Ian R. MacLeod
THE CHOP GIRL

Me, I was the chop girl-not that I suppose that anyone knows what that means now. So much blood and water under the bridge, I heard the lassies in the post office debating how many world wars there had been last week when I climbed up the hill to collect my pension, and who exactly it was that had won them.

Volunteered for service, I did, because I thought it would get me away from the stink of the frying pans at home in our Manchester tea room's back kitchen. And then the Air Force of all things, and me thinking, lucky, lucky, lucky, because of the glamour and the lads, the lovely lads, the best lads of all, who spoke with BBC voices as I imagined them, and had played rugger and footie for their posh schools and for their posh southern counties. And a lot of it was true, even if I ended up typing in the annex to the cookhouse, ordering mustard and HP Sauce on account of my, quote, considerable experience in the catering industry.

So there I was-just eighteen and WAAF and lucky, lucky, lucky. And I still didn't know what a chop girl was, which had nothing to do with lamb or bacon or the huge blocks of lard I ordered for the chip pans. They were big and empty places, those bomber airfields, and they had the wild and open and windy names of the Fens that surrounded them. Wisbeach and Finneston and Witchford. And there were drinks and there were dances and the money was never short because there was never any point in not spending it. Because you never knew, did you? You never knew. One day your bunk's still warm and the next someone else is complaining about not changing the sheets and the smell of you on it. Those big machines like ugly insects lumbering out in the dying hour to face the salt wind off the marshes and the lights and blue smoke of the paraffin lanterns drifting across the runways. Struggling up into the deepening sky in a mighty roaring, and the rest of us standing earthbound and watching. Word slipping out that tonight it would be Hamburg or Dortmund or Essen-some half-remembered place from a faded schoolroom map glowing out under no moon and through heavy cloud, the heavier the better, as the bombers droned over, and death fell from them in those long steel canisters onto people who were much like us when you got down to it, but for the chances of history. Then back, back, a looser run in twos and threes and searching for the seaflash of the coast after so many miles of darkness. Black specks at dawn on the big horizon that could have been clouds or crows or just your eyes' plain weariness. Noise and smoke and flame. Engines misfiring. An unsettled quiet would be lying over everything by the time the sun was properly up and the skylarks were singing. The tinny taste of fatigue. Then word on the wires of MG 3138, which had limped in at Brightlingsea. And of CZ 709, which had ploughed up a field down at Theddlethorpe. Word, too, of LK 452, which was last seen as a flaming cross over Brussels, and of Flight Sergeant Shanklin, who, hoisted bloody from his gun turret by the medics, had faded on the way to hospital. Word of the dead. Word of the lost. Word of the living.

Death was hanging all around you, behind the beer and the laughs and the bowls and the endless games of cards and darts and cricket. Knowing as they set out on a big mission that some planes would probably never get back. Knowing for sure that half the crews wouldn't make it through their twenty-mission tour. So, of course, we were all madly superstitious. It just happened-you didn't need anyone to make it up for you. Who bought the first round. Who climbed into the plane last. Not shaving or shaving only half your face. Kissing the ground, kissing the air, singing, not singing, pissing against the undercarriage, spitting. I saw a Flight Officer have a blue fit because the girl in the canteen gave him only two sausages on his lunchtime plate. That night, on a big raid over Dortmund, his Lancaster vanished in heavy flak, and I remember the sleepless nights because it was me who'd forgotten to requisition from the wholesale butcher. But everything was sharp and bright then. The feel of your feet in your shoes and your tongue in your mouth and your eyes in their sockets. That, and the sick-and-petrol smell of the bombers. So everything mattered. Every incident was marked and solid in the only time that counted, which was the time that lay between now and the next mission. So it was odd socks and counting sausages, spitting and not spitting, old hats and new hats worn backward and forward. It was pissing on the undercarriage, and whistling. And it was the girls you'd kissed.

Me, I was the chop girl, and word of it tangled and whispered around me like the sour morning news of a botched raid. I don't know how it began, because I'd been with enough lads at dances, and then outside afterward fumbling and giggling in the darkness. And sometimes, and because you loved them all and felt sorry for them, you'd let them go nearly all the way before pulling back with the starlight shivering between us. Going nearly all the way was a skill you had to learn then, like who wore what kind of brass buttons and marching in line. And I was lucky. I sang lucky, lucky, lucky to myself in the morning as I brushed my teeth, and I laughingly told the lads so in the evening NAAFI when they always beat me at cards.

It could have started with Flight Sergeant Martin Beezly, who just came into our smoky kitchen annex one hot summer afternoon and sat down on the edge of my desk with his blond hair sticking up and told me he had a fancy to go picnicking and had got hold of two bikes. Me, I just unrollered my carbons and stood up and the other girls watched with the jaws of their typewriters dropped in astonishment as I walked out into the sunlight. Nothing much happened that afternoon, other than what Flight Sergeant Beezly said would happen. We cycled along the little dikes and bumped across the wooden bridges, and I sat on a rug eating custard creams as he told me about his home up in the northeast and the business he was planning to set up after the war delivering lunchtime sandwiches to the factories. But all of that seemed as distant as the open blue sky-as distant, given these clear and unsuitable weather conditions, as the possibility of a raid taking place that evening. We were just two young people enjoying the solid certainty of that moment-which the taste of custard creams still always brings back to me-and Flight Sergeant Beezly did no more than brush my cheek with his fingers before we climbed back onto the bikes, and then glance anxiously east toward the heavy clouds that were suddenly piling. It was fully overcast by the time we got back to the base, driven fast on our bikes by the cool and

unsummery wind that was rustling the ditches. Already, orders had been posted and briefings were being staged and the groundcrews were working, their arclights flaring in the hangers. Another five minutes, a little less of that wind as we cycled, and there'd have been all hell to pay for me and for Flight Sergeant Beezly, who, as a navigator and vital to the task of getting one of those big machines across the dark sky, would have been shifted to standby and then probably court-martialled.

