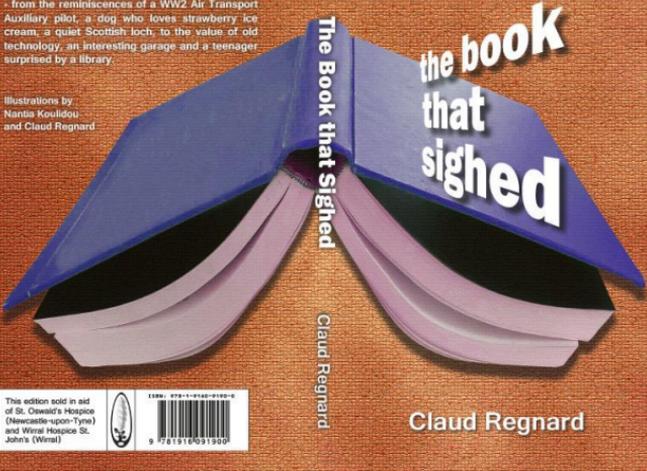


Six stories of hope transport you to different times
- from the reminiscences of a WW2 Air Transport
Auxiliary pilot, a dog who loves strawberry ice
cream, a quiet Scottish loch, to the value of old
technology, an interesting garage and a teenager
surprised by a library.

Illustrations by
Nanase Koullidou
and Claud Regnard

This edition sold in aid
of St. Oswald's Hospice
(Newcastle-upon-Tyne)
and Worsal Hospice St.
John's (Winst)



THE BOOK THAT SIGHED

CLAUD
REGNARD



WILLOW OAK

Copyright © 2020 Claud Regnard.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording on information storage and retrieval systems and any other electronic or mechanical means, without permission in writing from the publisher. The only exceptions are reviewers who may quote brief quotations in a review and non-commercial uses permitted by copyright law.

Names and characters are products of the author's imagination

ISBN (print) 978-1-9160919-0-0

First printed edition 2019

Illustrations for *Summer Soufflé*, *Even an Old Sun Is Warm*, and *On the Dot* by Nantia Koulidou.

Illustrations for *The Last Train*, *Borrowed Time*, *Midnight Bell* and *The Books That ...* by Claud Regnard

Book cover photo and design by Claud Regnard

Print edition printed in the UK by Beamreach Printing, 22 Pepper Street, Lymm, Cheshire, WA13 0JB.

www.beamreachuk.co.uk

All gross proceeds of the print edition went to help the work of St. Oswald's Hospice, Regent Avenue, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE3 1EE

and Wirral Hospice St. John's, Mount Road, Clatterbridge, Wirral, CH63 6JE

Published by WillowOak (logo © 2019 Reg no. 284 728 553)

WillowOakPiper@btinternet.com

About the author

Claud Regnard

Born in London of French parents, his first career ambition, aged five, was to be an astronaut. Two years later he changed his mind and decided to be a doctor. Despite that sensible choice and studying medicine in Scotland his subsequent career decisions were questionable. His first choice of surgery was based solely on his ability to rebuild the engine and gearbox on a Morris 1100. It was not his best career choice. Whilst training in general practice he came across a hospice but was advised that there was little to learn from such places. Consequently, four decades working in hospices and hospitals as a palliative care medicine consultant came as something of a surprise.



Now clinically retired he is proud to be an honorary consultant at St. Oswald's Hospice and to teach at Wirral Hospice St. John's, while maintaining interests in clinical decision making, implementing capacity legislation into clinical practice and identifying distress in individuals with severe communication difficulties. In between these interests and babysitting grandchildren he decided to

translate some thoughts into short stories, some based on his experiences in hospice.

