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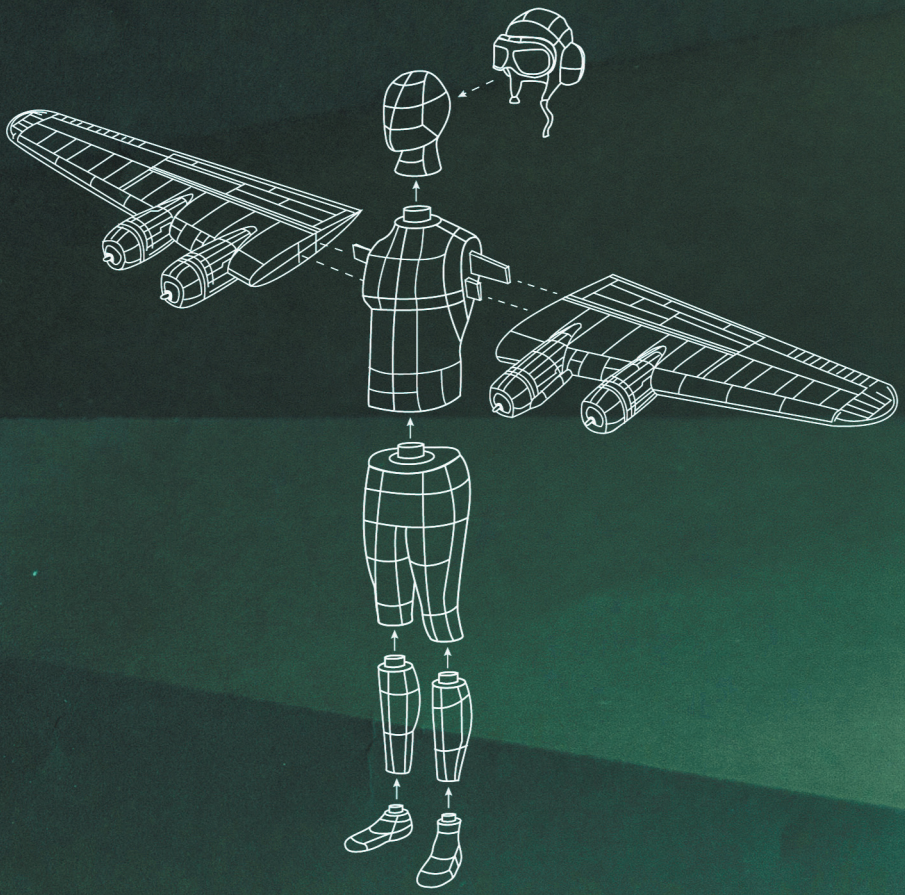

JEREMY HUGHES

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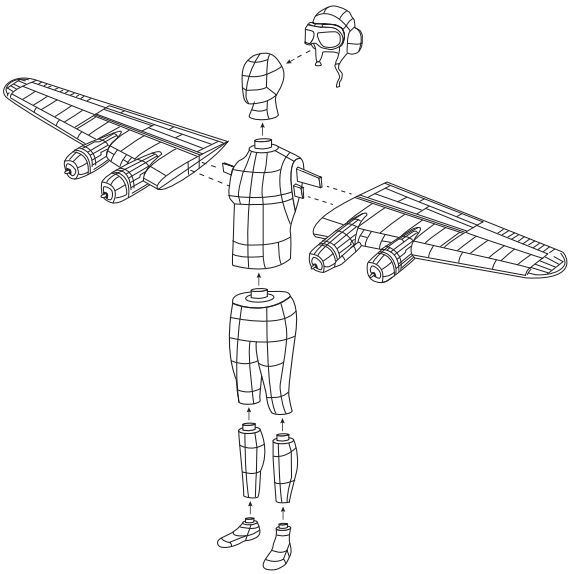

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for
Renée,
Ursula & Theodore

The sun hath twice brought forth his tender green,
Twice clad the earth in lively lustiness.

Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey

PROLOGUE

Breconshire Constabulary **"C" Division**
Police Station,
CRICKHOWELL.
17th September 1943.

Superintendent R. Jones,
County Police Office,
BRECON.

Sir,

I respectfully beg to report that at 10.30pm on 16th September, 1943, I received information from Glyn Williams, of Nant Farm, that an aeroplane had crashed on his land. Accompanied by P.C. 282, Arthur John, I proceeded to Nant Farm.

I was informed by WILLIAMS that he had heard the crash and he went out to investigate.

Accompanied by P.C. 282, Arthur John, I went to the crash site with WILLIAMS.

The debris at the site suggested a very large aeroplane. "G*I* W***ING" could be made out on one large section and the number 24-9305 was clear on what I understood to be part of the fuselage. There were nine bodies. WILLIAMS informed me that he had seen ten bodies. We searched the surrounding area but found nothing. The neighbouring farms were informed of the facts.

I notified the appropriate authorities.

I communicated with the coroner David Llewellyn Esq. and informed him of the facts. He requested me to ask Dr. Thomas to attend. Dr. Richard Thomas stated that the cause of the deaths was consistent with catastrophe.

I notified David Huws, Esq., J.P.

Please see attached statements by P.C. 282, Arthur John, and Glyn Williams.

Notice of deaths has been forwarded to the Coroner, David Llewellyn, Esq.

I am, Sir,
Your obedient Servant,
Robert Prichard
Inspector.

GLYN WILLIAMS states as follows:-

I am Glyn Williams of Nant Farm, Llanbedr.

On the evening of 16th September 1943 I was in the yard when a very large aeroplane flew over. I saw a flash and heard a loud bang shortly after.

I did not know what type of aeroplane it was so I took my shotgun and two dogs to investigate. I found the wreckage of the aeroplane spread over a large area. The dogs quickly found ten dead men. The aeroplane was American.