But as it was, he just made it into the briefing room as the map was being unfolded and sat down, as I imagine him, on the schoolroom desk nearest the door, still a little breathless, and with the same smears of bike oil on his fingers that I later found on my cheek. That night, it was Amsterdam-a quick raid to make the most of this quick and filthy cloud that the weather boffins said wouldn't last. Amsterdam. One of those raids that somehow never sounded right even though it was enemy-occupied territory. That night, GZ 3401, with Flight Sergeant Beezly navigating, was last seen laboring over the North Sea enemy coastal barrages with a full load of bombs, a slow and ugly butterfly pinioned on the needles of half a dozen searchlights.

So maybe that was the first whisper-me walking out of the annex before I should have done with Flight Sergeant Beezly, although God knows it had happened to enough of the other girls. That, and worse. Broken engagements. Cancelled marriages. Visits to the burns unit, and up the stick for going all the way instead of just most of it. Wrecked, unmendable lives that you can still see drifting at every branch Post Office if you know how and when to look.

But then, a week after, there was Pilot Officer Charlie Dyson, who had a reputation as one of the lads, one for the lassies. All we did was dance and kiss at the Friday hall down in the village, although I suppose that particular night was the first time I was really drawn to him because something had changed about his eyes. That, and the fact that he'd shaved off the Clark Gable moustache that I'd always thought made him look vain and ridiculous. So we ended up kissing as we danced, and then sharing beers and laughs with the rest of his crew in their special corner. And after the band had gone and the village outside the hall stood stony dark, I let him lean me against the old oak that slipped its roots into the river and let him nuzzle my throat and touch my breasts and mutter words against my skin that were lost in the hissing of the water. I put my hand down between us then, touched him in the place I thought he wanted. But Pilot Officer Charlie Dyson was soft as smoke down there, as cool and empty as the night. So I just held him and rocked him as he began to weep, feeling faintly relieved that there wouldn't be the usual pressures for me to go the whole way. Looking up through the oak leaves as the river whispered, I saw that the bright moon of the week before was thinning, and I knew from the chill air on my flesh that tomorrow the planes would be thundering out again. You didn't need to be a spy or a boffin. And not Amsterdam, but a long run. Hamburg. Dortmund. Essen. In fact, it turned out to be the longest of them all, Berlin. And somewhere on that journey Pilot Officer Charlie Dyson and his whole crew and his Lancaster simply fell out of the sky. Vanished into the darkness.

After that, the idea of my being bad luck seemed to settle around me, clinging like the smoke of the cookhouse. Although I was young, although I'd never really gone steady with anyone and had still never ventured every last inch of the way, and although no one dared to keep any proper score of these things, I was already well on my way to becoming the chop girl. I learned afterward that most bases had one; that-in the same way that Kitty from stores was like a mum to a lot of the crews, and Sally Morrison was the camp bicycle-it was a kind of necessity.

And I believed. With each day so blazingly bright and with the nights so dark and the crews wild-eyed and us few women grieving and sleepless, with good luck and bad luck teeming in the clouds and in the turning of the moon, we loved and lived in a world that had shifted beyond the realms of normality. So of course I believed.

I can't give you lists and statistics. I can't say when I first heard the word, or caught the first really odd look. But being the chop girl became a self-fulfilling prophecy. Empty wells of silence opened out when I entered the canteen. Chairs were weirdly re-arranged in the NAAFI. I was the chop, and the chop was Flight Sergeant Ronnie Fitfield and Flight Officer Jackie White and Pilot Officer Tim Reid, all of them in one bad late summer month, men I can barely remember now except for their names and ranks and the look of loss in their eyes and the warm bristle touch of their faces. Nights out at a pub; beating the locals at cribbage; a trip to the cinema at Lincoln, and the tight, cobbled streets afterward shining with rain. But I couldn't settle on these men because already I could feel the darkness edging in between us, and I knew even as I touched their shoulders and watched them turn away that they could feel it, too. At the dances and the endless booze-ups and the card schools, I became more than a wallflower: I was the petaled heart of death, its living embodiment. I was quivering with it like electricity. One touch, one kiss, one dance. Groundcrew messages were hard to deliver when they saw who it was coming across the tarmac. It got to the point when I stopped seeing out the planes, or watching them through the pane of my bunk window. And the other girls in the annex and the spinster WAAF officers and even the red-faced women from the village who came in to empty the bins-all of them knew I was the chop, all of them believed. The men who came up to me now were white-faced, already teetering. They barely needed my touch. Once you'd lost it, the luck, the edge, the nerve, it was gone anyway, and the black bomber's sky crunched you in its fists.

I can't tell you that it was terrible. I knew it wasn't just, but then, justice was something we'd long given up even missing. Put within that picture, and of the falling bombs and the falling bombers, I understood that the chop girl was a little thing, and I learned to step back into the cold and empty space that it provided. After all, I hadn't loved any of the men-or only in a sweet, generalized and heady way that faded on the walk from the fence against which we'd been leaning. And I reasoned-and this was probably the thing that kept me sane-that it wasn't me that was the chop. I reasoned that death lay somewhere else and was already waiting, that I was just a signpost that some crewmen had happened to pass on their way.