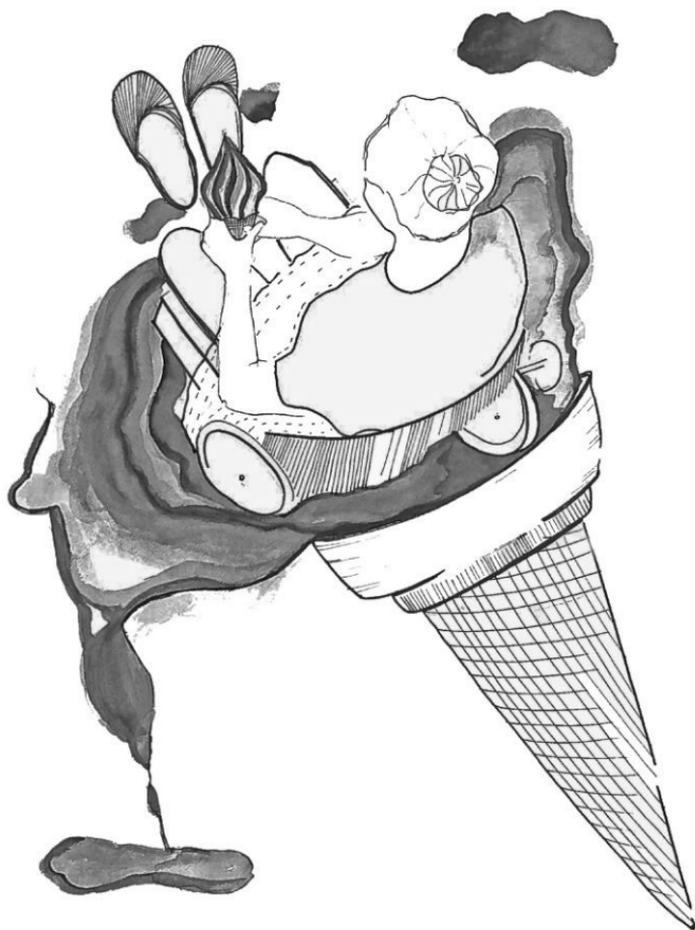
He continues to learn, which means that either there is a great deal more to life, hospice and palliative care than his advisors thought, or that Claud Regnard is a very slow learner.

All gross proceeds from the print edition went to help the work of St. Oswald's Hospice, Regent Avenue, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE3 1EE and Wirral Hospice St. John's, Mount Road, Clatterbridge, Wirral, CH63 6JE

When describing a hospice, many patients start with the comment, 'From the moment I came in...' That sense of a safe community is an inspiration and, together with the determination of skilled specialist teams to make a difference to the lives of individuals, it has transformed the lives of many generations. Today, hospice and palliative care teams are involved in the care of 200,000 individuals in the UK every year. Many patients return home from hospice to be cared for in the community.

Hope is the surprise awaiting those in hospice. For many, it is the beginning, not the end.

Please support your local hospice



SUMMER SOUFFLÉ

The beach huts sat hunched in the glare, pastel soldiers resolute in their resistance to the heat. Any weeds were gently browning under the sun or pockmarked white with weed killer. Only suitable plants were allowed here. Sam knew how they felt.

He sauntered past the bleached boxes like a lost sand grain drifting in a lazy breeze. He was in no hurry, keeping to the shadows, partly to keep cool but mainly to stay hidden. Not that many noticed a thin, bedraggled dog. A few children spotted him. Some pointed him out to adults, some were curious, a few threw whatever was to hand – sand, a sandwich or seashell. But by the time the adults looked, the child stared, or an object landed he was far way, leaving the viewer uncertain if they had seen anything at all.

His memory of being little was the warm, milky comfort of his mum. That memory was brief but intense. Some smells flashed him back to snuggling against her

fur. The feeling of warm peace would last him much of the day until the need for food became a priority. But once he had eaten and found somewhere safe, he would snooze and dream more memories.

