

## Gramps – After the War

After the war Gramps found himself working with German engineers and aviators in his work as a test pilot on the captured German planes. One of the aeronautical engineers, Hans Ritter, became his friend. He came to Gramps' funeral. As we walked in for the start of the service in our usual frantically late fashion I noticed a man at the end of the back pew near the wall. He was neat and precise as he sat, still and certain on the wooden bench, eyes straight ahead, barely blinking. I was pretty sure it was Hans, though the hair was whiter than that of the yellowing man on the piano, smiling nervously out from the tarnished photo frame.

When I was younger I wondered how Gramps managed to work with the men who'd been his enemy, who'd been trying to kill him barely a few months before he started work on an abandoned German airbase. I guessed he'd just pushed it to the back of his mind and focused on the work. But if that had been the case he would just have done what was asked of him, then come home, relatively untouched by the experience. He didn't do that. He was actively admiring of his German "colleagues", Hans in particular.

'Never met a better boffin. We had some close but none as meticulous as him. Always felt safe with Hans on hand.' He guffawed. More than that they were friends. One day I asked him why.

'Why not?'

'Isn't that obvious?'

'Not really.'

'The War.'

'Oh that.' He dismissed six years of bloodshed with a shrug and picked up his newspaper, peering over his reading glasses as he perused the pages.

'Yes that. How did you?'

'How did I what?' His eyes were flashing now. He wasn't going to make this easy for me.

'You know, make friends with the enemy.'

'Hans wasn't the enemy.'

'He was German.'

'Yes and he still is.'

‘So, how could you?’

‘The war was over.’

‘But not for very long.’

‘I suppose not.’

‘So, how did you?’ Gramps huffed and looked at me over the top of his dropped newspaper.

‘You’re not going to give up, are you?’

‘No.’

‘All right then.’

He folded his paper neatly into four, leaving the cryptic crossword facing up, two clues filled in. He took off his reading glasses, placed them on top of the paper then clasped his fingers over his slight belly. I stood, listening to the clock tick away the seconds as he readied himself.

‘So?’ I asked impatiently.

‘How could I be friends with Hans, a man who would have been my sworn enemy only months before I met him?’

‘Yes.’

‘I liked him.’

‘That’s it?’

‘What else is there?’

‘Well, how did you forgive him?’

‘For what?’

‘Being on the...’

‘Wrong side?’

‘Yes, exactly.’

‘Nothing to forgive.’

‘But how...’

‘Let me ask you a question. When would it have been reasonable for me to be his friend? What would have been a decent interval? What is the statute of limitations on this? When can we let bygones be bygones?’ Gramps was becoming quite cross now. His face was reddening and his knuckles were white with tension.

‘I don’t know. I wasn’t there, but...’

‘No. You weren’t.’ He barked and stood up sharply, darting looks around the room. He began to pace, his hands behind his back, the back of one hand tapping against the

palm of the other. He huffed as he paced and turned, muttering to himself. I didn't know what to do. I wasn't sure if he would speak again. I didn't want to make him cross by asking another question and I didn't want to seem rude by trying to slip away. I was also intensely curious. I'd never seen him so rattled before and I was desperate to know what happened next.

The pacing stopped. Gramps was standing in front of the fireplace looking straight at me as I perched on the high backed chair opposite him.

'What am I?'

'Gramps.'

'Not who, what?'

'I'm sorry, I don't...?' Now I was flustered.

'What am I?'

'A man?'

'Yes. What kind of man?'

'A good one?'

'I hope so but that's not what I'm driving at. How would I describe myself?'

'An air man, a pilot.'

'Exactly. First and foremost I love aeroplanes. I love to fly. Hans loves aeroplanes too. He loves to make them fly. That's it.'

'But what about...?'

'Yes, yes, the damned war, sorry, the blessed war. Why was I on the right side and Hans the wrong? Why was I blessed and Hans damned?'

'You fought for the allies, for freedom from oppression.'

'Ah yes, and what did the Germans fight for?'

'Hitler. They wanted to rule the world.'

'And we didn't?'

'No, you wanted to save people from tyranny.'

'Are you sure about that? What about the British Empire? What about slavery?'

'I don't understand.'

'I'd love to be the hero you think I am but the truth is I fought for the allies because I am British and Hans for the Germans because he is German. Nothing more than an accident of geography.'

'But he could have..?'

'Deserted? Really? Are you proud to be British?'

