

Chapel Arts Creative Writing Competition

Stars

I shot a man once. Dead. There in front of me. I killed a man. Under the stars.

Have you ever been scared? No really scared? My granddaughter used to say about some daft film "It was great, I was so scared". And as I started to open my mouth, my wife would give me that look. A look that sometimes prompted a fleeting thought that maybe Hans should have lived instead of me. That he'd have made a better job of his life than I had of mine.

I called him Hans. I started to dream about him almost immediately after it had happened. It was during the war and I'd been shot down that night. I knew I needed to shelter; to find safety. That meant leaving the cover of the sparse trees and scampering across the ravaged field to the burned out farm house. It had been such a beautiful night for flying; the moon was up and the stars were magical, sparkling. This will sound silly but it was almost as though the stars were singing and dancing in front of me as I flew that Lancaster. Crossing the channel I almost felt happy, that strangled feeling in my stomach nearly gone and for once I thought our sortie could go well. I might see daylight again.

I never told anybody. Not in the prisoner of war camp and once I was home, no one wanted to hear. "It must of been hard, lad", my old Dad said. And I agreed and that was that. I don't know what to think when they talk about, what's that thing, post-traumatic stress? Everybody seems to want to discuss their feelings nowadays. Still I suppose I've no room to talk.

I'm not sure when I started chatting to Hans. One day something shocking on the wireless made me say out loud "Well Hans what do you think of that?" It was usually big events that set me off: 1966 World Cup, the Cold War, a united Germany, 911, or even the news that Marks was to shut in the high street. And then when no one was around I'd chat and feel the release of sharing my thoughts with him.

My sleep was always pixilated with dreams of Hans. Once I dreamt we were about to take fire at each other but a butterfly fluttered by. In perfect English he said "It's a Viceroy". "No", I'd chided him "It's a Monarch" and he'd laughed and said delightedly "You're a lepidopterist too!" Then we put our guns down and sat on the grimy wooden floor and discussed butterflies. I wouldn't have minded but I know nothing about butterflies.

The only person I was ever tempted to tell what happened that night was my grandson, Max. I love that boy. He was never loveable not even as a child. His face was always contorted in a grimace and his acne is still fierce. A man now, but he's never really cracked what life is about. Years ago his mum sent him round to put in a light bulb. Talk about unwilling. He slunk in and

grunted, "Alright?". I'd put the bulb on the dressing table with the chair next to it. I reckoned it would take him five minutes and then he'd be free to go home. But once the light was back on he muttered (I had to ask him to repeat himself) "Have you still got that telescope upstairs?" "Mmm I have", (and I paused whilst I'd tried to work out what he was thinking), then I chanced it "I don't suppose you'll check it still works for me?" "Suppose so".

Would you believe it, we set it up and gazed into the sky together. After a while he muttered, "Got any custard creams?" "Son you're in luck, I have, hold on I'll get a cuppa to go with them." "Oh don't bother I'll go".

Off he gracelessly went. When he came back we sat in silence enjoying the cuppa and dunking our biscuits and I wanted to tell him. I'm not sure why. Just then I was closer to him than anyone else I've ever known. Then he said "I'm going for a piss", and the moment went.

How did I get on to that? I was telling you about that night.

I'd have given anything for the sky to cloud over. To give me cover. Who knew what was out there? My head felt full of cotton wool, I could feel a vein pounding in my neck, my pulse was startlingly fast and my heart fluttering. Under the star filled sky I edged towards the building. If I could get through the door that was hanging off its hinges, I'd thought that I might have a chance. My heart had come to life and pounded painfully as I dashed to the door. With my revolver in my hand I spun round the opening. The roof was missing and there he was, illuminated under the stars. We both stared at one another and then together instinctively raised our arms. Bang: bull's eye. And as he slumped wordlessly to the ground I felt a warm trickle down my legs...

Why am I telling you this now? I'm getting on, as my daughter keeps saying. Increasingly during the long nights when I gaze at the stars I wonder what awaits me. I've told her I want on my headstone: "At peace now under the stars". And I can only hope. Because you see Hans has never left me, so what is coming may be as much a release for him as it will be for me.

I shot a man once. Killed him, under the stars. But like the stars above he's always there, sometimes hidden, but always there. Waiting.