He remembered being taken to the house of a retired farmer who once owned collies to herd the sheep. The farmer had always kept his dogs outside, whatever the season. Sam could see a red balloon of a face looking at him sternly and being taken to a cold kennel in his back garden. All Sam could do was howl for his mum, warmth, and company. Most evenings, neighbours at the bottom of the garden would call to him and he would sniff their hands shyly. He heard the neighbours' voices speaking to the farmer's wife, and soon after the farmer's wife brought Sam a cloth to sleep against. It helped a little but did not stop Sam's howls of loneliness, until he felt himself lifted inside by the farmer's wife. There he sat by the fire, where her large hands warmed his small heart. In time the farmer's face thawed to a smile and he allowed Sam to doze at his feet, curled against his woolly slippers.

Christmas passed chasing the wrapping paper and tinsel. It drifted into a New Year of cold fluff from the sky. Sam remembered his first walk through snow, starting with anxious creaking steps followed by

thrilling dives into comforting, cold silence. Any chill was matched by warm excitement, followed by the heat of the fire.

Those safe days slipped by too quickly. There came a time when the farmer took to his bed, but Sam still curled against the now empty slippers. The farmer's wife would sleep in a chair by the bed, occasionally reaching down to stroke Sam. Looking up, Sam saw her smile was warm, but her eyes were distant. When a crowd of new feet walked in accompanied by whispering and crying, Sam hid under the bed. The slippers disappeared from the house along with any warmth and kindness. After that he remembered only cold and fear.

The farmer's wife became too unwell to look after Sam and he was taken by a relative. Once again, he was in an outside kennel, but this time in a concrete yard. Winter still had its time to run and he experienced cold, hunger and beatings. There was no pattern to the punishments, no way to avoid them, especially when the man staggered in late at night with a bad smell about him. His face was always screwed up like the wrapping paper Sam used to chase, but with no warmth or colour. His hands were cold like his food, and his clothes smelt of decay. Sam had found an old slipper in the yard that

helped him remember better times. One evening the man was in an angry mood and reached in, found the slipper, and tried to pull it out. Sam bit down hard on the slipper, growling. The man yelled as Sam's teeth sank into his hand. The beating that evening made it hard for Sam to breathe or see through his swollen eye. In the morning, Sam found himself tied to the kennel by a rope that squeezed his neck when he pulled.

That cold, dank morning Sam wondered if he should rest, stop fighting and let go. It would be so easy. He would see his mum again and the kind balloon face of the farmer. But he had changed. There was anger in young Sam that refused to be subdued. He had noticed the man had begun to leave through the back gate to empty rubbish that smelt little different to the man. He had seen that his rope, like the man, was tired and rotten. Chewing through the rope gave him a purpose and eased his hunger for a while. He waited.

One dark evening, an exhausted sleep was interrupted by a clatter as the rubbish-smelling man came out carrying a large bag. The man staggered to the gate, rattled the latch open and stepped through. Sam crept silently out of the kennel and ran through the man's legs. He could hear the man swearing, shouting, and then falling, hitting something on the way down. Sam's

chest ached with bruised, weak muscles but he kept going. He never looked back. He hid in corners, taking food where he could, but finding little comfort. He learnt to keep away from people. In turn, they kept away from him, unsure what he might do or spread.

Jack preferred to shrink into the shade. The shadows hid his gaze, just like those passing hid theirs. The alcoves gave shelter from the weather but not from insults, so the dark provided an escape. He could not escape the memories that followed him into the darkest places but sometimes they shone a little light and warmth on his soul. As a child he had lived happily enough on his parents' farm. He worked hard, helping his father, crunching his way through dark mornings of frozen grass to collect the cows for milking or to help deliver lambs. It fascinated him to see those floppy wet bundles of legs wriggle into life, wobble upright and hungrily suck up their first milk. Occasionally a lamb was rejected, and Jack was given the task of feeding bottled milk to a hungry mouth on gangly woolly stilts. Afterwards it would stare at Jack's eyes and fall asleep like a child in a tightly knitted jumper. Those eyes did not question or judge. He missed that accepting face.