Me, I was the chop girl.

And I believed.

Such were the terrors and the pains of the life we were leading.

With the harvest came the thunderflies, evicted from the fields in sooty clouds that speckled the windows and came out like black dandruff when you combed your hair. And the moths and the craneflies were drawn for miles by the sparks and lights flaring from the hangers. Spiders prowled the communal baths, filled with their woodland reek of bleach and wet towels. The sun rippled small and gold like a dropped coin on the horizon, winking as if through fathoms of ocean.

With harvest came Walt Williams. Chuttering up to the Strictly Reserved parking space outside the Squadron Leader's office in a once-red MG and climbing out with a swing of his legs and a heave of his battered carpetbag. Smiling with cold blue eyes as he looked around him at the expanse of hangars, as if he would never be surprised again. Walt had done training. Walt had done Pathfinders. Walt had done three full tours, and most of another that had only ended when his plane had been shot from under him and he'd been hauled out of the Channel by a passing MTB. We'd all heard of Walt, or thought we had, or had certainly heard of people like him. Walt was one of the old-style pilots who'd been flying before the War for sheer pleasure. Walt was an old man of thirty, with age creases on his sun-browned face to go with those blue eyes. Walt had done it all and had finally exhausted every possibility of death that a bemused RAF could throw at him. Walt was the living embodiment of lucky.

We gathered around, we sought to touch and admire and gain advice about how one achieved this impossible feat-the we at the base that generally excluded me did, anyway. The other crew members who'd been selected to fly with him wandered about with the bemused air of pools winners. Walt Williams stories suddenly abounded. Stuff about taking a dead cow up in a Lancaster and dropping it bang into the middle of a particularly disliked Squadron Leader's prized garden. Stuff about half a dozen top brass wives. Stuff about crash landing upside down on lakes. Stuff about flying for hundreds of miles on two engines or just the one or no engines at all. Stuff about plucking women's washing on his undercarriage and picking apples from passing trees. Amid all this excitement that fizzed around the airfield like the rain on the concrete and the corrugated hangars as the autumn weather heaved in, we seemed to forget that we had told each other many of these stories before, and that they had only gained this new urgency because we could now settle them onto the gaunt face of a particular man who sat smiling and surrounded, yet often seeming alone, at the smoke-filled center of the NAAFI bar.

Being older, being who he was, Walt needed to do little to enhance his reputation other than to climb up into this Lancaster and fly it. That, and parking that rattling sports car the way he did that first day, his loose cuffs and his other minor disregards for all the stupidities of uniform, his chilly gaze, his longer-than-regulation hair, the fact that he was almost ten years older than most of the rest of us and had passed up the chance to be promoted to the positions of the men who were supposedly in charge of him, was more than enough. The fact that, in the flesh, he was surprisingly quiet, and that his long brown hands trembled as he chain-smoked his Dunhill cigarettes, the fact that his smile barely ever wavered yet never reached his eyes, and that it was said, whispered, that the Pilot Officer in the billet next to his had asked to be moved out on account of the sound of screaming, was as insignificant as Alan Ladd having to stand on a box before he kissed his leading ladies. We all had our own inner version of Walt Williams in those soaringly bright days.

For me, the shadow in bars and dancehall corners, potent in my own opposite way, yet now mostly pitied and ignored, Walt Williams had an especial fascination. With little proper company, immersed often enough between work shifts in doleful boredom, I had plenty of time to watch and brood. The base and surrounding countryside made a strange world that winter. I walked the dikes. I saw blood on the frost where the farmers set traps to catch the foxes, and felt my own blood turn and change with the ebb and flow of the bomber's moon. Ice on the runways, ice hanging like fairy socks on the radio spars as the messages came in each morning. The smell of the sea blown in over the land. In my dreams, I saw the figures of crewmen entering the NAAFI, charcoaled and blistered, riddled with bleeding wormholes or greyly bloated from the ocean and seeping brine. Only Walt Williams, laughing for once, his diamond eyes blazing, stood whole and immune.

Walt was already halfway through his tour by the time Christmas came, and the consensus amongst those who knew was that he was a unfussy pilot, unshowy. Rather like the best kind of footballer, he drifted in, found the right place, the right time, then drifted out again. I stood and watched him from my own quiet corners in the barroom, nursing my quiet drinks. I even got to feel that I knew Walt Williams better than any of the others, because I actually made it my business to study him, the man and not the legend. He always seemed to be ahead of everything that was happening, but I saw that there was a wariness in the way he watched people, and a mirrored grace in how he responded, as if he'd learned the delicate dance of being human, of making all the right moves, but, offstage and in the darkness of his hut where that pilot who was dead now had said he'd heard screaming, he was something else entirely. And there were things-apart from never having to buy drinks-that Walt Williams never did. Games, bets, cards. He always slipped back then, so smoothly and easily you'd have to be watching from as far away as I was to actually notice. It was as if he was frightened to use his luck up on anything so trivial, whereas most of the other crewmen, fired up and raw through these times of waiting, were always chasing a ball, a winning hand, thunking in the darts and throwing dice and making stupid bets on anything that moved, including us girls.