I returned to the farm and telephoned the police station.

At 11.00pm Inspector Prichard and P.C. John arrived at the farm. I directed them to the crash site but did not accompany them because I did not wish to see those poor men again.

When Inspector Prichard and P.C. John returned they said that they had counted nine bodies. I conceded that I might have mis-counted because I had been drinking beer at the Dragon Public House earlier. I am still sure that I counted ten men.

Inspector Prichard and P.C. John asked me to return with them to the crash site to search for the other man. We found nine bodies and after a wide search we found nothing else. When we returned to the farm Inspector Prichard requested that I inform my neighbours of the facts.

SIGNED. Glyn Williams.

The above statement was taken down by me at 2.25pm on 17th September 1943, at Crickhowell Police Station and read over by Williams before he signed it, in the presence of Inspector R. Prichard.

SIGNED. Arthur John, P.C. 282.

Breconshire Constabulary **"C" Division**

Police Station,
CRICKHOWELL.
17th September 1943.

Sir,

I respectfully beg to present this statement as being a true account of the events of the evening of 16th September 1943.

I was the duty constable at Crickhowell Station. I received a telephone call at 9.00pm from Mr. Glyn Williams of Nant Farm informing me that an aeroplane had crashed on his property. WILLIAMS was in a state of agitation. I established that the aeroplane had crashed on the land not on the dwelling.

I called for Inspector Robert Prichard on the way to Nant Farm.

When we arrived at Nant Farm WILLIAMS declined to accompany us to the crash site. He said: "I do not want to see those poor men again." He directed us to the site.

Inspector Prichard and I found the scene. There were nine bodies. WILLIAMS had stated that he had seen ten bodies.

We returned to Nant Farm.

I know WILLIAMS from previous incidents. He is a patron of the Dragon Public House. I asked him if he had attended that evening. He informed us that he had. Inspector Prichard informed WILLIAMS that there were nine bodies, at which WILLIAMS became angry and stated again that he had seen ten bodies.

Inspector Prichard said it was imperative to establish the facts and we had to return to the site. He was concerned that a man could be injured.

We returned to the site with WILLIAMS and his two dogs. We counted nine bodies. We searched the surrounding area for two hours but did not find another person.

WILLIAMS is certain he saw ten bodies.

WILLIAMS was instructed to inform his neighbours of the facts.

This being a true account of the events, by me, Sir,

Your obedient Servant,
Arthur John
P.C. 282

Chapter One

18th January 1942

Death is afraid of me.

I have known this since my first flight. I had watched a pair of flyers at Bower's Field and it looked easy. The pilots waved and smiled and whooped and skirled around the sky. I could do that without an aeroplane, all on my lonesome.

I was swimming at Tullock's Steps with Marty Greenberg when I looked up at the bridge and said I could fly.

"No way Ho-zay," he said.

"It's easy. Those guys at Bower's were having a blast."

"But you've never been in one of those things."

"I don't need one. *I* can fly."

"Like to see that," he nodded.

"Watch me." I took the track up to the bridge and Marty was calling, *What you doing? Where you going?* I appeared on the bridge and made my way to the centre of the span. The trees either side of the valley reflected on the water moving slowly between the pillars.

Marty shaded his eyes and shouted: "Don't do nothin' stupid!"

I sat on the rail with my legs dangling, looking at my feet then focusing on the water between them. It looked deep and clear.

Marty's voice lassoed past me: "You're mad."

I stood on the rail, like a beam in the school gym. *You can come down now!* The rail was smooth and wide under the balls of my feet. I closed my eyes and took in the concoction of the trees' spring breaths, the rowan,

the larch, the beech. I had been in their branches and now they were here to support me.

"What you doing?"

I opened my eyes. I wasn't looking down now. Marty's voice was spinning in the air with the birds' calls and the shushing breeze. I held out my arms in front of me as if I was about to dive, then took off.

That instant when my feet left the rail has for ever been me, held in the trees' breath, an airborne crucifixion preserved in my camera, veins and muscles the struts supporting my wings in the perfect aspect of flight, the dust between my toes like the dirt in the treads of undercarriage wheels.

"I thought you were dead, man," Marty said, when he came to visit me at home. "You were one stupid son-of-a-."

His face was sparking with the excitement of my flight. One son-of-a-. His eyes were the widest I'd ever seen them, then hooded by his brow the next, as a body involuntarily trying to interpret what it had witnessed, confused by the excitement and terror. But his mouth didn't change, fixed in a grin.

"This is to remind you *what* flies."

I unwrapped a model aeroplane.

We laughed.

"Not sure your mom's gonna like it."

There was an astonishing suspension of time. I was crucified on the belief of flight. My wings were frozen by the shutter speed of memory, a camera which spins 360° around me so that in this one I'm head on, the bridge's structure behind me, a skeleton with its feet on the river bed and its arms reaching to touch each side of the valley, its hands up to its wrists in leaves. This one has me in profile, the tips of my fingers in focus and the rest of me furring into a blur like mould. This one looking down on me, my hair parted by the whims of the water as it had slipped by me as I swam. Now it was the air which fingered my ribs rather than the currents which moved between the flat slabs of rock from which we dived and where we spread our towels, the hairs standing off our legs as we cooled. All in colour: red shorts, black hair, green eyes.

The model was the same as the planes we'd seen at Bower's Field. A Stearman, bright blue and yellow, its cockpit open to the elements, the pilots all teeth and leather so that I thought of them as flying sharks. They were so close and daring. They reeked too. They pushed through the crowd with their leather helmets cupped in their hands for the quarters and dimes, their faces grimed with the engine's exhausts, their eyes circles of white where their goggles had been. I wanted to be one.

