to face with his thoughts; it will be rotting him from the inside like cancer. Gaston will never approach any airport, and hearing jet airliner’s sound, he — a person, who had spent one-third of his life in an air traffic control tower — will writhe like a person with epilepsy.

The thing that sounded in the earpiece divided his life into ‘before’ and ‘after’.

“Control tower... e-e-em... on which one should I be?”

10

February 13, 22:03 (UTC +1)

Somewhere in the air over Paris-Nord International airport

Wind gusts were rushing at the plane like watchdogs turning at the last minute before landing into hell. *AARON* was approaching the airport Paris-Nord, following the glide slope with its last ounce of strength. Thirty seconds ago, the airliner crossed the lower boundary of clouds, but neither Rothko nor Riggson noticed this — a sprinkle of snow was so thick that there was no difference between clouds and the snowstorm itself. Two pairs of powerful navigation lights located on the wings at the attachment to the fuselage were snatching a furious swirl of snowflakes from the dark.

Matthew Riggson was getting nervous. Less than two hundred meters separated the plane from the ground, but pilots still could not distinguish any lights that indicated the approaching airport. It is uneasy to keep composure when you are rushing to the ground in zero visibility relying only on instruments when it seems that the land is no more there, and there is nothing in the whole universe except darkness and storm; when everything you can do is to pray and hope that the thing which will pop up in front of you the next moment is a clean and brightly illuminated runway, not a maintenance hangar or passenger terminal.

The co-pilot's anxiety has been transmitted to the more experienced Radyslav. The Ukrainian glanced at the altimeter. 180 meters. With the current vertical speed (3.5 m/sec.) less than a minute remained to the landing.

There was no earth beneath them.

"The storm is rather heavy," Rothko said, motioning to the window covered with snow and darkness. He said this just to break the deathly silence.

Matthew did not even open his mouth to respond.

A momentary gust of wind struck the wings from above, and the plane sagged perceptibly. Pilots' viscera and stomachs have propped the lungs. At the same moment, a controller's voice sounded in headphones, "1419, maintain altitude. According to my information, you're deep below the glide path."

Because of the serious buffeting, the autopilot had partly turned off and pilots were performing some functions to lead the plane. Radyslav was controlling the plane, so he replied, "Control tower, everything's under control. Climbing," Rothko moved thrust levers forward and pulled the control column back, returning the plane on the glide path. Then he added, "Turbulence."

"1419, Roger that. Continue landing."

In a couple of minutes, Matthew Riggson anxiously reported, "One hundred meters."

Radyslav wanted to calm the co-pilot down, but as he opened a mouth to say a few soothing words, a sudden gust jerked the plane and pushed it up a few meters.

"Phew! Damn it!" the Ukrainian could hardly control himself not to roar. His palms became sweaty and at that moment Radyslav started thinking seriously that he would not be able to land a plane and he would be forced to go to a second circle or even fly to the alternate airport. If the buffeting near the ground intensified, it would be difficult to follow the glide slope, and then...

Matthew was seriously nervous.

"Captain. Less than a hundred meters left, I don't see it... I don't see the runway!"

Without listening, Rothko interrupted the Belgian and blurted out rudely, "Mett, don't twitch! We're on the glide path. In a quarter of an hour, we will be having a cup of coffee in the restroom."

The sharpness in his voice influenced Matthew: he regained composure, but in three seconds asked again, "Seventy meters. Where is it?"

Ukrainian was breathing hard, "Everything's fine. Continue descent."

Radyslav was holding a yoke with his left hand, and clutched throttle levers with his right one; Matthew had to monitor the height and speed, but both of them, craning their necks forward, fixed their eyes on the snowy chaos outside the window of the cockpit. Nothing changed — the same whirlwind of blackness and snow was adhering to the window. Only altimeter data was moving smoothly to zero.

60 meters...

"A hundred feet more," Radyslav thought, "and I should cancel the landi..."

Suddenly the co-pilot shouted, "I can see it... eye contact! I see the lights of the runway."

The Ukrainian leaned forward. Through the seemingly impenetrable thickness of the blizzard three rows of shining spots — red on each side of the runway and white in the middle — emerged from the darkness. They were extending forward, fading out in the snowstorm. The runway!

"Roger that," Radyslav exhaled and removed the hand from the throttle levers. "We land!"

Matthew Riggson wanted to report that he had understood the order, but he had no time. The plane had just overpassed a fifty-meter-high mark, when a second pilot, attentively watching the altimeter, had to count down meters remaining to the land.

“Fifty meters...” the Belgian rapped out confidently.

The runway became well-defined.

“Forty...”