But those rare moments of solitude with sleepy lambs became distant memories. Too often he was met with accusations of laziness and lectures on honest work in the fields. To Jack, the truth was that his life had become mind numbing and bone chilling. His hatred for the cold and the dark blinded him to the end of winter. As the days lengthened, he resented wasting the light on mud and cows. He no longer saw acceptance in the lambs, but indifference. He had become a stranger to them and to himself. His mother sensed the change and it frightened her. His father just became angry. He saw the farm as a living creature that needed care, but Jack saw it as a monster that was draining their lives. The arguments became raw and painful. The last time Jack saw his parents, his mother was crying, and his red-faced father was shouting at him to get out.

He spent the next few weeks walking, sleeping in fields, catching lifts, and finding food where he could. Usually this was from bins outside cafes. Being chased away by angry cooks became a game that affirmed his freedom. At other times, trouble followed Jack like a delinquent twin, resulting in drunken fights. Like his life, he had no idea where he was going but kept heading halfway between the rising and setting sun. Before long, the land stopped and he was facing a sea,

lazing in a reddening sun. It brought warmth to his liberty but no escape from hunger and tiredness.

Jack walked down an embankment to an old abandoned railway station. Crunching over the broken glass of the waiting room he found a trap door that took him to a storeroom below. Here the day's sun had warmed the old bricks and protected him from a chilly sea breeze. The remaining rays of a rusty sun crept through an opening next to the railway track. He lay down amid the warm dust and dreamed of the times he had been to the seaside as a child on rare holidays with a neighbour's family. There had been a wonder in seeing the water glittering through screwed up eyes and intense pleasure at the ice cream strawberry sweetness slipping down his throat. Sleepy memories were a welcome salve for the soul that night.

Down by the beach huts, sizzled parents and frazzled children were gathering their sand-salted belongings. Sam watched from the shadows as a child was given an ice cream bribe. The odds of getting some slippery pink bliss were looking up. On cue, the child dropped his ice cream. While the crying child and arguing parents walked off, Sam's straggle of fur shot out of the shadows, grasped the cone in his jaws and disappeared,

leaving a trail of pale pink drops. Sam adored ice cream. It was worth being seen by humans just to taste that icy smooth, sweet liquid. Not that anyone ever followed him. Who would want a melting blob that had been scraped off the floor by a slobbering mouth? And yet something was chasing him now. He raced into the shadows behind the bins, but the shape followed. He pushed past the bins into the narrow dark between the beach huts, but the clutter of the bins was followed by scattering sounds nearby. Whatever was following him was no longer interested in ice cream which was now pink rivulets down his front legs. He froze. Near him something was starting to snuffle and growl.

Sam had had his share of meetings with fellow dogs. Some kept to themselves, some were unpleasantly friendly, some were desperate, but a few just hated everyone and everything. The sound and smell nearby was hate, hate that would finish him off faster than he could devour his ice cream. Sam dropped the melting mess and turned his head to look for a way out. The gap between two huts was blocked by a fallen plank, but this was angled up to the beach hut roofs. Slowly Sam started to climb the smooth wood. As he reached the top, he could smell the sun-heated bitumen and free air. It was then that he slipped.

His nails dug into the wood and made a sound that echoed between the huts. The snuffling stopped, but the growling got deeper. Sam scabbled the last inches onto the hut roof to meet a volley of angry barking. A set of dirty teeth jumped up and he stared into a pair of bloodshot eyes. Fortunately, the huts were too high for those teeth to get close. The only option was to run. Hut occupants ran out to see one dog scrambling across the roofs, with brief flashes of another leaping up the back walls like a demented kangaroo. In the distance Sam could see the last beach hut getting close. He was just ahead of the teeth and eyes. Beyond was the flat roof of the beach cafe. From the apex of the last beach hut, Sam leapt onto the roof and then onto the railway embankment. The angry sounds receded behind him.