The infinitesimal suspension was broken by the inexorable pull of gravity and the flight that followed lasted only seconds more, each a book of sensory experience. I was aware of my weight for the first time, not the pounds and ounces, but my *presence*. Here I was, a boy, flying off Tullock's Bridge while my friend Marty shielded his eyes from the sun, his left hand like the peak of a cap. It was a moment he would remember for the rest of his short life.

"I thought you were dead," he said. "I didn't think you'd do it. I can't believe you *did* do it."

I was looking at the model's wings.

"Why'd you do it?"

"Cos I thought I could, I guess."

"I guess."

I nodded and raised my eyebrows.

"Well, don't jump off anything again."

"I didn't jump. I flew."

Marty gripped his knees with his hands. "I'd better hit the road," he said. He stood up and I caught him in silhouette against the window and knew that Death would take him soon.

The first second consisted of the surprise and joy of being borne and born. I was peeled out of the constraints of my former being, a boy who had stepped off the bridge of innocence into the air of experience. Two was spent as a swallow, my legs straight out behind me and slightly apart like a forked tail aware of the air currents that bunched the flies this way and

that around the bridge's pillars. Three prepared me for the water and the fish I saw holding its position in the current, and the suddenness of the world beneath it.

"I kept looking at the spot where you went in and there was nothing," Marty said. "You crumpled into the water and disappeared. You were gone."

I thought of what he must have seen, the swirls and smashed surface repairing themselves to their former appearance, that smooth gliding which hinted of depth and mystery.

"Then you surfaced quietly and gently a few yards away, as if being held up."

I opened my eyes to a perfect flat sky. Within the water was another world. The quality of sky was such that it looked as if I could enter and disappear. A noise then, like trees in a breeze, and then I was touched.

"You're with us."

I moved my eyes to a nurse in the crisp leaf of her uniform.

Marty was always there but I can't remember the first time we met. That was lost in the beginnings of childhood. He witnessed my first flight, my first kiss and, I think, the first time a girl pumped my seed at the back of the Church of the Holy Shmoly.

Death singled him out for his beauty and his apparent lack of that self knowledge. Wherever we were together girls looked at him and their jaws dropped. If I hadn't seen it I wouldn't have believed it possible. But after a while they'd be saying to me, *That Marty guy's weird*.

He wasn't weird. He was just a beautiful innocent who would never see the plains of adulthood, a boy whose seed would never go beyond his own hand. A boy who would be killed by a girl who hadn't even got as far as deciding that he was 'weird'.

"They think you're it, Marty."

"I ain't no *it*. Stop saying so."

Any boy would have given up one of his balls for whatever it was that Marty had but he didn't want it. Perhaps that was another reason why Death took him.

I heard the instructors talking about me:

"That kid's scraping the tests."

"That's as maybe, but I'm telling you, he's the best damn flyer I've ever gone up with."

"That right?"

"I show him one thing, one little thing, and I never have to show him again. He just goes and slots it in somewhere. I tell you, he can out-fly the machine."

"But the rest?"

"Shoot the rest, it's kids who can fly the damn planes we need. This kid would fly to the moon and back if I let him."

After Tullock's Bridge, I didn't need instruction. I knew how the plane would react before it happened, whether it was wind or rain or sleet or sun or engine failure or bullets or missiles or just plain turbulence. It was nothing to me. I'd learned everything in my descent to the river's level drifting breadth, and I'd done it while listening to the leaves' soft applause as I did so.

Sitting behind me in the trainer the instructor would say, "You sure you've not done this before?"

I wanted to say, *Just strap an engine to my back and a bomb to my belly and let me go*.

The magneto quit and the instructor took over but was struggling to take control. There was no power, we couldn't climb, the magneto wouldn't respond and the trees below looked like concrete.

"She's mine, Sir," I said. I slapped the rudder and set her down hot.

"Son-of-a-bitch!" my instructor hollered at me as he got down from the plane. "You make me sick. You're a God-damn bitch, no doubt about it." He marched me straight to another ship. "Now take this piece of shit and show me you can fly."

That's how I went solo. No nerves, just a feeling that this was what I was for. I didn't need to think about anything, checking this and that. It was there in my make up. It's what I was. I made that baby dance.

"If I ever see you do that again, I'll ground you," the instructor said when

I landed, "but it sure was beautiful." I moved closer to the big beautiful gals.

They don't know what I know. If they don't wash out on the way they all want to be aces, flying solo forever in Mustangs, Thunderbolts and Warhawks. But that's not what it's all about. They're thinking of the glory of flying. They don't know it's about being at one with the machine. It's nothing to do with them as individuals, it's the need for fighter pilots or transport pilots or bomber pilots. They're just another part of the machine, and I want to be in the most beautiful baby ever to fly. The B17. I want to be that indescribable something doctors try to find to determine whether you're alive or dead, what priests talk about so freely without actually being able to define it. I am the aeroplane's brain. I am its soul. Why would anyone want to fly with one engine when you can fly with four? It's like having an orchestra at your disposal, conducting them in your very own *Flight of the Humble B*! That's it. The fighters buzz around like insects but we'll just swat them away. Oh boy.

A lot of these guys are dying before they can even get into the war. They just can't do the flying. They get airsick or they can't work out which way's up. Some think they're bona fide aces already until the instructor tells them they're not going to kill them today, thank you, nor have the opportunity to kill anyone else, let alone slam one of Uncle Sam's shiny machines into the ground. Some of them will still get to fly, though, in a bomber crew.