Lights of the parallel runway and the main taxiway Alpha-Hotel emerged on the right side. Then the lights of terminals and streetlamps broke through the snow mass. Buildings of the Paris-Nord airport were rising out of the blizzard, like an image on the newly taken Polaroid photo.

“Twenty...”

No more than a hundred meters left to eight broad white lines, which marked the beginning of the runway. And at this moment the Ukrainian noticed something that made his hair stand on end.

“What the hell?!” Radyslav gasped for air, like a fish, which had been cast ashore. For a moment something took his breath away. And finally, he roared in Russian, “JESUS FUCKING CHRIST!”

The co-pilot jerked his head up.

Rothko’s eyes focused on a blurred whopper that was stuck right in the middle of the runway just a kilometer away from the airplane. Already then, the captain of the crew had to react, abruptly rearranging throttle levers into the ‘TO/GA¹’ position and pulling the yoke back. Rothko clearly distinguished the obstacle and despite this, he wasted the whole second by taking no action. It seemed that the pilot became numb. Why? That is because his brain refused to analyze the seen. Even though vision is regarded as the main human sense organ, the eyes are a very unreliable source of information. Within seconds the sweeper did not exist in Radyslav’s head for one simple reason: his brain considered that the sweeper shouldn’t be, or it’s better to say couldn’t have been on the active runway.

Who knows, maybe exactly this second was crucial.

Matthew was the first who reacted.

“The sweeper!” shouted the co-pilot, recognizing a vehicle for removing snow in the whopper with blurred outlines. Ignoring the captain’s confusion and taking the decision to abort the landing, he pushed the thrust levers forward — at full speed — activating the “TO/GA” switch.

Along with Matthew’s movement, the terrified voice of the ATC controller sounded in the pilots’ headphones.

“Continental 1419! Climb! Climb quickly!!!” someone from the fight control room tried to warn the crew, hoping the pilots would attempt to go on a second circle.

Radyslav Rothko blinked and, still not fully realizing or perhaps not believing in everything that was happening, tried to answer automatically, “E-e-em... control tower...” and wasted another second. At a speed of 135 knots, *AARON 44* flew over the threshold of the runway 22L, and, losing altitude, was approaching the two wide longitudinal lines located three hundred meters from the edge of the runway, which marked a touchdown zone. A snowbound airfield was flickering with nightmarish speed outside the window of the cockpit. At that time the liner was about seven meters above the earth — barely the height of a two-story house.

Finally, two and a half seconds after young Riggson switched the go-around mode without any orders, Radyslav shook off the numbness and feverishly ordered, “Go around!!! Full power!” simultaneously pulling the control column back.

¹ A Take-off/Go around mode is a switch on the autothrottle in the cockpit of modern passenger aircrafts with two modes: take-off (TO) and go-around (GA). The first mode is used during the take-off; the second is activated before landing. If suddenly on the final approach the pilot realizes that due to some reason, he is unable to land safely, activating the switch “TO/GA” increases the power to go-around thrust, deactivates the autopilot (to prevent the plane from following the gliding slope) and overrides any autothrottle mode which would keep the aircraft in landing configuration. In an emergency, using a TO/GA switch is often the quickest way of increasing thrust to abort a landing.

“I don’t know... It doesn’t work,” blurted out the second pilot, anxiously clutching the control wheel.

“What?!” Rothko glanced at the thrust levers near the right knee, making sure that both were in the fully forward position. An experienced pilot needed a split second to understand that go-around mode was activated.

Meanwhile, obeying orders from the cockpit, *AARON* humbly lifted its nose and continued rushing forward, maintaining an altitude of 5 meters.

Less than six hundred meters left to sweeper.

“It doesn’t go!” Matthew repeated desperately. Perhaps Radyslav did not understand or did not hear the co-pilot because there was no reaction on his part. “Oh God, please, don’t kill me!” the second pilot started panicking.

Along with a desperate whine from the young Belgian, the roar of engines at full power flooded the cockpit. Pointers on digital displays, which correspond to the parameters N_1 and N_2 , jerked to ticks 100%. It seemed *AARON* awoke but did not gain any altitude. The point is that the go-around mode at an extremely low altitude before landing, when the decision is taken and the order “We land!” is given, is a strikingly difficult and stressful maneuver for an aircraft and crew. Even if a vertical speed at the moment preceding the landing ranges within normal limits (3.5-4 m/sec.), aircraft engines cannot produce such thrust to enable an instant leveling of kinetic energy, directed to the ground.

AARON sagged, touching the runway, and, picked up by the roaring engines, immediately left the ground, grinding the snow with blackness and wind.

“Matthew, pull it back! Ba-a-ack!!!” Radyslav screamed.

