

THE 10TH CIRCLE OF HELL

3000 words

“Gee-gee, what is this?”

Anna, precocious, inquisitive, and still only five appeared as if by magic in the doorway of her great-grandad Bill’s living room, drawing the attention of the small group assembled for his birthday. Sitting in his tall-backed chair by the window, gazing out on the scatterings of snowdrops, Bill was distracted from the jollities, just for a moment.

“Where did you get that Anna?” her mother Jill asked, annoyed. “Have you been rummaging?”

“What’s rummaging?” the child asked, her face a beguiling mixture of mischievousness and childlike innocence.

“It’s okay Jill,” Gee-gee said. “It was lying out in the bedroom. I was looking at after the funeral and didn’t put it away. Bring it here please titch and I will tell you.” Anna brought the crinkly brownish-yellow piece of foolscap paper, folded too many times for its own health, ink blotched and fading in patches. Bill accepted the paper and invited Anna to sit on the arm of his chair, her usual perch.

“This is a Royal Navy form, my gunnery training record, from the war. Look at the date. 1942. It is very old.”

“As old as the Bible?” the girl asked, wide-eyed.

He chuckled.

“Almost my dear. I was but a lad really. This proves that I was qualified to fire big guns on ships.”

“What’s war gee-gee?”

Anna had reduced great grandad to something more manageable on small lips. Bill paused. The young ones always asked the big, unanswerable questions. What was war, really? Man’s folly? Hubris? Ambition? Mad desire? Justifiable response to unjustifiable threat? He had never asked himself that question, not even when he and his best friend Fleming had been on the train

heading for Loch Ewe to join a convoy, Russia bound. That was their posting, what else did they need to know? It had been for others to debate the logic of war, and of a fleet of ships heading into the gelid, bone chilling waters of the Arctic Circle delivering supplies to the Russians. Of his new ship he knew little beyond its name and task. Protect the transport ships, floating bombs which a single torpedo could turn into a starburst of flame.

“Gee-gee, are you asleep?”

Bill opened his eyes with a start, lost in the moment, a few days since Fleming’s funeral in Russia. Bill would have moved heaven and earth to be there, shoulder to shoulder with Fleming’s widow Valentina. Compared to his sea voyages the journey by air would have been but a hop and a step through Helsinki and St Petersburg, if only his old lungs had allowed. His daughters had not influenced him, but the thought of young Anna had. Fortunately, Anna hadn’t found the other form which stated, in faded fountain pen script, ‘admitted to hospital, pulmonary TB’ 1950 and on the 13th of June 1952 ‘physically Unfit for Naval Service’. After his experiences in the Arctic, he might have been glad of such a legacy of the war but following convoy duty his new ship had made for Alexandria in the Med for refit. The Navy became his life, or so he had thought.

He had spoken with Valentina over an internet link before and after the funeral – a good looking woman for her age still. Fleming, his best friend but an irascible, pugilistic bottle brush of a man, all wiry muscle and quick temper had been no Cornel Wilde that’s for sure. But he and Valentina had been as one since 1943 through all that war and peace could throw at them. He and Fleming had both been lucky with in love. Bill’s wife Helen appeared in the doorway, nodding surreptitiously to Anna. Ah, the secret birthday cake moment with a few candles multiplying up in tens to four score and nine.

“Off you go titch, great-grandma needs you. I’ll explain after the Well, just after, okay?”

Anna, party to the secret, bounded off the chair towards the kitchen. The adults followed leaving Bill alone to his thoughts. Eyes closing gently, he was transported from his living room to the cold, windy shores of the Highlands, gazing once more out into the loch where their JW convoy was assembling.

1943

“Here, drink.”

Bill was no lover of whisky, a sin for a Scotsman, especially when the offered drink was the real stuff, not the product of an illicit still in a crofter’s outhouse. Bill took a swig and girmed, not at the bite of the scotch but at the unexpected taste.