‘Of course.’

‘Why?’

‘Well, we...’

‘There it is, “we”. You are proud to be British because you belong. Couldn’t Hans have been proud to be German?’

‘But they wanted...’

‘No “THEY” didn’t. Hitler did.’

‘But they voted for him. We voted for Churchill.’

‘Not exactly and he wasn’t perfect.’

‘At least we didn’t support fascists.’

‘Haven’t you heard of Oswald Mosley?’

‘Who?’

‘Look, I’m sorry. I’m sure from where you are it all looks simple, the Germans were bad, the British were good, but people and politics..’ He sighed, ‘It’s all just so much more complicated than that. Nan would know what to say to you. I’m not very good at all this.’

‘Did she know Hans?’

‘Yes, she knew him.’

‘How?’

‘He visited us with his family a few years after I returned from Germany.’ He made a show of looking at his pocket watch, clipping it open and snapping it shut. ‘Gosh time is marching on. We should be preparing dinner. Your mother would never forgive me if I didn’t feed you properly.’

‘Gramps, that’s rubbish and you know it. Why don’t you want to tell me?’

‘Because you’re too young and it’s too late.’

‘I’m not too young. I’m nearly as old as you were when you went to war. You’re just overreacting.’

‘Overreacting. Overreacting. Is such a thing possible?’ He threw his head back to face the ceiling, his hands raised to the heavens.

‘What happened?’ I was becoming annoyed now, frustrated at Gramps’ avoidance of my, quite reasonable, questions. I sat back in the chair, arms crossed and cross-legged, determined to find out the truth.

‘Fine, you win. I’ll tell you what happened but once I have finished you must never ask me any more questions about it, ever.’

‘But what if...’

‘No. I will tell you the story, my way. You listen quietly, then we leave it, I make dinner and we don’t speak about it again. Deal?’

‘Deal.’ I reluctantly agreed.

‘Very well.’ Gramps sat back into his chair and looked straight ahead.

‘You asked me why I was friends with Hans and that part is simple. I liked him, as I said. Not long after the War I was sent to Germany to look at some of the planes that had been captured. It was all part of us uncovering their technology, we did the same with the Italian and Japanese planes we captured.

I was sent to an airfield just outside Hamburg, a vast and open space, prone to mist, much like airfields here. This was more solitary than most, the people that bring a buzz to such a place, bring it to life, well, there weren’t many of them. I was sent alone to work with these two German boffins who remained.’

‘How did you talk to them?’

‘I thought I said no interruptions.’

‘Sorry.’ I pulled a pretend zipper across my mouth and locked it. Gramps smiled ruefully.

‘I speak, or at least I spoke, German. I’d been over there between the wars living in Berlin and studying. My German started like a rusty bicycle but with a bit of care and attention it ran as smoothly as it ever had.

The two Germans were Hans and Ralf. Ralf tended to keep himself to himself. He was older than Hans and I so didn’t really enjoy our daredevil stunts or the pranks we played to stave off the boredom and loneliness. Hans was the one who came up with me as I tested the limits of the planes, one was an Me 262, the first ever jet-powered fighter, while Ralf stayed on the ground and made all the calculations for the reports.

The airfield was a long way from anywhere so we were expected to sleep and live there, allowing the work to be done as quickly as possible. We’d all been in the war so didn’t expect featherbeds, but flat mattresses on a hangar floor in winter were still a bit below our hopes. At first we were colleagues, uneasy collaborators on a task, but Hans and I developed camaraderie. During the day we both loved to fly and were both curious to see what could be done with these magnificent beasts. We pushed them as far as we could, each egging the other on to take the equipment a little bit further. Hans once dared me to see how quickly I could rise to 13,000 ft, betting me I couldn’t beat the 30 seconds he claimed he’d seen before. Well, that was it. No one was going to beat me, especially not a German pilot. It was a matter of honour. I foolishly took us into a really steep climb and passed out on the

way up. I came to at 13,000ft and yelled at Hans to stop the clock but he was still out. He came round a little later and stopped the clock at 2 minutes. He refused to accept anything different as that was his observation. I railed and railed at him but he wouldn't budge. He was right, but I made sure I beat that record another time.