I was always the tallest kid in the class and when I realised I could fly I started to see myself as an albatross, spending all day on outspread wings without so much as a flap. Then I thought of myself as a buzzard, but a carrion feeder wasn't right for a would-be pilot. Then it was an eagle, a golden bird, something that had the ability to attack and defend, single out its prey from a great distance. That was me, dangerously beautiful. Six feet four and a half inches, one hundred and ninety six pounds. My arms outstretched are six feet eight and a half inches. I've *always* been a bomber.

I wasn't that big when Marty got me out of the river, but on the way.

Marty wasn't small either, and a tough cookie, though he would never think of himself as such. As quiet and gentle as anyone I've known but no push over. I should have been protecting him but it was the other way round, like when we were out of the neighbourhood and came across some guys who thought it would be fun to ride us. People my size often get singled out for special attention, as if the world isn't for us when some guy wants to prove himself somehow, usually a little guy who, for whatever reason, decides that today you're gonna be the way he makes himself feel better about whatever it is in his core which makes him feel inadequate.

So these guys are cool, you know, all slick moves and talk a talk Marty and I think strange. I see them first on the other side of the street, spot them a whole day and several miles before they see us, and when they do I know they'll be over, slapping each other and nodding and sure enough, they cross. I wonder what's coming exactly, but know it's not going to be hello. It's one of those scenes in a Chaplin film: two people approach each other on the sidewalk and try to avoid each other but both go the same way. You go this way, they go that way too. Laughter. But this isn't funny.

I am polite. "Excuse me," I say.

"Excuse me?" he says.

"Yes." I stand to one side. Marty's looking at us both. The guy's buddies are all ants in their pants.

He's more or less on my toes now, looking up into my face. "Excuse me? What kinda talk's *that*? Ex*cuse* me? You sound like a *girl*. You a *girl*?"

He pulls a knife and its blade flicks out as clean as a snake's tongue. Marty catches the guy's wrist with his left hand and punches him straight in the face with his right in one movement and the guy hits the deck. "Which one of you's next?" he says, as if he's trying to help them decide.

They back off without picking up their buddy. Marty drops the knife down a storm drain and huffs, "*How* unfriendly can you get?"

Not really meant for this world.

I never told anyone about the other side, not that anyone ever asked me. In fact, no one ever asked me about the flight at all, apart from why I did it. People were pussy-footing about, asking was I unhappy, did I want to

die, was there a girl? No. No. No. I had an epiphany but I couldn't put it like that. I told them what would get me out of the hole: I wanted to do something exciting.

They lectured me about how I'd put a lot of people to a lot of trouble for my stupid prank. It was all drowned out by the leaves' applause, the music the other side, and the long silence when my muscles and bones worked with each other to enable me to fly again.

Chapter Two

I suppose it was unreasonable to have wanted both of my parents at my fiftieth birthday. How many people *do* for the occasion? But it wouldn't have been possible anyway, never having known my father other than as a two dimensional black and white photograph on the mantelpiece throughout my childhood, and my mother falling short by a few months. It would only have hurt her in all probability, being reminded of the fifty long years that had passed since the man whom she loved had met his maker in 1943. That was a good way of putting it. The day she received the news that he would not be coming back, she shook off her faith like an ill-fitting coat. Oh she tried, she said, to see it all as part of God's greater plan, that it was merely a minuscule event in the world's great tragedy. But she couldn't sustain it. She had devoted herself to church, attending St. Michael's ever since she could remember: Sunday school, bible class, summer fêtes, harvest festivals, lent. The lot. Then she stopped going, just like that.

"There is no such thing as Christ or God," she said when I came home from school one day talking about raising the dead, feeding the five thousand, making the blind see. "That's all baloney." That was one of Dad's words, not a Suffolk word. Dad, as it happens, is a word I've never used. "That's your father," Mum would say, showing me photographs of him. She never referred to him as Dad, either. I suppose I would have called him Dad if I'd known him. He was always 'my father', as if he was some distance away and would return, when in fact he would never come back. Mum could have been at my birthday, I'm sure, but fifty years is a long time to be on your own and I understand she wanted to go. She had been

there for my twenty-first and thirtieth and fortieth, so she'd done her bit.

We are here today to celebrate Gail's life, a life lived in the midst of evil, a life that conjoined in love and produced new life. A great life, because life itself is great.

Although I didn't know her, it is clear to me from the conversations I have had that Gail was a kind and loving person, a person who loved the people close to her, a person always willing to help those in need. I think it is possible to see those qualities in the photographs we have here.

She was born in Suffolk in February 1923 just after the Great War. She was lonely as a child and planned to have lots of children when the time came. That time was 1942, when she met the man with whom she wanted to live for the rest of her life.

Gail met Grayson – Gray – when the world was fighting the evil that threatened it. It was frightening and exciting, young men and women living for the moment. They met at the base and I think of them dancing to a big band. For Gail it was love at first sight.

That's exactly what she said. She told me so many times about how she met my father that I sometimes believed I must have been there. There was a glitterball, she said, in the hangar where they were dancing, and ribbons and taffeta dresses and men in uniforms and ties with small tight knots. She said that when dad held her close he felt ironed and strong. He was twenty-one and she was twenty. "He was dashing." She actually said dashing. "He was like a film star, neat and clean and handsome. And he had such a wonderful voice. Nothing like the boys I was used to. He said it was nothing special in America. I couldn't tell. I felt as if I was in a film. It was unbelievable. I should have known it was fantasy but I couldn't help myself." She saw the aeroplanes every day but never thought she would dance with one of the pilots. Or marry him. "A man of twenty-one responsible for those great big machines and nine other men. They were all just boys."

When I look at the photographs out here I wonder what they said to each other, what they found in each other. Thousands of miles from home he fell in love with a girl from a small English village. Their love produced a boy

who became a special man, special because he has shaped the lives of many boys and girls.

I am special?