Watching Walt as I did, I suppose he must have noticed me. And he must have heard about me, too, just as everyone else here at the base had. Sometimes, on the second or third port and lemon, I'd just stare at him from my empty corner and will him, dare him, to stare back at me. But he never did. Those sapphire eyes, quick as they were, never quite touched on me. He must, I thought. He must look now. But never, never. Except when I stood up and left, and I felt his presence behind me like the touch of cool fingers on my neck. So strong and sharp was that feeling one night as I stepped down the wooden steps outside the NAAFI that I almost turned and went straight back in to confront him through those admiring crowds. But loneliness had become a habit by now, and I almost clung to my reputation. I

wandered off, away from the billets and into the empty darkness of the airfield. There was no moon, but a seemingly endless field of stars. Not a bomber's night, but the kind of night you see on Christmas cards. After a week's rain, and then this sudden frost, I could feel the ground crackling and sliding beneath me. The NAAFI door swung open again, and bodies tumbled out. As they turned from the steps made to sway arm-in-arm off bed, I heard the crash of fresh ice and the slosh of water as they broke into a huge puddle. They squelched off, laughing and cursing. Standing there in the darkness, I watched the same scene play itself out over and over again. The splash of cold, filthy water. One man even fell into it. Freezing though I was, I took an odd satisfaction in watching this little scene repeat itself. Now, I thought, if they could see me as well as I can see them, standing in the darkness watching the starlight shining on that filthy puddle, they really would know I'm strange. Chop girl. Witch. Death incarnate. They'd burn me at the stake. . . .

I'd almost forgotten about Walt Williams when he finally came out, although I knew it was him. Instantly. He paused on the steps and looked up at the sky as I'd seen other aircrew do, judging what the next night would bring. As he did so, his shadow seemed to quiver. But he still walked like Walt Williams when he stepped down onto the frozen turf, and his breath plumed like anyone else's, and I knew somehow, knew in a way that I had never had before, that this time he really didn't know that I was there, and that he was off-guard in a way I'd never seen him. The next event was stupid, really. A non-event. Walt Williams just walked off with that loose walk of his, his hands stuffed into his pockets. He was nearly gone from sight into his Nissen hut when I realized the one thing that hadn't happened. Even though he'd taken the same route as everyone else, he hadn't splashed into that wide, deep puddle. I walked over to it, disbelieving, and tried to recall whether I'd even heard the crackle of his footsteps on the ice. And the puddle was even darker, wider, and filthier than I'd imagined. The kind of puddle you only get at places military. I was stooping at the edge of it, and my own ankles and boots were already filthy, when the NAAFI door swung open again, and a whole group of people suddenly came out. Somebody was holding the door, and the light flooded right toward me.

Even though I was sure they must all have seen me and knew who I was, I got up and scurried away.

All in all, it was a strange winter. We were getting used to Allied victories, and there'd even been talk of a summer invasion of France that had never happened. But we knew it would come next summer now that the Yanks had thrown their weight into it, and that the Russians wouldn't give up advancing, that it was really a matter of time until the War ended. But for us, that wasn't reassuring, because we knew that peace was still so far away, and we knew that the risks and the fatalities would grow even greater on the journey to it. Aircrew were scared in any case of thinking further than the next drink, the next girl, the next mission. Peace for them was a strange white god they could worship only at the risk of incurring the wrath of the darker deity who still reigned over them. So there was an extra wildness to the jollification when that year's end drew near, and a dawning realization that, whether we lived or died, whether we came out of it all maimed and ruined or whole and happy, no one else would ever understand.

There was a big pre-Christmas bash in a barn of the great house of the family that had once owned most of the land you could see from the top of our windsock tower. Of course, the house itself had been requisitioned, although the windows were boarded or shattered and the place was empty as we drove past it, and I heard later that it was never re-occupied after the War and ended up being slowly vandalized until it finally burnt down in the fifties. The barn was next to the stables and faced into a wide cobbled yard, and, for once, out here in the country darkness and a million miles from peace or war, no one gave a bugger about the blackout, and there were smoking lanterns hanging by the pens where fine white horses would once have nosed their heads. It was freezing, but you couldn't feel cold, not in that sweet orange light, not once the music had started, and the Squadron Leader himself, looking ridiculous in a pinny, began ladling out the steaming jamjars of mulled wine. And I was happy to be there, too, happy to be part of this scene with the band striking up on a stage made of bales. When Walt arrived, alone as usual in his rusty MG, he parked in the best spot between the trucks and climbed out with that fragile grace of his. Walt Williams standing there in the flamelight, a modern prince with the tumbling chimneys of that empty old house looming behind him. A perfect, perfect scene.

I did dance, once or twice, with some of the other girls and a few of the older men who worked in the safety of accounts and stores and took pity on me. I even had a five-minute word-just like everyone else, kindly man that he was, and spectrally thin though the War had made him-with our Squadron Leader. As far away from everything as we were, people thought it was safe here to get in that bit closer to me. But it was hard for me to keep up my sense of jollity, mostly standing and sitting alone over such a long evening, and no chance of going back to base until far after midnight. So I did my usual trick of backing off, which was easier here than it was in the NAAFI. I could just drift out of the barn and across the cobbles, falling through layers of smoke and kicked-up dust until I became part of the night. I studied them all for a while, remembering a picture from Peter Pan that had showed the Indians and the Lost Boys dancing around a campfire.

Couples were drifting out now into the quiet behind the vans. I tried to remember what it was like, the way you could conjure up that urgency between flesh and flesh. But all I could think of was some man's male thing popping out like a dog's, and I walked further off into the dark, disgusted. I wandered around the walls of the big and empty house with its smell of damp and nettles, half-feeling my way down steps and along balustrades, moving at this late and early hour amid the pale shadows of huge statuary. It wasn't fully quiet here, this far away from the throb of the barn. Even in midwinter, there were things shuffling and creaking and breaking. Tiny sounds, and the bigger ones that came upon you just when you'd given up waiting. The hoot of an owl. The squeak of a mouse. The sound of a fox screaming. . . .