Later, at night, we'd huddle in the dark around a small fire, perched on upturned crates and cocooned in our respective regulation blankets, cradling tin mugs of tea, or possibly whiskey. We'd talk about our wives, our families, our hopes for the future now the war was over. Hans had a little girl, Hanna, she was two years old when the war ended. Nan was pregnant with your Dad when I'd been sent away. Hans had been away when Hanna was born and regretted not being there to see her first days. He made it his personal mission to make sure we finished our testing in time for me to be back with Nan.

After a few months my work was complete and I was due to leave, as was Hans. He was being released back to his family as thanks for his co operation. He invited me to stay with him while I waited for clearance to come home and I gratefully accepted, the thought of home-cooked meals and a proper bed was too beguiling to pass up.

Hans' home was simple and neat, his wife quietly efficient, his daughter ebullient and full of questions. After a couple of days I was exhausted by her energy but also entranced by her easy curiosity and lack of fear. Gelda, his wife, was much more wary. She kept watching me, stealing frantic glances while she prepared dinner or tidied toys away. She tried to keep Hanna away from me until she realised Hans and I truly were friends and my staying was not a ploy to catch them out in some way. The war may have been over but suspicion reigned on both sides.

During the time I stayed with them Gelda relaxed and warmed to me. At first she sat and listened to us telling our air stories and discussing the future of air travel now jet engines were changing the model once more, while she returned lost buttons and darned socks. After a few days she joined us and shared her experience of the war, scrabbling to find enough food for her and Hanna, worrying about where Hans was and whether she would ever see him again. I gained an insight into how difficult it was for those left behind. I'd been on a wild adventure, adrenaline fuelling my missions. The women and children had no such adventure, only fear, deprivation and worry; whether British or German.

After a week it was finally time for me to return home, just in time for Joe as it turned out, our Dad was born two days after I arrived. Gelda and Hans sent me on my way with fond farewells and Hanna presented me with a portrait. She was so proud as she gave it to me, she'd even written my name on it with a bit of help from her mother. She told me it was

me on my way to an aeroplane, because I liked aeroplanes didn't I, just like her Daddy? I replied, 'Yes, that's right.' She clasped her arms around my neck and said, 'and I like you, just like Daddy.'

When you've lost touch  
with who you are, how do you find...

The bright sunny Spring day was melting into evening. Both of us were so engrossed in the story that neither of us had moved to turn on a lamp. Gramps' eyes were glistening in the dimming light. At the time it was so inconceivable that he could be crying that it didn't even cross my mind.

'Once I returned home Hans and I continued to correspond by letter, continuing our friendship based on our shared love of Fokkers and family. I moved out of the navy and started to work for De Havilland, I have to say I much preferred working for a private company. I was tired of the military discipline and underlying threat of possible action as well as being grateful to put more distance between myself and the war, push it into my past.

A few years later, around the time of the coronation Hans and his family were coming to England and wrote in the hope of meeting us. I replied that of course we should meet and I would brook no talk about hotels or boarding houses, they must stay with us. I wish I'd told them to stay away, that they weren't welcome, maybe then...'

Gramps lowered his head and shook it, his hands over his face. I was still gripped, unable to move or speak lest he not finish the story. I had to know what is so difficult for him to tell me. I needed to understand. Gramps stood up and walked over to the cabinet behind me. He clicked on the floor lamp next to it, creating a puddle of warm orange light on the floor next to my armchair. He opened the top of the cabinet and took out a cut crystal glass. It had some flecks of dust in the bottom that he removed by blowing them and shaking the glass. He placed it carefully on the shelf, next to the silver filigree drinks tray. He carefully teased out a bottle of whiskey from the back of the silent sentries. A puff of dust escaped into the room as he twisted open the cap. He poured himself a finger depth of whiskey, picked up the glass and cradled it in his hands before raising it to salute an invisible visitor, clicking his heels together as he did so. He knocked back the glass of whisky and gasped as the hot liquid burnt his throat. He placed the glass back down and marched evenly back to his seat.

'It was June 1953. Germany was rebuilding itself, thanks in no small measure to the skills of Hans and its other engineers it was finding its way again. Britain had a difficult time just after the war as well but there was a tide of optimism brought by the prospect of a pretty new Queen and the promise of some good old-fashioned pomp and circumstance.

Hans, Gelda and Hanna arrived on a lovely spring day, warm and humid. We sat outside in the early evening, it was as if we hadn't spent a day apart. We knew each others' news but Hans had never met Nan or Joe and I was startled by the change in Hanna in what had been only a few short years. Hans and I were both a bit more comfortable, wider in the girth and less haunted by recent memories.