You are half of your mother and half of your father, he says, addressing me now. *You might think she lived with a broken heart but you must realise that you are the embodiment of your parents and therefore the embodiment of the love that made you, a reminder every day of how extraordinary and wonderful love is. He who believes in Christ shall have everlasting life. Your father gave his life for Gail, and for all of us gathered here today*.

I wonder what mum would make of all this. It's turning into a lecture on the war. I suppose it's to be expected, considering. We felt it daily. Everyone had a story in the villages near the base. *Over sexed, over paid and over here* doesn't fit the photograph of my father placed next to one of Mum at the front, the photograph on the mantelpiece throughout my childhood. He was the sadness Mum wore like a heavy piece of jewellery, though she never wore any, apart from the wedding ring. I have it now. It's tiny. She never took it off even when she had her tonsils excised.

And this is where I must talk about Gail's broken heart. Gray was killed in action in 1943 and I am told she never recovered. They had such little time together.

No time.

Love is the greatest capacity that God bestows upon us. To be separated from those we love is a terrible burden to bear. It is entirely apt to remember these words from Romans: "I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

I am trying not to cry now. I didn't expect to and won't let myself. "If there was a God he wouldn't have allowed this to happen to anyone," Mum said. "No one should have to go through this." She meant losing my father. I concentrate on the minister's white robe and the sky-blue sash draped around his neck. And suddenly I am transported into that recurring childhood dream in which I sat in my father's plane with my hand on top of his as he moved the controls between us.

"God so loved the world that he gave His only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." So it is with Gail and Gray, who loved each other. It is important that we remember that in God there are no broken hearts. Gail will be with Gray now, as one day we shall all be together.

But now she is gone.

She took pride in going to secretarial school, learning touch-typing on huge manual typewriters before the advent of the more finger-friendly electric machines. She was good at her job, took great pride in her efficiency.

"We wouldn't have won the war being sloppy," she'd said to me.

When she retired she didn't know what to do with herself. She advertised her services in the local paper and the post office window and was always busy with something.

When I was at an age at which my curiosity caused me to enquire about my father, she told me there was nothing to know other than what she'd already told me. "I met him, loved him, married him, lost him. That's all there is."

"But where was he from? What did he do before the war? What about his family in the States?"

"All that matters is what I've told you."

It was just Mum and me the whole time. There were no other men. No one could possibly have matched the film-set presence of my father. We were in a village where it was considered pretentious if you *didn't* drop your aitches.

This is all such a charade. What the minister doesn't say is that she never wore trousers and never went in a pub. Public House, she said. She used words like 'bloody' and 'bugger' and 'sod' when she was very angry and would explode after long festering silences. And instead of rebelling against her parental constrictions, I just went along with them. I'd look at my father's photograph on the mantelpiece and immediately feel her emptiness. His absence pervaded every room in the house. For Mum, he was every breath in and every breath out. Occasionally I found her holding his photograph against her breast, or talking to him. On my tenth birthday I heard her crying in her room.

In the midst of life we are in death.

In many ways I had never grown up because Mum 'protected' me from the world. I *did* have girlfriends but they never lasted. A different man would have left but I couldn't. Just couldn't. She had this gaping hole in her which I went some way to filling. One girl, Sylvia, spat, "I don't want to marry your mother!" when she walked away.

I didn't have a clue what to do about the funeral and was glad when the undertaker took over and I was able to let him get on with it. People my age assess their position, their status, the wife, the kids at university, the house, the grounds, the second home, the retirement within reach. As a headteacher (Mum preferred '-master') I have achieved only the respect of those working alongside or beneath me. It's been easy. As a teacher I was uninspiring but as it counts for nothing when climbing the managerial ladder, it was no hindrance. I completed all administration meticulously and way before deadline, carried out everything managers delegated. I got every promotion I applied for, trod on nobody's toes and was inoffensive to the point of being bland. And in interviews I didn't have to pretend to be anything other than what I was. I could have been a Head years before I was but I was restricted to a daily travelling distance from Mum. "This is your home. What do you want another house for?"

I walked into the crematorium behind Mum's coffin as the undertaker directed and I was surprised to see so many people there. Neighbours. She was a good neighbour. "You must help one another or nothing will be achieved." There were also people I didn't recognise representing parts of her life I had only heard about.

May God in his infinite love and mercy
bring the whole Church,
living and departed in the Lord Jesus,
to a joyful resurrection
and the fulfilment of his eternal kingdom.

The undertaker stood me at the door while people walked past me and shook my hand. Then the undertaker suggested I stand by the flowers outside. There was my tribute, a blooming typewriter. It could have represented me too.

Many people said, *If there's anything I can do*. And one man gave me his card. "Your mother did some work for me. I wanted to pay my respects."

I expect there were many wedding photographs similar to my parents' on mantelpieces in villages around American bases. My father was so smart. He stands with such grace and authority at St. Michael's and makes it look easy. He was twenty-one! When I look at myself in the full-length mirror in Mum's room I see a tame and acquired absence. When I smile I do not light up the room as my father's smile lights up his photographs. It's only then that I realise that Mum must have been a 'looker'. My father is obviously handsome and when I've considered the wedding photograph I have always been drawn to him. After all, I *knew* Mum. She has that white-faced English prettiness you see in films of the period.

But Mum was gone now and I was alone. No position for a man, or anyone for that matter, on the cusp of their fiftieth. As I left the crematorium I slipped a copy of the Funeral Service in my suit pocket and felt rather pleased that she was dead.

The first thing I bought after Mum died was a model of a Flying Fortress. I remember holding a large model box in my arms as a small boy in Woollies in Norwich and Mum taking it off me: "Now come on, you don't want to waste your pocket money on that kind of thing," she said, putting it back on the shelf.