Perhaps I'd fallen asleep, for I didn't hear him coming, or at least didn't separate out the sound of his footsteps from my thoughts, which had grown as half-unreal as those dim statues, changing and drifting. So I simply waited in the darkness as one of the statues began to move, and knew without understanding that it was Walt Williams. He sat beside me on whatever kind of cold stone bench I was sitting, and he still had the smell of the barn on him, the heat and the drink and the smoke and the firelight. The only thing he didn't carry with him was the perfume of a woman. I honestly hadn't

realized until that moment that this was another item I should have added to my long list of the things Walt Williams avoided. But somehow that fact had been so obvious that even I hadn't noticed it. It wouldn't have seemed right, anyway. Walt and just one woman. Not with the whole base depending on him.

I watched the flare of the match, and saw the peaked outline of his face as he stooped to catch it with two cigarettes. Then I felt his touch as he passed one to me. One of those long, posh fags of his, which tasted fine and sweet, although it was odd to hold compared with the stubby NAAFI ones because the glow of it came from so far away. No one else, I thought, would ever do this for me-sit and smoke a fag like this. Only Walt.

He finally ground his cigarette out in a little shower of sparks beneath his shoe. I did the same, more by touch than anything.

"So you're the girl we're all supposed to avoid?"

Pointless though it was in this darkness, I nodded.

It was the first time I'd heard him laugh. Like his voice, the sound was fine and light. "The things people believe!"

"It's true, though, isn't it? It is, although I don't understand why. It may be that it's only because . . ." I trailed off. I'd never spoken about being the chop girl to anyone before. What I'd wanted to say was that it was our believing that had made it happen.

I heard the rustle of his packet as he took out another cigarette. "Another?"

I shook my head. "You of all people. You shouldn't be here with me."

The match flared. I felt smoke on my face, warm and invisible. "That's where you're wrong. You and me, we'd make the ideal couple. Don't bother to say otherwise. I've seen you night after night in the NAAFI. . . ."

"Not every night."

"But enough of them."

"And I saw you, that night. I saw you walk over that puddle."

"What night was that?"

So I explained-and in the process I gave up any pretense that I hadn't been watching him.

"I really don't remember," he said when I'd finished, although he didn't sound that surprised. This time, before he ground out his cigarette, he used it to light another. "But why should I? It was just a puddle. Lord knows, there are plenty around the base."

"But it was there. I was watching. You just walked over it."

He made a sound that wasn't quite a cough. "Hasn't everyone told you who I am? I'm Walt Williams. I'm lucky."

"But it's more than that, isn't it?"

Walt said nothing for a long while, and I watched the nervous arc of his cigarette rising and falling. And when he did begin to speak, it wasn't about the War, but about his childhood. Walt told me he'd come from a well-to-do family in the Home Counties, a place that always made me think of the BBC and pretty lanes with tall flowering hedges. He was the only child, but a big investment, as was always made clear to him, of his mother's time, his father's money. At first, to hear Walt talk, he really was the image of those lads I'd imagined I'd meet when I joined the RAF. He'd gone to the right schools. He really had played cricket-if only just the once when the usual wicket keeper was ill-for his county. His parents had him lined up to become an accountant. But Walt would have none of that, and my image of his kind of childhood, which was in all the variegated golds and greens of striped lawns and fine sunsets, changed as he talked, like a film fading. His mother, he said, had a routine that she stuck to rigidly. Every afternoon, when she'd come back from whatever it was that she was always did on that particular day, she'd sit in the drawing room with her glass and her sherry decanter beside her. She'd sit there, and she'd wait for the clock to chime five, and then she'd ring for the maid to come and pour her drink for her. Every afternoon, the same.

Walt Williams talked on in the darkness. And at some point, I began to hear the ticking rattle of something which I thought at first was his keys or his coins, the kind of nervous habit that most pilots end up getting. It didn't sound quite right, but by then I was too absorbed in what he was saying. Flying, once Walt had discovered it, had been his escape, although, because of the danger to their precious investment of time and good schools and money, his parents disapproved of it even as a hobby. They cut off his money, and what there was of their affection. Walt worked in garages and then on the airfields, and flew whenever he could. He even toured with a circus. The rattling sound continued as he spoke, and I sensed a repeated sweeping movement of his hand that he was making across the stone on which we were sitting, as if he was gently trying to scrub out some part of these memories.

Then the War came, and even though the RAF's discipline, and the regularity, were the same things that he detested in his parents, Walt was quick to volunteer. But he liked the people, or many of them, and he came to admire the big and often graceless military planes. The kind of flying he'd done, often tricks and aerobatics, Walt was used to risk; he opted for bombers rather than fighters because, like anyone who's in a fundamentally dangerous profession, he looked for ways in which he thought, wrongly as it turned out, the risk could be minimized. And up in the skies and down on the ground, he sailed through his War. He dropped his bombs, and he wasn't touched by the world below him. Part of him knew that he was being even more heartless than the machines he was flying, but the rest of him knew that if he was to survive it was necessary to fly through cold, clear and untroubled skies of his own making.