I'd spoken to my colleagues and had broad clearance for Hans to look around. A few were nervous about the "enemy" stealing our secrets, albeit they were secrets we had achieved by capturing the "enemy's" technology. Has was very excited to see the facilities at Hatfield and look around a DH 106 Comet, perhaps even recreate our initial meetings with a test flight. I did warn him I wouldn't be taking on any more crazy bets. Having Joe and being a father somewhat tempered my search for thrills. Hans joked that I'd gotten soft in my old age and didn't want to be embarrassed. Well, that was a red rag to a bull. By the time he'd finished I'd agreed a rematch of our original dare, hoping this time we'd both stay conscious for the experience.

Before that was a weekend of truly British celebrations. Bunting of the Union Flag had been draped over every wall, house, street sign and lamp post outdoors as well as over pictures, pianos and banisters inside. Nan and I had arranged to have most of the neighbours in the street over to our house in the morning to watch the coronation on our brand new television set. We had bought it a month or so before and had checked it was working before turning it off until the big day. Nan is a stickler for a sense of occasion, said it would lose its charm if we just treated it as part of the furniture straight away. So, there it had sat, sturdy and silent in the corner of our living room with a large chrysanthemum perched on top, while we continued to sit in the evening listening to the wireless.

Nan and Gelda bustled about washing up glasses and cups, making tea and pouring sherry. They buttered scones Gelda and Hanna had made the day before and cut up jam sandwiches for the children. I think they even did them in a Union flag pattern. There was a wonderful buzz of excitement in the house, everyone was dressed in their Sunday best. It was as if we had all been personally invited to the coronation.'

Gramps huffed and stood up, puffed with pride. He strode over to the fireplace, his military gait returning an echo of a more sombre and ceremonial era. He shook his head lightly and smiled before the sides of his mouth dipped again and a cloud drew across his bright piercing eyes. He looked old and tired to me for the first time. He steeled himself to continue. I wasn't sure I wanted to hear it now. I wanted to freeze my picture of them

smiling over sandwiches, Dad in his smart grey shorts just to the knee, his knitted vest over his short-sleeved shirt, his socks pulled cleanly up to meet his shorts, his shoes shining like glass, after Gramps showed him how to do it properly.

‘Nan looked radiant. Joe was a true credit. My home was the centre of the celebration and I couldn’t have been more honoured. I was also proud to show Hans and his family what a welcoming village we lived in, finally able to repay his generosity to me.

The service was breathtaking. No one spoke. Most people barely moved as we were enchanted by the piece of history unfolding in front of us. When it finished we sat in awed silence for a minute or two before someone coughed and excused themselves to go and help finish the street party preparations. Everyone filed out and we were left again. Nan and Gelda busied themselves tidying plates, cups and glasses then we spruced ourselves up and went out for the party.

The weather wasn’t brilliant but it didn’t matter, the street looked magnificent. A large table snaked down the main village street and the place crackled with good humour and high-spirits. Everyone wore their own crowns pulled out of crackers. Hans and his family were initially reluctant to come out of the house, fearing to upset the atmosphere by dredging up memories of the past.

‘We will just stay here. You enjoy the party.’

‘Come on, come outside.’

‘You have been very kind.’

‘But?’

‘We are German.’

‘So?’

‘The war.’ He whispered.

‘Is over.’ I asserted ‘Come on, what better way to prove it than this. Besides our new Queen has German heritage.’

‘I am not sure it is a good idea. We do not want to intrude.’

‘You are my guest. It will offend me greatly if you refuse to accept the hospitality of my homeland.’

‘I have no wish to offend you. If you are certain...’

‘Never been more certain, except about our bet.’ We laughed, breaking the tension, and then shuffled our families out into the crowd.

It was a magnificent day. At the end of the afternoon we all gathered on the green for a

few fireworks. I stood next to Nan, my arm around her shoulders, Joe stood in front of us holding a toy windmill that clacked and spun in the early evening breeze. And while we stood there wondering at the cracks and patterns in the sky; enjoying the explosion of peace and prosperity...?

Gramps crumpled over, his head in his hands. His body was shaking. I stood up and went to him, gingerly reaching out to his shrivelled shoulder. He caught my hand with his rough fingers, short and strong they tapped on the back of my hand. He let himself fall to his knees and lifted his torso, heavy with memory. There are droplets bulging in his blue eyes, refracting light from the lamp. He looked deep into mine,

‘A group of teenage boys heard Hanna talking, noticed her accent and started making fun of her..... then.....’