“Yanks call it Bourbon,” Fleming explained. He’d always had a talent for acquiring things did Fleming, since they were lads together on the Fife coast, working around their fathers’ fishing boats at whatever could earn a shilling. “Dae ye not like it?” Fleming was apt to take such a thing personally, regretting a single drop wasted.

Bill chuckled.

“Actually, I prefer this. There’s a sweet sourness to this – doesn’t burn the throat like Scotch. I could get a taste for this. May I?”

“Help yourself McConachie, it’s not to my taste but I will have it back. I’m a bit short on real Scotch. Days from now we’ll be dancing a Cossack dance with the Russians, so the Yanks were telling me.”

Bill glanced sideways at Fleming, astonished at his gullibility.

“Dancing? Do you think the Russians have time for dancing while they are fighting for their lives?”

Fleming took a swig, pondering. Then laughed.

“The Yanks were having me on, weren’t they? Ah well, no mind, we will see Russians, and I won’t be unhappy if we never see the Germans in their dive bombers and U- Boats.”

“That’s the point Fleming – you don’t see U Boats, not until it’s too late.”

Theirs would not be the first convoy, and stories were legion about the fate of convoy ships if the German Fokker four-engine spotters pin-pointed their positions. Operating out of their Norwegian bases they were a proper menace. Bill wasn’t the first to regret that the Germans hadn’t been stopped from over-running Norway. Too late now, done was done, and no-one could re-write history. The sooner they got their cargo to Murmansk or Archangel, Russian names if any were, the sooner they would be sailing home. In the Arctic winter they could expect rough, chilly seas and a proper smattering of ice floes to slow them down if they sailed too far north above Norway. The big destroyers could handle big waves better than the smaller ships, and the tankers were so low in the water with heavy cargo King Neptune himself would have a job tossing them around.

“It’ll be cold,” Bill said, as if it hadn’t occurred to Fleming who almost never wore a heavy woollen topcoat.

As youngsters on the fishing boats, they had become accustomed to the cold of the Firth of Forth in winter, their hands working chilled lines heavy with fish, gutting fish in buckets of ice on the journey back to harbour to sell the catch.

Fleming grinned.

“Och McConachie, don’t tell me you are worried about a few Germans, terrible weather, mountainous seas, freezing fog, raging storms, and drifting ice?”

“Don’t forget the frostbite, the gangrene, cold food and perpetual dampness will you Fleming? Especially don’t say you think we are going for a picnic, okay? You can be a reckless wee lunatic. They say two minutes max if you go into the water with oilskins and sodden duffel coat dragging you down. They won’t stop you know, to rescue you?”

“You think?” Fleming countered. “That matelot from Plymouth, Albert, came ashore on Monday, he was rescued from the sea, so he says. True, I think. The boy slid down the burning deck, into the fiery sea and there he froze to death, as stiff as a board can be.”

Bill chuckled despite himself. Fleming was an irreverent wee man, especially when he was trying to hide his true emotions.

“You’re a poet now Fleming? Didn’t know you could string two words together that didn’t include the words boxing, Whisky or dancing.”

“Not much else worth talking about is there? Really though, do you think Murmansk or Archangel has a Palais for dancing? Speaking of dancing, are you writing to Helen?”

“Might be? What’s it to you?”

“If you aren’t, I will be, that’s what.” It was a gauntlet thrown down onto the grassy slopes of the loch-side and Bill knew that to hesitate could be fatal.

“I am, okay?”

“Okay. Just don’t be lying to me. On those grey, frozen seas our lives will be the line. I don’t want to go to the great boxing ring in the sky thinking of Helen alone and miserable. She likes us both, but it is you she likes just a smidgeon more. I know that, and by the way when we get to the ice, watch my back.”

“You going to be watching mine?”

“Always pal. Count on it. Now, finish this and head down the hill. Those lassies on Signals are just dying to meet a handsome laddie like me.”