The faint sound of the band in the barn had long faded, and I could see the sweep and movement of Walt's hand more clearly now, and the clouds of our breath and his cigarette smoke hanging like the shapes of the statues around us. I had little difficulty in picturing Walt as he described the kind of pilot he'd once been; the kind who imagined, despite all the evidence, that nothing would ever happen to him. Not that Walt believed in luck back then-he said he only went along with the rituals so as not to unsettle his crew-but at a deeper and unadmitted level, and just like all the rest of us, luck had become fundamental to him.

In the big raids that were then starting, which were the revenge for the raids that the Germans had launched against us, so many bombers poured across their cities that they had to go over in layers. Some boffin must have worked out that the chance of a bomb landing on a plane flying beneath was small enough to be worth taking. But in a mass raid over Frankfurt, flying through dense darkness, there was a sudden jolt and a blaze of light, and Walt's top gunner reported that a falling incendiary had struck their starboard wing. Expecting a fuel line to catch at any moment, or for a nightfighter to home in on them now that they were shining like a beacon, they dropped their load and turned along the home flightpath. But the nightfighters didn't come, and the wind blasting across the airframe stopped the incendiary from fully igniting. Hours went by, and they crossed the coast of France into the Channel just as the night was paling. The whole crew were starting to believe that their luck would hold, and were silently wondering how to milk the most drama out of the incident in the bar that evening, when the whole plane was suddenly ripped apart as the wing, its spar damaged by the heat of that half-burning incendiary, tore off into the slipstream. In a fraction of a moment, the bomber became a lump of tumbling, flaming metal.

There was nothing then but the wild push of falling, and the sea, the sky, the sea flashing past them and the wind screaming as the bomber turned end over end and they tried to struggle from their harnesses and climb out through the doorways or the gaping hole that the lost wing had made. Walt said it was like being wedged in a nightmare fairground ride, and that all he could think of was having heard somewhere that the sea was hard as concrete when you hit it. That, and not wanting to die; that, and needing to be lucky. In a moment of weightlessness, globules of blood floated around him, and he saw his co-pilot with a spear of metal sticking right though him. There was no way Walt could help. He clambered up the huge height of the falling plane against a force that suddenly twisted and threw him down toward the opening. But he was wedged into it, stuck amid twisted piping and scarcely able to breathe as the tumbling forces gripped him. It was then that the thought came to him-the same thought that must have crossed the minds of thousands of airmen in moments such as these-that he would give anything, anything to get out. Anything to stay lucky. . . .

The darkness had grown thin and gauzy. Looking down now, I could see that Walt was throwing two white dice, scooping them up and throwing them again.

"So I was lucky," he said. "I got the parachute open before I hit the sea and my lifejacket went up and I wasn't killed by the flaming wreckage falling about me. But I still thought it was probably a cruel joke, to get this far and freeze to death in the filthy English Channel. Then I heard the sound of an engine over the waves, and I let off my flare. In twenty minutes, this MTB found me. One of ours, too. Of all the crew, I was the only one they found alive. The rest were just bodies. . . ."

I could see the outlines of the trees now through a dawn mist, and of the statues around us, which looked themselves like casualties wrapped in foggy strips of bandage. And I could see the numbers on the two dice that Walt was throwing.

A chill went through me, far deeper than this dawn cold. They went six, six, six . . .

Walt made that sound again. More of a cough than a chuckle. "So that's how it is. I walk over puddles. I fly though tour after tour. I'm the living embodiment of lucky."

"Can't you throw some other number?"

He shook his head and threw again. Six and six. "It's not a trick. Not the kind of trick you might think it is, anyway." Six and six, again. The sound of those rolling bones. The sound of my teeth chattering. "You can try if you like."

"You forget who I am, Walt. I don't need to try. I believe . . ."

Walt pocketed his dice and stood up and looked about him. With that gaze of his. Smiling but unsmiling. It was getting clearer now. The shoulders of my coat were clammy damp when I touched them. My hands were white and my fingertips were blue with the cold. And this place of statues, I finally realized, wasn't actually the garden of the house at all, but a churchyard. Our bench had been a tombstone. We were surrounded by angels.

"Come on . . ." Walt held out his hand to help me up. I took it.

I expected him to head back to his battered MG, but instead he wandered amid the tombstones, hands in his pockets and half-whistling, inspecting the dates and the names, most of which belonged to the family that had lived in that big house beyond the treetops. Close beside us, there was a stone chapel, and Walt pushed at the door until something crumbled and gave, and beckoned me in.

Everything about the graveyard and this chapel was quiet and empty. That's the way it is in a war. There are either places with no people at all, or other places with far too many. The chapel roof was holed and there were pigeon droppings and feathers over the pews, but it still clung to its dignity. And it didn't seem a sad place to me, even though it was decorated with other memorials, because there's a sadness about war that extinguishes the everyday sadnesses of people living and dying. Even the poor brass woman surrounded by swaddled figures, whom Walt explained represented her lost babies, still had a sense of something strong and right about her face. At least she knew she'd given life a chance.

"What I don't understand," I said, crouching beside Walt as he fed odd bits of wood into an old iron stove in a corner, "is why. . . ."

Walt struck a match and tossed it into the cobwebbed grate. The flames started licking and cracking. "It's the same with cards. It's the same with everything."

"Can't you . . ."

"Can't I what? " He looked straight at me, and I felt again a deeper chill even as the stove's faint heat touched me. I've never seen irises so blue, or pupils so dark, as his. Like a bomber's night. Like the summer sky. I had to look away.

He stood up and fumbled in his pockets for another cigarette. As he lit it, I noticed that once again his hands were shaking.

"After the War, Walt, you could make a fortune. . . ."