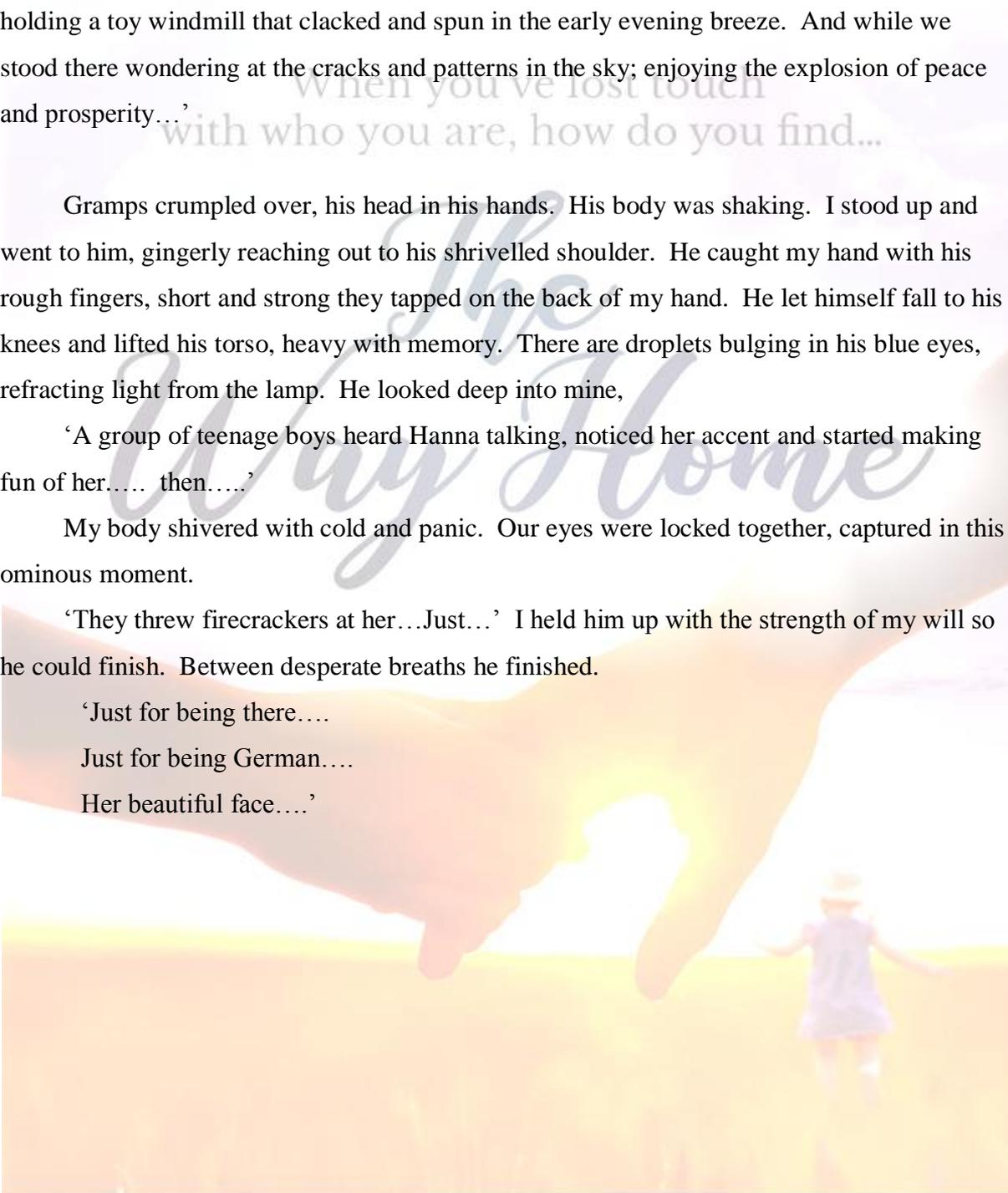
My body shivered with cold and panic. Our eyes were locked together, captured in this ominous moment.

‘They threw firecrackers at her...Just...’ I held him up with the strength of my will so he could finish. Between desperate breaths he finished.

‘Just for being there....

Just for being German....

Her beautiful face....’



Esther Wane