Sam was exhausted. His anger at the wasted ice cream was tempered by the relief of escape. He sauntered slowly along the railway line, through the hazy tar smells of the sleepers. It was dusk now and the cooling rails swept around a corner in the cliffs. He was just thinking about finding a nook for the night when he heard a growl back down the track. Looking back was a familiar large shape with growling teeth. Sam started to run. Behind him, the large dog clattered stones against the rails with a clanging echo along the metal. The

ringing was getting closer and he could hear the rasping breaths. He was no longer sure if he was imagining the breath-stink or if it was just behind him. As the track curved ahead a platform came into view. His paws were being cut by the sharp stones and he had little breath left. Stopping meant death. The platform had no shelter, but next to the track was a dark opening. Sam leapt through.

Jack was jerked awake by angry barking and then hit by a bundle of fur that smelt of strawberry. He had no time to wonder about the smell as an angry head started to come through the opening. The head hesitated, unsure of the darkness and the unfamiliar smell. A large paw appeared and even in the dimming light Jack could see the bared teeth. Jack reached out and felt a half brick. A hollow echo bounced in the darkness as the brick hit the wall next to the opening. The growling head hesitated, puzzled by the direction of the threat. But the growl started again, and the head pushed further in. Jack picked up any rubble he could. It was mainly small stones and dust but this time he threw it at the head and kept picking and throwing. The eyes blinked with dust and the head jerked as each small stone hit. The final insult was its large paw being bitten by sharp teeth. The head pulled out whimpering and ran back down the

track, still puzzled why shadows that smelt of strawberry could be so dangerous.

It was dark now, with only a little moonlight creeping through the opening. Jack heard whimpering and could just make out an unfamiliar shape. Sam lay trembling in the corner. All his life Sam had known what was coming next, good or bad. For the first time he was unsure. He heard a rustle of paper followed by something landing near his nose. The thought that this was a bad aim was dispelled by the smell of meat and bread. Sam ate in gulps with greed, then pleasure. He lay down, licking the last remains and looked at his companion. He was difficult to make out, but Sam was surprised by the smile. In the shadow a hand reached out. Not the bad smell of the rubbish man but one of the streets and earth. Just like Sam. Exhaustion allowed the hand to touch him and gently stroke behind his ear. Sam tilted his head with pleasure. The strokes became less and were soon replaced by Jack's snoring, but the hand remained, warm and safe. Before long Sam joined in the snoring chorus.

As the early dawn painted watercolours on the wall, two pairs of eyes opened and glared at each other.

Memories of fearful escapes were slowly replaced by a shared relief that they had survived this far. Trust would take longer. It was safer to share wariness.

The first day was spent together but at a safe distance. They showed each other where they found food and hiding places. Jack's food was often cold greasy burgers that gave Sam's teeth an unpleasantly sticky coating. Sam's food choice was bone scraps that made Jack want to throw up. Sam's hiding places barely fitted Sam, let alone Jack with three layers of clothes. Jack's places of safety were too exposed for Sam unless he hid behind Jack. Neither was impressed by the other's choices. At the end of that first day, they each began to doubt this partnership would work.

It had started to rain heavily, and they took shelter in a doorway. People hurried by, gliding under umbrellas, as if a single drop of rain would ruin their lives. As the rain eased, however, Jack noticed people staring at him. He was not used to attention, but what he could not see was Sam behind him, peeking out at the dwindling rain.

Over the years Sam had cultivated a lost puppy look that sometimes brought dividends of food. On this occasion Sam was not even aware he was looking pathetic, but a few people noticed him and smiled. Before long, a small coin fell into Jack's lap, followed

by an offer of coffee and a sandwich. Jack had avoided begging. He had seen too many sink into a cycle of alcohol, drugs, cold and death. He had visited shelters on occasions but found them full of a sadness that eclipsed the kindness of those helping. However, begging with a small dog brought dividends of food and some money, even dog food. One couple walked past, and the woman turned back, reaching into her handbag, and silently handed Jack a £20 note. That would buy food for both. As they returned to the derelict station, Sam and Jack began to think there might be a benefit to this partnership after all.