Pilots were pulling the yoke back at full tilt. Struggling with the *g*-force that occurred due to an urgent change of direction, both leaned out from their seats, riveting their eyes on windows each one on his side, trying to see over the high-lifted nose of the aircraft how much was left to the sweeper.

Landing lights of the Ukrainian plane flooded the *Øveraasen’s* cabin with dazzling flame. Noel Legras, a driver, anxiously turned around and was petrified, seeing a forty-ton airplane falling out on him from the innards of a snowstorm. The guy shitted his pants and instantly realized how petty and vain his feelings for Svitlana were. At that moment he was ready for everything: ready to regard as his former girlfriend is rolling in the hay with all the oldish managers of *ArcelorMittal* three times a day, just to avoid seeing this huge machinery moving on him out of the furious sky. Noel turned the wheel quickly to the right, making one last effort to remove the sweeper for the runway, although in the depth of his soul, he knew that it was useless. If the plane does not gain enough altitude, the collision will unlikely be avoided: the difference between the speeds of an airliner and a clumsy vehicle with a long trailer is too big.

The distance between *AARONOV* and *Øveraasen* reduced to 300 meters.

Two turbofan engines D-436-44, elaborated by the construction department *Progress* in Zaporizhia and manufactured at the factory *Motor-Sich*, together generated 136 thousand newtons of thrust — an incredible power for a regional jet airliner, but it was not enough.

Only when the sweeper disappeared from his view, hiding under the plane’s nose, Radyslav Rothko thought about tomorrow’s meeting in Charles de Gaulle Airport. He would take flowers. Why had he not thought about flowers before? Undoubtedly, he will be there with a huge bouquet of carmine roses! Marina would definitely like it. The man imagined the moment when he would lock his wife in an embrace and kiss her when finally, he would be able to hug his capricious Asia just in the arrival hall and present a box with a new iPad to Olenka. He dreamed to hold them close and to see their happy smiles... The image did not survive the next moment. Disappeared, and fell

to pieces like a house of cards. When Radyslav saw the sweeper one last time, it was very, very close.

“Holy shit, that’s all!” a thought came to the pilot’s mind. There will be no meeting! No roses. Olenka won’t get her tablet. Marina will never quiver in his arms. Knowing that one of the flight data recorders is saving a conversation in the cockpit, Radyslav wanted to say something — quickly express his feelings — so when the records would be deciphered, to make his family understand how much he loved and missed them, no matter what.

The man said nothing. He simply could not pick the right words.

Less than a second left to the collision.

Gaston Luis Lemierre closed his eyes, realizing that flight 1419 would not have a chance to gain any altitude and move away from the Earth to a safe distance.

Having understood the same, Noel Legras hysterically yelled, pressing his head to the steering wheel.

Gradually being released from the clutch of gravity, *AARONOV* rose to four meters above the runway — almost enough to fly over *Øveraasen*. Almost...

The aircraft’s right landing gear crashed into the cab of the sweeper almost simultaneously with the right engine, tearing metal like wet cardboard.

The last thing that sounded in the cockpit of an airliner was the calm, surprisingly dry, and colorless phrase of the co-pilot Matthew Riggson, “Mam, je t’aime²”

11

Exactly at 11:04:24pm, the right engine of the *AARON 44* is breaking into pieces the *Øveraasen*’s cabin, turning into jelly the head and upper torso of its driver — Noel Legras. Shattered fan blades, pieces of a compressor, and pipelines are ripping up the right wing. A shapeless cloud of devastating splashes of metal fragments is piercing a fuel tank, located in the wing. In the thousandth of a second the kinetic energy of details, which a moment ago formed a central part of the wing and the turbine, is transmuting into thermal; the temperature in the ruptured tank increases abruptly up to 400°C, and the aviation fuel, which, considering the short flight time, has left more than enough, explodes. In half a second the fire under the pressure penetrates cracks between the wing and fuselage, torching the remains of fuel in the main tank.

A fireball is absorbing the central part of *AARONOV*.

The collision of the right wing with the sweeper creates a torque effect, which turns the aircraft across the runway and simultaneously presses its right wing to the ground. All together — the pressure and high temperature from the explosion, enormous inertial forces that emerged after a sharp turning, and also the resistance of the wing that leaned against the ground — generated an overload, which during the design of the plane was not anticipated. With a horrible rasp, the plane splits into three parts.

Those who were flying in the tail of the airliner, are the lucky ones. Because of the rapid braking and turning, the forces acting on this part of the aircraft are the heaviest. Eleven passengers and two crew members are instantly killed, having no time to get scared: the inertial forces are so powerful that under their influence cervical vertebrae of the victims are ground like in a stone crusher.