Bill clapped his friend heartily on the back, taking the Bourbon back.

“Deluded Fleming, that’s what you are. Deluded.”

3 weeks later

Faces ravaged by searing cold, fingers and toes kaleidoscoping through the palette from red to brown to purple and black, heartbeat racing, shivering hot despite the inhuman cold, men huddled in blankets, praying there would be no further wave of attacks. Bill and his fellow survivors silently cheered the news they were but a few miles out from Murmansk Fjord as if they were approaching the gates of Paradise itself but feared that sanctuary would be offered only to be cruelly snatched from them. One of the officers, who had placed solemn duty and his commission above Oxford University, spoke of the 10th circle of Hell they had navigated. Beyond Dante's 9 Circles, where betrayers of special relationships are frozen in a lake of ice, there was another Circle beyond, so he said, where mariners were doomed to mountainous seas, sleeting winds propelling deadly spears of ice, a prison of ice and endless torment from predators stalking. To Bill's surprise Fleming spoke up through chapped lips, sardonically commenting that the Germans, betrayers of their treaty with Stalin triggering Operation Barbarossa and the convoys surely ought to be imprisoned there. Bill marvelled that Fleming was watching the political situation as keenly as he watched lassies' skirts whirling in an eightsome reel.

Every waking terror had been realised, magnified one hundred times. Rolling swells became blue-grey cliffs to climb. Ice frozen thick and solid upon the decks and guns resisted back-breaking efforts to hack it loose, preventing a capsize. On deck even the garrulous Fleming understood the death that flew upon sleeting winds, wrapping his hands in layers of silk, wool, and sheepskin. Between watches, four hours on, four hours off, food was taken cold if at all and sleep, when sleep could be snatched on any firm surface was disturbed and offered no respite from the mounting tension. Foul weather dropped cruising speeds, with a concomitant increase in the threat from the U Boat pack, hunting, ambushing, relentless in the pursuit, as cunning as jackals in their strategy for claiming a kill. Day to day the sailors endured gale force winds which froze their marrow. No-one on board Bill's ship imagined they were in an ordinary field of conflict.

Then the torpedo hit. Spotters on the bridge saw the first torpedo trail and sounded the warning. Frantic manoeuvres caused the first torpedo to pass, mercifully, through the gap between ships. The second torpedo, from a second hunter alert to the anticipated evasive action, hit with an impact that shuddered the destroyer's plates from bow to stern. As the old girl listed drunkenly to port, young Rob, a Taysider, one year older than Bill, slid down the icy deck, greasy with oil and blood, into the sea burning fierce between the ice floes. A brief scream, a flash as his clothes ignited and Rob was gone. Shipmates became disorientated in the confusion of war, but there was little chance of escape. To enter the cocktail of ice, fire and freezing brine was a certain death, an oily slick only prolonging the death throes of men in the water. To stay on board was to risk quick death by cannon fire from overhead, or slow death by inferno or drowning below as the ship's broken carcass sank to the bottomless depths of the merciless Arctic Sea. Nonetheless the instinct to live ran strong in their veins and defying Death's siren song, shipmates tried to save themselves and friends. If that failed, to impotently watch them sink beneath the icy broiling seas. Bill and Fleming remained alive, framed in flame. Their ship had been fatally wounded but not yet split along its spine; for the moment they remained above water, watching the German planes strafe other ships and drop their remaining bombs.

“Bill, I can save you,” Tam had screamed. “Make an effort you lazy devil.”

“Oh aye? And who'll save you when you've saved me Fleming?” Bill screamed back through black, acrid smoke choking in his throat.

“Come on, she's moving. There's a lifeboat. We have to go into the sea.”

