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Opening extract from

Bomber

Written by

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Published by

Bloomsbury Publishing PLC

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Bloomsbury Publishing, London, New Delhi, New York and Sydney

First published in Great Britain in May 2015 by Bloomsbury Publishing Plc
50 Bedford Square, London WC1B 3DP

www.bloomsbury.com

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 1 4088 5849 3



Typeset by RefineCatch Limited, Bungay, Suffolk
Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

CHAPTER 1

Kirkstead, East Anglia, England, August 17th, 1943

Harry Friedman had been in England less than half an hour when the bomb group he was joining returned to Kirkstead. That was the moment Harry realised volunteering for the air force would probably cost him his life.

The day had started well, and Harry and the crew of the *Macey May* had arrived at their new airbase in good spirits, despite the dreary weather that greeted them when their B-17 bomber descended through the clouds.

They had never made such a long flight before and seeing endless blue sea stretching below had fired Harry's imagination. It made him think of the early seafarers he'd read about at school and what they must have thought when they were all alone in a great ocean, with only the edge of the world to fall off. When they spotted Iceland looming in the distance, he felt like an excited kid. Their navigator, Warren Cain, had directed them all the way from Newfoundland safely across that great void and landed them exactly on time to refuel for the last leg of their journey.

Iceland had looked extraordinary from the air and it did on the ground too, like something from the time of the dinosaurs, all craggy black rock and steaming geysers. There were volcanoes there, but they seemed to be asleep when Harry's crew passed through. He couldn't believe all these things he was seeing. He thought about his friends back in Brooklyn, and all the tales he'd have to tell them when he got back.

The refuel took about an hour and a cold wind was blowing in from the north, so they had all been glad to get back on board the *Macey May* and set off southward towards Britain, although he'd heard the British weather could be pretty unfriendly too.

By the time the B-17 touched down at Kirkstead, Harry was desperate to get off the plane, stretch his legs, and get away from the deafening drone of those four Wright Cyclone engines. Yet, despite its duration, it had been an easy flight – ten thousand feet most of the way. No need for oxygen or cumbersome flying suits.

There was a frustrating twenty-minute wait on the runway, then Captain Bob Holberg's voice came over the interphone to tell them they had finally been given permission to proceed to their designated hardstand. Holberg parked the *Macey May* on the eastern edge of the newly built airbase, and that constant roar of engines ceased with a judder and a cough. The short silence that followed was pure bliss; now they could talk without shouting. One by one the crew wriggled out, either from the small rear exit or the hatch

beneath the cockpit. Here they were – replacement crew for the 488th Bombardment Group, 236 Bombardment Squadron.

Harry looked down the aircraft's great silver length from its tail to the nose, admiring its graceful curves, and told himself how lucky he was to fly in such a beautiful machine. It was supposed to be one of the safest planes in the United States Army Air Force – as safe as any plane could be that was built to fight in a war. The B-17 was bristling with thirteen powerful machine guns. Of the ten men aboard, everyone apart from the two pilots operated these guns. No wonder they called it the Flying Fortress.

It had been hot inside the B-17. Now Harry found himself shivering as a thin wind ruffled his curly black hair.

'Welcome to England, boys.' Holberg came over. 'You cold, Sergeant?' he said.

Harry nodded.

'If it's like this in August, just think what it'll be like in January!'

The crew looked glum, then tail gunner Jim Corrales said, 'Cheer up, fellas. We might all be dead by then.'

They laughed uneasily. Harry noticed Holberg giving Corrales a disapproving glance, but Harry didn't mind the tail gunner. He always made them laugh. It was good for 'morale' – a word Harry had never heard before he joined the USAAF. Someone back at the training camp canteen had told him it meant 'the will to keep on fighting when those around you are being killed by the truckload'.

Harry looked around the flat landscape. He was a city boy and had rarely left New York before he'd enlisted. Even though they'd just spent a gruelling few months training in the flatlands of Nebraska, he still wasn't used to an endless low horizon, where you could see for miles in all directions.

A jeep arrived at the hardstand to take them to their barracks. As they clambered aboard, Howard Bortz, the plane's bombardier, pulled Corrales from one of the back seats. 'Officers in the seats,' he said with a smile that didn't reach his eyes.