There was no one to say no now, as the words Flying Fortress seemed to jut out in three dimensions from the other kits on the shelf: Lancaster, Wellington, Short Stirling, Superfortress.

"I've not made one of these before," I said to the man who served me.

"You mean that particular kit or at all?"

"At all," I said, a little self-consciously.

"Right. You'll need some glue and paints. You gonna paint it?"

"I suppose so."

"It's only a bit of plastic if you don't," he said. "Good. Right. Let's see." He took the box from me and read from it. "One of these, one of these…" as he took the small pots of paint from the stand. "You'll need a few brushes as well, and some thinners. You've never made one, right?"

"That's right."

"Ok. You'll need a craft knife, sandpaper to smooth rough edges – there's always rough edges when you take the pieces off the sprues – and a couple of small cramps. Oh yeah, and some tape. It's good to have a space where you can leave it and go back to it, too. Get yourself a magazine. They're full of tips." He handed me the carrier bag with the name of the shop on it, the weight of the plastic kit now more significant with the rest of the paraphernalia necessary to build it.

I was about six years old when they started. I would close my eyes and rub my feet together under the blankets, then find myself standing at the top of the stairs. I'd put my arms out in front of me and let myself fall, and as I did so, some extraordinary force would take me in its arms until I was in the horizontal. And as I felt myself supported I spread my arms out like wings. My back brushed against the ceiling as I looked down on the patterned carpet's fields. I went round and round the light. Then I saw myself in the mirror Mother always checked herself in before she faced the world, and the bookcase with my set of Encyclopaedia Britannica. Once I'd seen all was in order, I'd return to the landing just as gently as I'd taken off. That feeling was profound. I was light and strong and special.

But at that moment when I rubbed my feet under the blanket I didn't know that I *would* dream about flying. Sometimes the dream that followed was different. I would find myself at the entrance of a cave which I had to enter and at some point I would encounter the monster. I *knew* I would but it was always a shock when it appeared, filling the space with its bulk. Physically it was a huge, violent scribble of pencil, the strokes making up its black fur and huge clawed paws, its eyes white patches where the pencil had been erased. It terrified me, but I would wake up then sleep with no further trouble. The dreams about flying with my father started later.

Taking the box out of the large paper bag sent a tingle through me. The illustration was the kind that got me all excited in Woollies when I was a child. I had longed to make one and it was sad *how* long. The aircraft was in the thick of action, its guns blazing at the German fighters plaguing it. It was a Christmas moment when I took off the lid and saw the olive green pieces and the plane's glazed parts on a separate frame. I slit the bags to examine the fuselage, wings, wheels, propellers, seats. Finding the latter, I looked for the pilots. I wanted to have my father in my hand. But there was no pilot. I looked at the instructions: the kit didn't come with a crew of any kind. Considering that it could be made with its undercarriage up for flight, it seemed odd that there was no crew to fly it. This was the Marie Celeste of the skies.

The cockpit was first in the instruction booklet, with numbered 'flags' to indicate the colour each piece was to be painted. Hell, that didn't matter to me. I was making a model to be closer to the father I'd never known. It didn't matter what colour the seats and straps had to be, I wanted him *there* in the hot seat. The inside didn't matter. Just having the aeroplane made up and on display somewhere in the house would create his presence for me, albeit a tenuous and vicarious one.

I heard two mothers talking about me at the school summer fayre. I was checking the pegs outside the marquee which we'd put up for the PTA to shelter from the sun or rain, whichever the English weather had planned, when I heard them:

"What's up with *him*, you think?"

"Up?"

"You know, where's his wife?"

"Not married."

"Partner then."

"He lives with his mother, apparently."

"He's gay, I knew it."

"No, no. There *was* a woman, once, I believe."

"That's just a front. They often do that."

"'They'?"

"Gay men. They're often great professionally and cover their tracks."

"There are no tracks to cover, are there? He's just a man who lives with his mother."

"Mmm. Well, it's not right. You must admit, it's a *little* strange."

"I suppose."

"He'd be taken more seriously if he *was* married and had kids."

"We haven't got any complaints. He's so professional."

The exchange stopped and I gave it a few moments before entering the marquee. "Good afternoon, ladies!" I said. "My, you're both looking very summery." As I walked out I heard, "Definitely gay."

My fiftieth birthday dinner was simple and private. I set up the table for three. I put my father's photograph on one placemat and a photograph of my mother on another. Three glasses. I filled mine and clinked theirs. Cheers.

Rabbit. I opened a tin of rice pudding for dessert, my favourite. I placed a tea- light on top of the chocolate sponge I'd bought from the baker's and put it on the table between Mum and Dad. Their faces glowed.

I get it now, my schoolboy pals' obsession for Airfix models. They fill a need within each little boy, put them at the controls of an exciting aeroplane or terrifying tank. That was all my pals seemed to make. Ships hardly got made, their enormous presence beyond the realms of plastic bits in a flimsy cardboard box. But an aeroplane was something else. You can put yourself in that seat and look out over the nose or along the wings, or behind one of the guns and squint down the barrel to catch an enemy fighter in the sights as its wing guns spit lead at you.

I realised then that I didn't have an Airfix kit, but Revell. Did it matter? I just wanted a model of what my father had commanded. I went back to the shop.

"I was wondering – and I know this might sound odd – but there are no pilots in the kit, no crew at all."

"Really? I didn't know that."

"Can't fly a plane without a crew!

"You're right there."

"I just wondered, do the Airfix models come with pilots?"

"I think so. Let's have a look." He opened the box of a nearby kit. "This one does so I expect they all do."

"Do Airfix have a Flying Fortress?"

"We haven't got one but I can get one in for you."

"Ok. I suppose I'd better finish the one I've got, first. Maybe later."