He made that sound again, almost a cough; a sound that made me wish I could hear his proper laugh again. And he

began to pace and to speak quickly, his footsteps snapping and echoing as the fire smoked and crackled and the pain of its warmth began to seep into me.

"What should I do? Go to a casino-me, the highest roller of them all? How long do you think that would last. . . ?"

Walt said then that you were never given anything for nothing. Not in life, not in war, not even in fairy tales. Before that night over Frankfurt, he'd sailed though everything. Up in those bomber's skies, you never heard the screams or the sound of falling masonry.

He slowed then, and crouched down again beside me, his whole body shivering as he gazed into the stove's tiny blaze.

"I see it all now," he said, and the smile that never met his eyes was gone even from his lips now. "Every bullet. Every bomb. Even in my dreams, it doesn't leave me. . . ."

"It won't last forever, Walt-"

His hand grabbed mine, hard and sharp, and the look in his eyes made me even more afraid. When he spoke, the words were barely a whisper, and his voice was like the voice of poor dead Pilot Officer Charlie Dyson as he pressed himself to me on that distant summer night under the oak tree.

When Walt said he saw it all, he truly meant he saw everything. It came to him in flashes and stabs-nightmare visions, I supposed, like those of the dead airmen that had sometimes troubled me. He saw the blood, heard the screams and felt the terrible chaos of falling masonry. He'd been tormented for weeks, he muttered, by the screams of a woman as she was slowly choked by a ruptured sewer pipe flooding her forgotten basement. And it wasn't just Walt's own bombs, his own deeds, but flashes, terrible flashes that he still scarcely dared believe, of the war as a whole, what was happening now, and what would happen in the future. He muttered names I'd never heard of. Belsen. Dachau. Hiro and Naga-something. And he told me that he'd tried walking into the sea to get rid of the terrors he was carrying, but that the tide wouldn't take him. He told me that he'd thought of driving his MG at a brick wall, only he didn't trust his luck-or trusted it too much-to be sure that any accident or deed would kill him. And yes, many of the stories of the things he'd done were true, but then the RAF would tolerate much from its best, its luckiest, pilots. For, at the end of the day, Walt still was a pilot-the sky still drew him, just as it always had. And he wanted the war to end like all the rest of us because he knew-far more than I could have then realized-about the evils we were fighting. So he still climbed into his bomber and ascended into those dark skies. . . .

Slowly, then, Walt let go of me. And he pushed back his hair, and ran his hand over his lined face, and then began stooping about collecting more bits of old wood and stick for the fire. After a long time staring into the stove and with some of the cold finally gone from me, I stood up and walked amid the pews, touching the splintery dust and studying the bits of brass and marble from times long ago when people hadn't thought it odd to put a winged skull beside a puffy-cheeked cherub. . . .

Walt was walking up the church now. As I turned to him, I saw him make that effort that he always made, the dance of being the famous Walt Williams, of being human. From a figure made out of winter light and the fire's dull woodsmoke, he gave a shiver and became a good-looking man again, still thinly graceful if no longer quite young, and with that smile and those eyes that were like ice and summer. He turned then, and put out his arms, and did a little Fred Astaire dance on the loose stones, his feet tap-tapping in echoes up to the angels and the cherubs and the skulls. I had to smile. And I went up to him and we met and hugged almost as couples do in films. But we were clumsy as kids as we kissed each other. It had been a long, long time for us both.

We went to the stove to stop ourselves shivering. Walt took off his jacket, and he spread it there before the glow, and there was never any doubt as we looked at each other. That we would go-stupid phrase-all the way.

So that was it. Me and Walt. And in a chapel-a church-of all places. And afterward, restless as he still was, still tormented, he pulled his things back on and smoked and wandered about. There was a kind of wooden balcony, a thing called a choir, at the back of the chapel. As I sat huddled by the stove, Walt climbed the steps that led up to it, and bits of dust and splinter fell as he looked down at me and gave a half-smiling wave. I could see that the whole structure was shot through with rot and woodworm, ridiculously unsafe. Then, of all things, he started to do that little Fred Astaire dance of his again, tip-tapping over the boards.

I was sure, as I stared up at Walt from the dying stove, that he danced over empty spaces where the floor had fallen though entirely.

Walt was due back at base that morning, and so was I: we all were. There had already been talk on the wire that tonight, hang-over or no hang-over, Christmas or no Christmas, there would be a big raid, one of the biggest. Leaving the chapel and walking back under the haggard trees toward the littered and empty barn, which stank of piss and butt ends, we kept mostly silent. And Walt had to lever open the bonnet of his MG and fiddle with the engine before he could persuade it to turn over. He drove slowly, carefully, back along the flat roads between the ditches to the airfield where the Lancasters sat like dragonflies on the horizon. No one saw us as we came in through the gates.

Walt touched my cheek and gave that smile of his and I watched him go until he turned from sight between the Nissen huts and annexes, and then hurried off to get dressed and changed for my work. But for the smudge of oil left by his fingers, I could tell myself that none of it had happened, and get on with banging my typewriter keys, ordering mustard by the tub and jam by the barrel and currants by the sackload as the ordnance trucks trundled their deadly trains of long steel canisters across the concrete and the groundcrew hauled fuel bousers and the aircrew watched the maps being unrolled and the pointers pointed at the name of a town in Europe that would mean death for some of them.