Corrales shrugged and clung to the side, like the other non-commissioned boys. All the gunners, and Clifford Skaggs on the radio, were sergeants.

The distant hum of aero-engines drifted over the airfield. 'They're back,' said the driver, a corporal with a strong Tennessee accent. 'We gotta wait here a while.'

They got off the jeep and stood scouring the eastern sky. Curtis Stearley, Holberg's co-pilot, passed around a packet of cigarettes. They all took one. It was a crew tradition after every flight.

Harry wasn't sure he liked Stearley. He was a tall Texan, with darkly handsome features, not unlike the Hollywood film star Clark Gable. Stearley cultivated the resemblance and had even grown a similar moustache. When the crew had gone out carousing, in a break from their long months in training, Harry had noticed girls seemed to fall for his easy charm. Harry smiled to himself. Maybe he was just jealous.

'Where they been?' Holberg asked the jeep driver.

The driver looked uncertain and Harry imagined he could almost see him thinking. Wasn't this classified information? The sort you weren't meant to discuss. But then, the bomb group had been there and dropped their bombs, so it couldn't be a secret any longer.

'Schweinfurt,' said the corporal. 'We heard it's been a rough one.'

The leading B-17 was now visible in the sky, getting bigger by the second. It made a perfect landing along the main runway and swiftly taxied over to the hardstands on the western edge. At once the air was full of noise and the acrid smell of aviation exhaust. B-17s continued to land in a steady procession and Harry could see some of them had been shot up pretty bad: a tail with struts beneath its metal fabric bare to the world; a feathered propeller and a blackened engine; a gaping hole in a fuselage.

One B-17 arrived trailing smoke from the outside right engine and fired a red flare as it approached the runway. Harry watched the smoking curve of the flare and instantly understood its meaning. There were badly injured men on board. It was the signal for ambulance crews to attend the stricken aircraft.

The B-17 touched down with a squeal of brakes, bouncing back into the air twice before it settled on to the ground and came to a halt at the very far end of the runway. Harry realised not one of his own crew had moved or spoken as the bomber made its descent. Now they were cheering.

Another bomber followed. This one too was trailing smoke from a left engine, but as it grew nearer they could see the inside right engine had also stopped. 'These things can land on one engine,' said Holberg, voicing everyone's concern, 'so he should be OK with two . . .'

He trailed off mid-sentence. This B-17 was now in its final approach and the landing gear had still not been lowered.

'Doesn't look good,' said Stearley, drawing hard on his cigarette.

Landing without wheels, flat on your belly, was just about the most dangerous way to come back to earth.

The bomber lurched unsteadily as it approached the main runway, the left wing dipping and almost touching the tarmac. Harry's eyes were drawn to the ball turret under the belly. He hoped the gunner had got out. The pilot tried to level off, but instead his plane tilted to the right side and the wing caught the ground. With an awful grinding of metal on concrete the Fortress lifted again, then landed hard, sliding down the runway almost sideways, sending up sparks. The right wing cracked between its two engines, and for a moment there was a spurt of aviation fuel, then a fireball so fierce they could feel it on their faces. The blazing bomber continued to hurtle along the runway at speed, getting nearer to the spot where their jeep was parked. Instinctively Harry and his companions started to sprint for the shelter of the trees that lined the eastern perimeter.

They heard another loud explosion and all dived to the ground. A few seconds later, debris of all shapes and sizes rained down around them. Harry looked back to see a great flaming pyre, maybe a hundred yards away. The heat was intense, and the crackle of the billowing orange and black flames almost drowned out the sirens of the approaching fire trucks.

The crew of the *Macey May* sat there on the concrete. Harry was glad no one else had tried to get up. He was sure his legs wouldn't carry him and he didn't want anyone else to know. He looked around at the *Macey May*. It seemed untouched by the explosion. That was good.

An ambulance arrived at the blazing wreckage just after the fire trucks. But the medics could see at once there was nothing for them to do. Ten lives had been lost in an instant. They returned to their little vehicle and sped off to another stricken aircraft. The firemen rapidly unrolled their fire hoses and began to spray the flaming wreck with bright white foam.

As the fire died down, the Tennessee corporal broke the horrified silence. 'Come on, boys, let's get you out to your barracks.'