Autumn had started to spread its misty softness, lit with occasional scarlet leaves drifting along a damp earth. Each sunset the beach huts were embarrassed by the brightly coloured leaves piled against them, as if being taunted that their time was ending. Some days a retreating sun brought a reminder of warmth, but the evenings drew in earlier and colder to make clear who was winning the race. Leaves would drift under the station platform, blown cold as a winter warning. Few people ventured out except those who thought cold air and exercise could delay old age. They were too

obsessed with their losing battle to worry about a bundle of clothes and fur in a doorway.

Jack and Sam went back to searching bins, despite having to prise them open on frosty mornings. Cold grease and bone bits were some comfort over the cold. Kitchen staff were less likely to chase Jack if they had snarling teeth at their backsides and Sam was too quick to be caught. One evening they were searching bins behind a care home. The kitchen door slammed open, and with the light streamed out three angry-looking cooks. Jack turned to run while Sam prepared to find the nearest backside when the three cooks pushed Jack aside and ran off. Looking back at the kitchen the light was flickering with dark smoke as the fire took hold.

Jack and Sam went to the front as staff evacuated residents to the raucous accompaniment of fire alarms. In the distance he could hear sirens. Sam barked and looked up. Following his gaze Jack saw an open window and a face shouting. Everyone was too busy helping and no-one had noticed. Jack told Sam to stay and ran into the house. The fire was taking hold in the kitchen and smoke was creeping rapidly along the ceiling of the hall. He ran up the stairs to be faced with a dozen doors. Disorientated, he was unsure which to try when he felt a tug on his trousers. Sam had ignored his

order and was pulling him to one door. In the room a woman was in a wheelchair at the window. She had covered her head with a blanket to avoid the smoke, but as Jack wheeled her out to the top of the stairs the smoke was rapidly getting closer to the ground. The only option was to bounce the wheelchair down, step by step. The smoke followed them down the steps. At the bottom Jack and the woman were coughing with the smoke and Jack was dizzy and blind with tears. The front door was shrouded in smoke, but Sam was below the smoke and pushed Jack from behind, towards the front door and clean air.

Outside, the woman was taken away by the firemen. Jack sat down on the steps as the fire was brought under control. Sam had followed the wheelchair and watched them give the woman a mask to breathe. Her hand dropped and found Sam. He looked up at a soot-covered face and a pair of smiling eyes that brought back memories of warmth and love. Jack saw the woman being lifted into the ambulance and saw recognition in her face.

Sam and Jack slipped silently back to their station sanctuary. The next morning, they had a visit to make, but that night Sam and Jack slept side by side, dreaming

of sleepy beach huts, cool ice cream and summer smiles.

Summer Soufflé

Sea sated smiles,
Silly sunhats,
Sagging seats

Sunny sautéed scenes
Salty scents,
Simmering sands

Suntanned swimmers,
Scarlet skin,
Screaming shorts
Soggy salmon sandwich,
Sandy sausage,
Sweet sun oil

Sleepy sails
Slowly sliding,
Scarcely sailing

Seeping shabbiness
Shimmying shadows
Sharing shelter

Scooped sandcastles,
Scrunched sculptures,
Scuttling shells

Scarcely serious
Summer soufflé

NOTES

Summer Soufflé

This was inspired by the following experiences:

- A collie puppy left outside by neighbours, a retired farmer and his wife. The puppy would howl all night, not reassured by having a blanket. Eventually they took the puppy in. The farmer died some months later.

- Homeless people (often young men) and the author's partner who always gives them money. The ones with dogs invariably have more money in their collection tins or hats. Jack and Sam are typical.

- The Dorset coast has many beach huts and some areas are quiet havens of summer, such as those at Friars Cliff where the author's parents lived. It was easy to imagine Sam escaping over the beach hut roofs.

- An abandoned railway station where the author would play as a child, often under the platform where an opening allowed him to place stones on the steel rail and watch them being crushed by a goods train. If only his parents knew....

- The story of a man meeting his long-lost brother on seeing a homeless man. Coincidences can happen.