The same forces are turning the tail of the *AARONOV*, pulling it across a snow-covered airfield to the south, just to the gate of an auxiliary fire station. The fuselage with thirteen dead

² Mom, I love you! (fr.)

bodies, which before splitting inhaled some gas and fire from ruptured fuel tanks, is covered with splatters of weak flame.

Passengers in the central part of the airliner are less lucky. They are going through the moment of collision, but the next moment the floor under them explodes, spitting flame and gas, filling every cubic centimeter of space with violent fire, and detonates the central fuel tank. Nineteen people, desperately screaming, are roasting alive; they do not understand what is going on, but they realize that death is knocking on their door. Seven of them, the most enduring, could feel their heartbeat after the skin had burned to the bones.

The central part of *AARON* presses down the remains of the cabin, fragments of *Øveraasen's* grader, and, leaving behind a wide trail of fire and pieces of the left wing, is rolling to the southwest and finally stops in the middle of the runway.

Twenty people, who were in the nose of the aircraft — seventy passengers, senior flight attendant Veronica Morelle and pilots — have the highest chance of surviving the crash. The nose fragment is slipping out from the sizzling hot orb that swallowed the middle part of the aircraft picking up no flame. Splitting off, the nose of the plane sweeps along the snowed-up airfield alongside the taxiway November-Tango to runway 04L-22R, gradually dissipating tremendous kinetic energy. Unlike the tail, there are no elevators or vertical stabilizers in the nose part of the *AARON* that could prevent rotation, and already in a few seconds a ten-meter fragment of the fuselage starts to roll over, rotating around its axis.

The first who dies is young Matthew Riggson. On a clash with *Øveraasen*, his safety belts could not hold the body of the high and thin co-pilot; his torso slips forward and the twenty-six-year-old Belgian bumps into the central panel of the cockpit, smashing his head. From a powerful blow, his skull crumbles into small pieces, half of which is sinking in the jelly brain.

Two passengers, who occupied seats 6A and 6C, are thrown through the hole in the fuselage with their seats. 6A dies instantly, breaking his neck, hitting their head against the ground. 6C lands on his shoulder, rolling over more than fifty meters, and stretches on the snow only a few steps away from the spattered with burning debris runway. During the fall the poor guy breaks the spine in four places therefore he lies in the inconceivable for healthy person pose. He looks like a useless old rag doll, thrown in the trash bin. A second after falling 6C starts screaming. Two workers of the ground service, who were cleaning the scoreboard at the intersection of a taxiway Lima-Romeo and runway 04L-22R at the time of catastrophe, soon will be telling that if they had not seen everything with their own eyes, they would have never believed that a person can produce such sounds. Because of the shock and pain, the groans of the passenger 6C sound like a combination of an intensified tenfold roar of a terrified donkey and the yelping of a dog under the wheels of the truck. His screams last half a minute and then end off.

Although the rest fifteen passengers turned up to be like in the drum of a washing machine at spin, they still can survive. And they could have survived if all fifteen passengers were fastened to the seats before the collision with *Øveraasen*. Inside the cabin of each plane there always can be found a wisacre, who contemptuously snorts when the sign “fasten your belts” is turned on. Either during take-off or the final approach, there is always a “hero”, who flies unfastened because, as he says, nothing will happen to him and usually safety rules are written for assholes. In the nose part of the *AARON* that separated from the central fragment swaddled in flames, there are three of them in places 2A, 3C, and 4E. After a collision, the detached fragment of the fuselage rolls over and hurtles through the field. People who have been smart enough to fasten their seatbelts are pressed to their seats. They are scared to death and pretty battered, but alive... until three loggerheads, who consider themselves smarter than the aircraft designers, start to fly around the cabin. During the first rotation, passengers 2A, 3C, and 4E are pulled out from their seats and hit against the roof of the

cabin with great force. They quickly breathe their last, breaking up the necks and smashing up the heads, but the story does not end. During the following rotations of the fuselage, their dead bodies continue flying around the cabin like rubber projectiles, tearing the heads, breaking the chests, and beating to death other fastened passengers. A minute before stopping off the front part of an airliner between the taxiway Alpha-Hotel and the runway 04L-22R out of fifty-two passengers and crew members of flight 1419 only four remain alive: the captain of the crew Radyslav Rothko, the stewardess Veronica Morelle and two passengers, managed to survive in the mess of the nose “centrifuge” — a short lawyer on the seat 1A and not very height thirteen-year-old schoolgirl from 5G. All four of them are in extremely serious condition.

In the western part of Paris-Nord airport, howling sirens cut the air. From the main fire station, flooding the blizzard with pulsating blue light, fire trucks are rushing to the place of the accident.

A pristine-white blizzard is mixing with thick black smoke.