There was never long to wait for winter darkness, and the clouds were dense that day. The airfield seemed like the only place of brightness by the time the runway lanterns were lit and the aircrew, distant figures already, threw their last dart and played their last hand and put on their odd socks and whistled or didn't whistle and touched their charms and

kissed their scented letters and pressed their fingers to the concrete and walked out to their waiting Lancasters. Standing away from where everyone else had gathered, I watched the impenetrable rituals and tried without success to figure out which dim silhouette was Walt's as they clustered around their Lancasters. And I listened as the huge Merlin engines, one by one, then wave on wave on wave, began to fire up. You felt sorry, then, for the Germans. Just as the sound became unbearable, a green flare flickered and sparkled over the base. At this signal, the pitch of the engines changed as bombers lumbered up to face the wind and slowly, agonizingly, pregnant with explosives and petrol, struggled up the runways to take flight.

That night, it was dark already. All we could do was listen-and wait-as the sound of the last Lancaster faded into that black bomber's sky without incident.

The way things turned out-thanks to a secret war of homing beams and radar-it was a good, successful raid. But Walt Williams didn't come back from it, even though his Lancaster did, and the story of what had happened was slow to emerge, opposed as it was by most people's disbelief that anything could possibly have happened to him.

I made the cold journey across the airfield late that next afternoon to look at his Lancaster. The wind had picked up by then, was tearing at the clouds, and there was a stand-down after all the day and the night before's activity. No one was about, and the machine had been drained of what remained of its ammunition, oil, and fuel, and parked in a distant corner with all the other scrap and wreckage.

It was always a surprise to be up close to one of these monsters, either whole or damaged; to feel just how big they were-and how fragile. I walked beneath the shadow of its wings as they sighed and creaked in the salt-tinged wind from across the Fens, and climbed as I had never climbed before up the crew's ladder, and squeezed through bulkheads and between wires and pipes toward the grey light of the main cabin amid the sickly oil-and-rubber reek.

The rest of the aircrew had reported a jolt and a huge inrush of air as they took the homeward flightpath, but what I saw up there, on that late and windy afternoon, told its own story. Most of the pilot's bubble and the side of the fuselage beside it had been ripped out-struck by a flying piece of debris from another plane, or a flak shell that refused to explode. Walt had been torn out, too, in the sudden blast, launched into the skies so instantly that no one else had really seen exactly what had happened. They'd all hoped, as the co-pilot had nursed the plane back home through the darkness, that Walt might still have survived, and, Walt being Walt, might even make it back through France instead of ending up as a German prisoner. But the morning had revealed that Walt, either intentionally or through some freak of the way the wind had hit him, had undone all the straps from his seat and had fallen without his parachute. Even now, it was still there, unclaimed, nestled in its well. I was able to bend down and touch it as the wind whistled through that ruined aircraft, and feel the hard inner burden of all those reams of silk that might have borne him.

Then, I believed.

I was transferred to another base in the spring after, when my section was re-organized in one of strange bureaucratic spasms that you get in the military. They'd had their own chop girl there who'd committed suicide by hanging herself a few months before, and they mostly ignored the rumors that came with me. It was as if that poor girl's sacrifice had removed the burden from me. Her sacrifice-and that of Walt Williams.

Still, I was changed by what happened. There were other men with whom I had dates and longer-term romances, and there were other occasions when I went all instead of just part of the way. But Walt's ghost was always with me. That look of his. Those eyes. That lined, handsome face. I always found it hard to settle on someone else, to really believe that they might truly want to love me. And by the time the War had finally ended, I was older, and, with my mother's arthritis and my father's stroke, I soon ended up having to cope with the demands of the tea-room almost single-handed. Time's a funny thing. One moment you're eighteen, lucky, lucky, lucky, and enlisting and leaving Manchester forever. The next you're back there, your bones ache every morning, your face is red and puffy from the smoke and the heat of cooking, and the people over the serving counter are calling you Mrs. instead of Miss, even though they probably know you aren't-and never will be-married. Still, I made a success of the business, even if it ruined my back, seared my hands, veined and purpled my face. Kept it going until ten years ago, I did, and the advent down the street of a McDonald's. Now, my life's my own, at least in the sense that it isn't anybody else's. And I keep active and make my way up the hill every week to collect my pension, although the climb seems to be getting steeper.

The dreams of the War still come, though, and thoughts about Walt Williams-in fact, they're brighter than this present dull and dusty day. I sometimes think, for instance, that if everyone saw what Walt saw, if everyone knew what was truly happening in wars and suffered something like these visions, the world would become more a peaceable place and people would start to behave decently toward each other. But we have the telly now, don't we? We can all see starving children and bits of bodies in the street. So perhaps you need to be someone special to begin with, to have special gifts for the tasks you're given, and be in a strange and special time when you're performing them. You have to be as lucky and unlucky as Walt Williams was.

And I can tell myself now, as I dared not quite tell myself then, that Walt's life had become unbearable to him. Even though I treasure him for being the Walt who loved me for those few short hours, I know that he sought me out because of what I was.

Chop girl.

Death flower.

Witch.

And I sometimes wonder what it was that hit Walt's Lancaster. Whether it really was some skyborne scrap of metal, or whether luck itself hadn't finally become a cold wall, the iron hand of that dark bombers' deity? And, in my darkest and brightest moments, when I can no longer tell if I'm feeling sad or desperately happy, I think of him walking across that foul puddle in the starlight as he came out of the NAAFI, and as I watched him in an old chapel after we'd made

love, dancing across the choir above me on nothing but dust and sunlight. And I wonder if someone as lucky as Walt Williams could ever touch the ground without a parachute to save him, and if he isn't still out there in the skies that he loved. Still falling.

"The Chop Girl" by Ian R. Macleod
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