I didn't leave the shop immediately. When I bought the Fortress I'd been business-like, walked in, got what I wanted and left. Now I look around, though 'around' is odd for a shop so small. The models are stacked deeply on the shelves and I pull them out of the boxes to examine the illustrations I loved as a boy: they haven't changed. There are tanks and armoured cars, ships and soldiers. It's the aeroplanes which fascinate me, though – the big bombers. "If you're interested in the Fortress, you might like these," the proprietor said. He went to the small boxes and pulled out a couple. "These fought alongside them, escorted them."

He held a Mustang in one hand and a Thunderbolt in the other. I took the Mustang from him. The illustration showed a dynamic machine fiercer than the elegance of a Spitfire. Then I took the Thunderbolt, stubbier and more compact, more bulldog-like. "I'll take this one."

But I needed to complete the Fortress, so I got straight into it. I wanted it whole in my hands. Just give me the frames and numbered boxes and glue and I'm off. The assembly instructions are so clear and simple. If only life could be like this, numbered parts and arrows to show you where to put them. A drop of glue and there you go.

Some of the small parts are a devil to hold and glue and fix in place. I smear the glue and it's messy. I get the tweezers, with which I pull out my nostril hair, from the bathroom cabinet. To begin with they help, but I still haven't the dexterity to position things without messing the glue.

I open the door to a man I recognise from somewhere.

"Your mother did some work for me. I was at the funeral?"

"I remember."

"She – your mother, I mean Gail – gave me something to look after for

her. I didn't think the funeral was the right time to mention it. Perhaps you could fetch it now."

"What is it?"

"I've had it years. It's a box."

"Box."

"Yes, couldn't have it in the house, she said."

"What's in it?"

"I've no idea. I never asked."

"You've not looked?"

"Heavens no. Besides, it's locked. Been in my barn for years."

"My mother did some work for you, you say?"

"George Chapman," he said, offering his hand. "She gave me this box years ago, said she'd have it back one day and would I look after it. She never did, ask for it back I mean, so I thought you'd better have it now."

"Well, yes, if it's something that belonged to my mother."

"That's right, it belongs to you."

"Yes it does, I suppose." Then I remembered myself: "I'm sorry, how rude of me. Would you like a cup of tea?"

We stepped into the house. George stood in the hallway next to the bookcase and I ushered him into the kitchen.

"Actually, I'd prefer coffee."

"It'll have to be instant."

"I didn't expect anything else. Oh, now who's being rude!"

We shared a smile and the awkwardness between us began to dissipate. He was smart, a similar age to my mother, with his dense grey hair combed back and a ruddy complexion I associated with years and years of shaving every morning. His hands were brown around the mug of coffee.

"She was a very good woman, your mother. Meticulous in everything she did for me, not like the young ones these days. Can't write their name let alone anyone else's. But you know all about that, being a teacher."

"I'm a Head, so don't get to see much pupils' work."

"Anyway, your mother was the best."

"She certainly drilled it into me, the importance of getting things just so."

"She talked about you. She was very proud." He appeared to remember something. "You'll need your car."

"I'm sorry?"

"For the box."

I take the model shop owner's advice and get myself a magazine. It makes me feel strangely inadequate. Tips be damned. In an attempt for authenticity modellers track down all sorts of information about the aircraft, the squadrons and the pilots. They even represent exhaust smuts on the fuselage or bullet holes or battle damage. All I want is to try and understand my father, somehow, know a little about what he did when he was alive. I just want to get the thing done and don't care whether the pieces fit exactly.

When I walk through the village I feel a kind of lightness, as if I've lost weight. I realise, too, that I haven't cried. I have spent my whole life joined to Mum and now that she's gone I think there should have been a flood. It's not that I ever resented her, apart from the odd teenage moment. I think it's because I always felt for her. She was a simple girl who met a man from another world, fell in love and, as with many others during the war, lost. The village must have been a shock for my father, too. Hardly any cars, horses doing the heavy work on the land and a way of life that must have been medieval to him. For Mum, a gamekeeper's daughter in rural Suffolk, a pilot officer in uniform speaking like someone from a Hollywood film was practically god-like. He, too, would have found her just as strange, supplementing the limits of rationing with fare from the field, wood and hedge: rabbit, pigeon, pheasant.

She taught me how to prepare them all for the pot on the table which still stands four-square in the kitchen, made by my great grandfather, she said, so I've never been squeamish of blood and guts. That's life and death in the country. There was always something dead hanging in the outhouse.

To watch her prepare a rabbit was a treat on a Sunday. She didn't believe in a roast. "There's only two of us." My grandfather would have gutted it so all Mum had to do was skin it. She put a board on the table and set about the ritual with the knife and steel, the swift sounds of metal

against metal like a mini sword fight in her hands. She *always* sharpened the knife before she used it. "It's got to be keen to make it clean." Razor sharp, it parted fur and skin with an ease which pleased her.

She ran the knife around the joint in each back leg, snapped it, cut the sinews, slit the skin on the inside and pushed the stump through. She pulled the pelt down the carcase in one slick movement, the sound of un-kissing, something I've never heard anywhere else, as if she were relieving a four-legged fruit of its skin. She repeated the procedure with the front legs, snicked through the neck, the head now hooded like an early photographer, looking at this last image of itself upside down.

I must have been eight years old when I started doing all this for myself. Mum would still sharpen the knife, however, and stood over me as I relieved the rabbit of its furry self, putting her hand on mine to show me exactly where to put it, where to introduce the knife's dog-snout point. In those days all the rabbits came from my grandfather. Now I usually get them from the butcher's where they hang outside the shop like empty puppets waiting for hands to animate them.