Bill dreaded this water, exponentially colder than the Firth of Forth in a lowland winter but saw Fleming's logic. The lifeboat was as close as it ever would be – immediately below a stray line hanging from a shattered mast. One chance only. With luck they would be in and out of the icy water before shock struck them. Fleming leapt first, grasping the rope, and swinging into the boat. Bill followed, and his feet dipped into the ice. Fleming grabbed his friend and pulled him

into the boat where a foot of water sloshed around their feet. Using the oars, they pushed away, collecting another dozen men as they put distance between themselves and the sinking carcass. The dive bombers broke off, billowing pungent smoke rendering the lifeboat near invisible. Fleming ushered the lifeboat beyond the foaming maelstrom, oblivious to direction, until miraculously, salvation shone its effulgent light upon them. A small plucky escort ship, spotting the bombers recede into blue sky, ignored the standing order to leave survivors, to rendezvous with the lifeboat, then full steam ahead past the icy refuge of Novaya Zemlya to Murmansk. The human cargo felt miserable and angry in their suffering from exposure and frost-bite but thankful to be alive. Ne'er again would Fleming tease the Signals girls; it was a radio signal that summoned a plane from the mainland to the island, bringing a Russian lady doctor and her female assistant. Foolishly some of the men who built fires ignored advice to rub snow on frost-bitten extremities and warmed their toes, inviting gangrene.

As the ship finally steamed into Kola Inlet, Bill saw the first green shoots of normality return. Amongst the death, despair, and pain Fleming's irrepressible, impertinent charm glowed around his lean frame. The Russian doctor's assistant shared his laughter and hands appeared to touch, a moment longer than necessary. Damn, but the wee boxer was incorrigible and indestructible.

2013

“Are you ready for your surprise?”

Bill opened his eyes to Helen's smiling face. Such a braw lass still.

“Oh heavens, was I asleep?”

“Naw, but I asked the girls to let you be with your thoughts. Thinking of Fleming, I know.

Bad memories?”

“Bad times Helen, but they were also good times, in that cosmic way Jill talks about Karma balancing out. Just look at our children and now the wee one. That’s a legacy worth going to hell and back for.”

She nodded.

“Bill, I’ve been thinking. Why don’t we invite Valentina to visit? She always wanted to see where Fleming was born and Loch Ewe. If she could handle convoy duty alongside the men, she is hale and hearty enough for nine hours in a plane. We can afford it.”

His eyes lit up.

“Oh my, that’s a grand thought. Aye, let’s do that.”

She kissed him, gently.

“Now look lively mister and be surprised when the cake appears. By the way, have you decided?”

“The Arctic Star?”

For heroism on duty. Too late for Fleming.

“I’m not a medals man” he said quietly, as if frightened of her reply. He certainly wasn’t a man for gaudy displays – nary a xmas jumper far less the clutch of medals to which he was entitled. Bill respected the poppy on his lapel and his white beret but that was his limit, so far.

“It would be easier,” he continued, “to tell you the one reason I would accept it rather than all the reasons I wouldn’t.”

“Go on, I am listening.

“For Fleming, and all the ship-mates who didn’t survive. Oh, I know their families can accept one for them, but that is why I would do it.”

“Sounds like a good enough reason to me Bill, yet I hear doubt in your voice. Hey, why don’t we combine it with Valentina coming over, if we can? She can collect Fleming’s medal. It will need some organising, but you can do that.”

“That is another fantastic idea. Goodness, how smart are you?”

“Don’t think I’m going to reply ‘smart enough to marry you’ or I’ll throw the cake at you.

Now, sit up straight, imagine the Admiral is coming aboard.”

“He was never as fearsome as the wee titch. Or you.”

“Indeed not, and never forget it sir. Churchill was right, they were the worst journeys in the world, but you and Fleming were brave and came back to us, still friends amazingly. Our years together have been just the best of years, wouldn’t you say?”

“Aye lass, that I would.”

Suddenly the lights went out and a tiny, strident voice called ‘action stations, here we come, close your eyes.’

Bill and Helen clutched hands.

Aye, the best years of their lives.