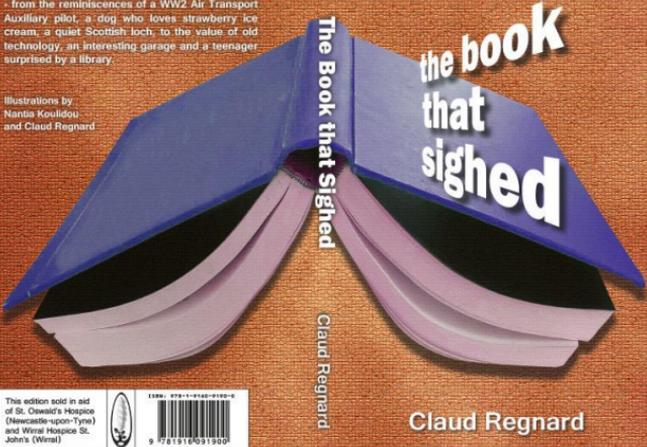


Six stories of hope transport you to different times
- from the reminiscences of a WW2 Air Transport
Auxiliary pilot, a dog who loves strawberry ice
cream, a quiet Scottish loch, to the value of old
technology, an interesting garage and a teenager
surprised by a library.

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

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MIDNIGHT BELL

William was not looking forward to the end of the year. After a year of lockdowns and restrictions during the viral pandemic, it seemed fitting to end this year with the ultimate festival of denial, New Year's Eve.

It was perplexing why an event that was on an eternal time-loop should be considered a celebration. Any disasters, failures or unhappiness in the previous year were invariably forgotten in an orgy of wishful thinking and dreaming that imagined the next year would be a journey to health, riches, and good fortune for all, or at least for the person doing the dreaming. Despite each year unfolding exactly like the one before, there was a lemming-like, headlong rush of collective amnesia just in time for the twelfth chime to ring out. Those who claimed it was a joyous occasion were sufficiently drunk to forget the reality, while those crying at the kerbside had finally realised the event was not the road to Nirvana the hype had promised.

William decided that the only option was to leave well before midnight and walk his dog. She was a lively

7-month old spaniel, raring to go with paws and legs that were still waiting for the rest of her body to catch up. He had pondered over a name until he realised that shouting 'Covid, come here' got him some satisfyingly suspicious looks, with the added benefit of extra social distancing that avoided talks about puppy training and dog biscuits. Through the gate and off the leash, Covid shot off into the Cambridgeshire fields to hunt new smells. They followed the Mill River, a pompous title for a trickling stream with ambitions well beyond its modest demeanour. Covid periodically leapt down the embankment to splash in the shallow water as she caught the scent of water voles. The snuffling, rustling, and splashing suddenly stopped.

He caught up to find Covid staring at some trees, behind which was RAF Bassingbourn. It was now an army training centre, but in the 1940's it was the base for the USAAF Strategic Air Command. Covid shot off. William was in no hurry as there was a well-maintained security fence around the site. He could hear Covid barking beyond the trees but as he came out all he could see was fog. He walked slowly over the grass, his outstretched hands expecting to meet the fence. Instead his feet stepped onto concrete.

Blurred lights shone in the distance accompanied by occasional shouts and a dropped spanner echoing its clang through the muffled mist. Covid had stopped barking and was having her ears ruffled by a grey-haired individual, one hand on a walking stick, the other being licked by Covid. He walked towards William with a beaming smile, holding out the hand that had been washed clean by Covid's tongue.

'Hi! Robert J Francis, just call me Chipper.' Ignoring William's raised eyebrow at the wet hand, he continued, 'Another fog lockdown. What do you limeys call them, soupers?'

'I think they used to call them pea-soupers,' said William, accepting the man's vigorous handshake.

'That's it! It was either that or chicken soup,' he said with a deep chuckle that made William smile.

'Hello, I'm William. This is Covid.'

Chipper knelt down beside a rapidly beating tail, 'Well, hello Covid, young girl. Great name.'

'Seemed appropriate after the lockdown.'

Chipper peered into the viscous fog, 'These lockdowns go on far too long. It's frustrating being unable to get out.'

'Tell me about it,' agreed William.

‘Sure, but there’s not much to say. We manage ok and make our own entertainment.’

‘I suppose you’re all in a social bubble,’ suggested William.

‘Certainly social, with unlimited bubble gum!’ laughed Chipper, slapping William on the back, much to Covid’s excitement. ‘Fancy a walk?’

The two men strolled along the concrete, Covid keeping them company in between rushing off to find rabbits. Chipper walked with a limp, his left foot dragging on the concrete accompanied by a faint metallic scrape from his walking cane. With each step his silver hair escaped from under his cap which lifted periodically to reveal sky blue eyes. His face was a paradox, with 90-year-old lines on a 20-year-old shaped face, as if an amateur actor had overdone the makeup. He had a permanent smile, like a young boy breathing in the sunny excitement of a warm beach.

As they walked, William noticed rubber tyre marks and large painted markings, ‘I didn’t realise the original runway was still here.’

‘It was extended to take the heavy B-17 Flying Fortress bombers,’ explained Chipper.

‘Just as well they’re not flying now,’ said William, ‘the noise must have been deafening.’