The jeep was close to the fire, but not close enough to have sustained any damage. The crew of the *Macey May* picked their way through metal shards, coughing away the harsh stench of burning metal and fuel. As Harry approached the jeep he saw a tattered bundle of fabric lying on the tarmac. As he got nearer he realised it was the sleeve

of a leather flying suit with a thick padded glove at one end. The fabric was charred and it didn't take him long to realise there was a severed arm inside it. He looked at his own sleeve and his own glove and turned around to spew his guts over the runway. No one said anything. His friend John Hill, the Fortress's left waist gunner, turned away and was sick as well.

CHAPTER 2

The barracks were more primitive than the accommodation the crew had had at their training camp in Nebraska and the gunnery school Harry had been sent to in Tennessee before he'd joined the crew of the *Macey May*. There was a single pot-bellied stove at the far end of the corrugated iron Nissen hut and bunks for twenty men.

All the non-coms had been placed in the same hut, so he would be with Corrales, the waist gunners, Hill and Dalinsky, and Skaggs, the radio operator. The commissioned men – the officers – were all sharing in another hut.

The place smelt of damp, woodsmoke and sweat. Each man already resident had tried to personalise his own little corner. Harry's eyes popped open at the sight of some of the pin-ups they'd plastered on the wall. All of a sudden he felt a very long way from his cosy family apartment in Brooklyn. He could still smell the greasy smoke from the runway explosion on his hair and clothes and longed to get under a shower to wash away the horror of the afternoon. But Holberg had said they had ten minutes to unpack before they had to report their

arrival, then sit through a briefing on what awaited them.

They had several weeks of acclimatisation ahead of them – night flights, more training – before they would be considered combat-ready. Harry was grateful for that now. He had arrived over England feeling excited and ready to go. But that had vanished the second he saw that horrible yellow and black explosion – like an obscene rotting cauliflower. He realised then and there that Kirkstead might be the last place he would ever live, and his life might be over before he reached his eighteenth birthday.

For the first time he wondered if he had done the right thing in coming here. His buddies back in Brooklyn had been full of admiration when he'd told them he'd aced the air force induction interview and the recruiting officers hadn't batted an eyelid when he'd told them he was eighteen. He hadn't expected there'd be a problem. Harry had a stocky, muscular build. He spent most of his school vacations teaching local kids gymnastics and baseball. He had plenty of confidence too and people always assumed he was older than he was.

His parents were upset when he volunteered, but they knew there was no point trying to dissuade him. They'd all been hearing terrible things about what the Nazis were doing in the conquered territories. At first it was just rumours and the odd story in the newspapers. Then friends who had family in Germany, Poland and Czechoslovakia had told them letters had just stopped arriving. They were

a pretty secular family, not even minding if Harry dated gentiles, but they were still Jews. And what they heard filled them with a mounting sense of dread and revulsion.

Harry had talked to Bortz, the bombardier, about this. He was Jewish too, and he had heard the same horror stories, and volunteered for the same reasons. Harry had always imagined there would be a bond between them, but Bortz was an uptight guy, who kept himself to himself.

'Come on, Harry, our ride's here. We gotta go.' John Hill's voice jolted him away from Brooklyn and back to Kirkstead. Harry slipped off the last of his flying gear and ran out to the jeep, clutching precariously to the side as it sped down a mud track to the main airfield buildings.

The briefing hall was just as makeshift as their Nissen hut and a thin draught whistled around their ankles. The linoleum on the floor was new but already scuffed, as were the flimsy trestle tables and chairs. Other crews joined them and they quickly realised these were men like them – just arrived from the States as replacement crews for the four squadrons that made up the bomb group at Kirkstead.

Holberg was sitting just behind Harry and deep in conversation with another captain. 'Worst raid yet,' he heard the man say. 'This squadron alone has lost four planes.'

Holberg swore under his breath – something which shocked Harry. His captain was a pretty upright guy – churchgoer. He even had a couple of kids. He wasn't the

swearing type, but then four planes was a third of a squadron.

Someone else chipped in. '303 over in Molesworth lost nine.'

Harry was horrified. Nine out of twelve planes. That was a massacre.