I can't be bothered with painting the cockpit before assembly. I'm not going to be looking at it that closely, especially as the pilot's missing. I quite like the guns, though, and the simplicity of the mechanism which allows the ball turret gun in the belly to swivel. When I get the wings on, the plane is huge. My schoolboy pals hung them from their bedroom ceilings.

Once it's completed I think that, actually, there's not that much to it. Now that I can see it whole and run through the process, it was straightforward.

Painting it is next. I have a couple of brushes and I set about the large areas. To do it properly, I should have painted all the parts before assembly, at least, that's what I've learned from the magazine. The engines, undercarriage, guns and cockpit glass are going to be a fiddle. I don't count on how long it's going to take, either. I tire and lose patience. In the end I don't care about the accuracy. The underside is meant to be grey and the topside camouflaged, and there's a line which should be straight where they meet. There is black on the wings' leading edges, too. A serious modeller would use tape and an airbrush to define such things but I just

want to get it done. It's good enough. I bet the real things weren't painted that straight anyway.

The Thunderbolt's instructions indicate gluing the pilot to its seat. A spot of glue on his flat grey buttocks and I sit him on it. He's ready to fly. I look at him as closely as I can with my myopic eyes. The detail is surprisingly good. He's wearing a helmet, flying suit and boots. He sits with one leg slightly in front of the other and his hands are between his legs as if he's holding a joy-stick. I look more closely with a magnifying glass. *Dad, is that you?* One of the few things I do know about Fortresses is that they didn't have a stick, but a control column on which was mounted a kind of steering wheel, so this couldn't be my father. Still, it doesn't stop me from examining this little man.

It gives me pleasure to consider him like this. Now I imagine him flying, sparking around the sky like a vigilant bee defending its cumbersome queen as she struggles to carry her load, diving at anything which might prevent her from doing so. His nose is yellow, the tail is red: an exotic American species which is here to defend the queens releasing their loads every day. I take the metaphor as far as I can. On Earth, I think of the pilot scalping off his helmet and goggles, feeling that exhaustion which must have come from being cramped in the cockpit and throwing his plane about the sky, pressed into himself as he engaged the enemy, thinking as a fighter, manoeuvring to kill. His buttocks creased, his body clammy, his feet heavy and his legs and shoulders aching. That beer tastes good in the mess later. The bunk feels even better as he drifts into the clouds of sleep. There is no white silk scarf or *Tally-ho!* and in my hand he is not my father. He's a small grey plastic fighter pilot.

I am on the train back from a Friday meeting in London, feeling that odd uncleanliness I always feel after being there, and I look around me. Complexions blotchy after a week at work reflected in the carriage windows in which eyes recognise themselves, then look through to the lights of distant farms. The noise of college kids bringing them back to reality, the kids at home, the mortgage, the car payments, the ageing parents, the

bewilderment of middle age on a middle income, and realising now, as never before, that this is what they had not imagined when they had to write that essay in school – *What I shall be doing when I am fifty – I'll be rich and famous, married to a handsome man/beautiful woman and have beautiful kids, drive a Rolls Royce and swim in my pool every day, go to America on holiday, buy all my food at Marks & Spencer's...*But here they are, tired, in a carriage of tired people whose essays are the same as theirs. 'Could have done better' written on their faces, surfacing from their graveyard to think of what keeps them on track, the family, the home, the mortgage for which they do this day in day out. The world which no one else on this train knows, that intimate gulf between their pinstripe or two-piece, and still the college kids are laughing at the end of the carriage, making arrangements for a wild weekend, putting off their essays. That's when I cry.

★★★★

Acknowledgements

There is a leaflet published by the Brecon Beacons National Park titled “Aircraft crash sites and the stories behind them”. Of the thirty crash sites described, number twenty-three recounts the fate of Flying Fortress 42-5903 “Ascend Charlie” which crashed 16th September 1943. The ten crew members were killed. This book is also dedicated to them.

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About the Author

JEREMY HUGHES was born in Crickhowell, south Wales. He was awarded first prize in the Poetry Wales competition and his poetry was short-listed for an Eric Gregory Award. He has published two pamphlets - *breathing for all my birds* (2000) and *The Woman Opposite* (2004) - and has published poetry, short fiction, memoir and reviews widely in British and American magazines. He studied for the Master's in Creative Writing at the University of Oxford. His first novel *Dovetail* was published in 2011.

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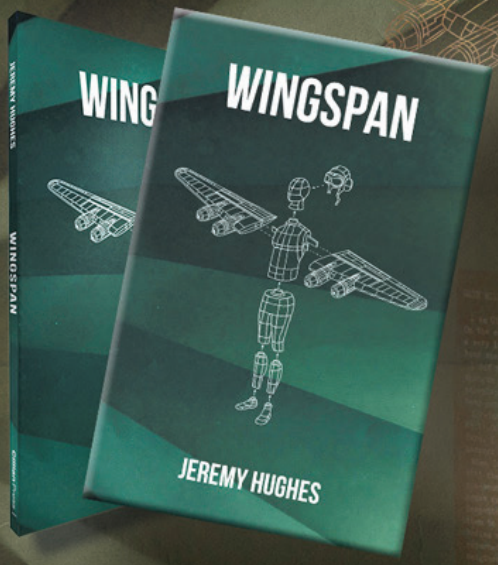
WINGSPAN

BY JEREMY HUGHES



Set in America, England and Wales, *Wingspan* tells two intertwined stories separated by fifty years and a thousand miles of ocean - stories of pursuit and discovery, love and war, bereavement and remembering.

In September 1943 an American Flying Fortress returning from a bombing mission crashes in Wales. A farmer is first on the scene to discover that its crew of ten have all perished. When the police arrive, only nine bodies are recovered. A lifetime later a son goes looking for the father he never knew, climbing steep hillsides into deepening mysteries of time and loss.

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