‘The engine roar from a bomber at take-off just about covers up the noise of your teeth chattering with the fear,’ said Chipper with a remembered shiver.

‘You flew in those?’

‘No, I was on B-26 Marauders, flying out of France and Belgium. I was a tail gunner; the last person to see the ground and the first to see the fighter planes coming to kill you. A close explosion once shattered the tail and left my legs dangling until we landed; it was difficult to suppress the urge to turn around and start pushing us home faster. Another time, shrapnel blew off my helmet- the message went up to the pilot that I’d had my head blown off. He nearly lost control when I turned up with my head in the right place. I told him I deserved a beer for keeping my head...’.

William smiled, ‘What brings you and your head here?’

‘I had friends stationed here and often visited to watch the B-17 beasts land and take off. If crews had to bail out or crash-land but survived, they came back here to walk the runway, to make the landing they had missed. It seemed a fitting way to complete my mission and remember companions. I do this every year at about this time.’

‘Why New Year’s Eve?’

‘Like many folks, I used to get drunk, join whatever party was going and pretend that the next year would be better. After 65 missions in a plane’s backside, you realise that the future is often no better, sometimes worse, and wholly unpredictable. I realised that valuing relationships past and present meant I could forget the future and be thankful for what I had.’

William kept nodding repeatedly.

‘You’re going to lose *your* head if you carry on like that,’ said Chipper with concerned, azure eyes.

William stopped nodding, ‘Sorry. I’ve got so tired of the pretence of New Year’s Eve fortune-telling that I’ve forgotten to be thankful for what I have.’

‘Yep, don’t regret that your whisky’s half gone, relish the taste of what’s just slipped down your throat.’

‘I might need some practice,’ pondered William wistfully. ‘There are a few relationships I’d rather forget.’

‘Yeah, some can be hurtful. I couldn’t see past the wall of forgiving them, until I realised I was trying to forgive the wrong person.’

‘Who was that?’

‘Me. I’d spent so much time being angry at them, that I’d ignored how angry I was at myself for being angry with them. I decided I deserved a break.’ Chipper’s

smiling eyes looked at William, 'Perhaps you need to give yourself some slack.

William swallowed, 'How long did it take you?'

'I was lucky. Knowing that tomorrow might be your last tends to rapidly sharpen your thoughts. It might take you a little longer, but you'll get there.'

'Any tricks?' asked William hopefully.

'Spend some time in the moment.' Chipper stopped in the silent cloud, looked up and stretched out his arms, 'Listen to the soft silence. Feel the delicate mist on your face, your feet on the ground, your breathing.'

'Does that help?'

'No idea,' admitted Chipper with a chuckle. 'But it's nice feeling.'

They were approaching brighter lights and the sound of music. As a curtain of fog lifted briefly, large shadows appeared and then disappeared as the fog returned.

'I don't want to keep you from the party,' said William.

'Oh, that'll go on till the early hours. Why don't I walk you back? It's easy to get lost out here.'

'Thank you,' said William.

The walk back was spent in quiet thought, each enjoying the other's company. Even Covid was padding silently next to them, wagging her tail, and looking up at each in turn. They reached the end of the concrete and Chipper stopped.

'Well, this is as far as I can go.'

'My house isn't far, you're welcome to share a drink,' offered William.

'Gee, that's very kind, sir, but I really need to be getting back. I'll stay until you're safely into the trees.'

William set out across the grass as the distant church clock started to ring the midnight chimes. He reached the edge of the trees and turned to wave goodbye as the last midnight bell rang out. Covid made a puzzled whine. In front of them was a secure fence and empty grassland beyond, clear of fog.

Back home, William poured himself a drink with a shaking hand. There are times when events fail to fit with reality. Covid snuggled into him on the sofa, equally unsure as to what had happened. They soon fell asleep. William dreamt of Chipper enjoying a drink with his pals, laughing, and reminiscing about the good times. Covid dreamt of large rabbits handing out bright orange carrot biscuits.

The next morning, William had breakfast and did an internet search for Robert J Francis. He found three sources. The first confirmed his remarkable story during the war, but the second two were a shock. A plaque near Gairloch in Scotland marked the site of a plane crash of airmen flying home to the US in 1945. The second was a grave at Madingly American military cemetery, no more than 10 miles from RAF Bassingbourne. Both listed staff sergeant Robert J Francis. He was 20 years old.

NOTES

- Robert J ‘Chipper’ Francis (ser no. 31309090) was born in 1924 in North Plymouth, Massachusetts. He was a tail gunner in B-26 Marauders with the 323rd Bomb Group. He flew a remarkable 65 missions after which he was allowed home on indefinite leave. This would normally have been by ship; however, the Pacific War meant the leave was shortened to one month and a Liberator plane became available for a quick return. They took off heading for Iceland and the US. Over Gairloch in Scotland the plane came down and all crew and passengers were killed.

- The remains of the plane can still be seen in the *Na Lochan Sgeireach* (Fairy Lochs) south east of Gairloch. He is listed as a passenger on the plaque marking the crash site. Chipper was 20 years old when he died.

- He is buried at the Cambridge American Cemetery at Madingly, 10 miles NNW of RAF Brassingbourne (grave number E-0-88).