'What was it? Did they say?' asked Holberg. 'Flak? Fighters? Don't suppose they know yet . . .'

The conversation was interrupted by the arrival of the bomb group commander and they all stood abruptly to attention. The commander was a trim-looking man in his middle years, with razor-sharp creases in his trousers. He took off his peaked cap to reveal a thin crop of grey hair and addressed them all sternly.

'At ease, gentlemen, welcome to England. My name is Colonel Laurence H. Kittering. You join us at a critical time. Today my bomb group have just returned from Schweinfurt. Our target was the ball-bearing factory there, and early reports suggest they did a good job, but we've taken a bit of a beating.'

Most of the hall had heard about the losses already and a low mutter passed through the assembled crews at this last comment. Kittering ignored this and carried on speaking.

'I want to tell you why it was worth it. If we can wipe out their ball-bearing production plants, then the war will end a lot sooner. Now you've all heard that nursery rhyme, *For want of a nail*?' He paused, searching their faces for acknowledgement.

The men stared at him blankly. He seemed mildly irritated by their reaction.

'*For want of a nail the Kingdom was lost*,' he said. 'Well, that's what ball bearings are these days. They're the nail. Everything with a motor – tanks, trucks, planes – they use them. Artillery uses them, machine guns use them. Bombs and shells use them.'

He paused again. 'You knock out that ball-bearing plant in Schweinfurt, and another one the Krauts have down in Regensburg, and we're halfway to winning the war.'

Kittering spent the rest of his talk outlining the drills and exercises the new crews would be doing before they were ready for combat. Then he told them he expected them to behave themselves and be courteous to the British.

'The Limeys have been at war for four years. So, yes, everything looks a little shabby. The food is lousy, and there isn't much of it. Their clothes are a bit worn. Everything needs a coat of paint. But I don't want any of you boasting about how much better everything is Stateside. They don't want to hear it and neither do I. These people held out against the Krauts after they conquered the rest of Europe and they deserve our respect. Now, any questions?'

Jim Corrales put his hand up. 'How do the Limeys take to being called "Limeys", sir?'

There was stifled sniggering throughout the room. Kittering eyed him with suspicion, weighing up what he had said and wondering if he should put him on a charge. Harry marvelled at Jim's straight face. There wasn't an iota

of mockery or insubordination in the way he had asked the question.

'They don't,' snapped the colonel. 'Next question.'

An officer stood up at the back of the room. 'Captain Wilbur Schwarz, sir. Is it true that this morning's raid on Schweinfurt cost twenty per cent of our mission aircraft? Can we expect subsequent missions to have a similar rate of attrition?'

The room erupted in concerned murmuring again, louder this time.

Colonel Kittering was not impressed. 'You'll all shut your mouths.' His voice cut across the hubbub and the room settled to a cowed silence. 'Rule number one at this airbase: you will not repeat idle gossip. Captain, you'll report to my office as soon as this meeting is over.'

There were no more questions after that. The men trooped out under the stern eye of the colonel, barely daring to speak. He saw Kittering grab Jim Corrales by the sleeve as he left the room and heard him say, 'One more crack like that in a briefing and I'll bust you down to private so fast you won't know your ass from a hole in the ground.'

Harry's crew all bunched together afterwards, outside the briefing hall. The day felt warmer and even held the promise of a beautiful late summer evening.

'Come on,' said Holberg. 'Let's go meet the ground crew.'

Sergeant Ernie Benik eyed the approaching new boys with trepidation. Most of them looked so young – kids fresh out

of school or college, with their cock-of-the-walk strut. At once he felt the weight of his years. He was in his early forties – probably an old man in their eyes.

His previous crew had lasted a single mission. The one before that had managed five operations before they were shot out of the sky. And that was after three of them had been killed in action on the fourth trip – the ball turret and tail gunner, and the radio operator, all caught in a lethal salvo from a German fighter.

Ernie made it his business to retrieve the bodies from the cramped interior and he shuddered when he remembered he'd had to finish that job with a hose. Cannon shells, especially, made a terrible mess of flesh and blood. The haunted faces of the survivors as they and the replacements boarded the plane for that fifth mission had convinced Ernie that he'd never see them again. If he'd been a betting man he would have put money on it. But that would have been callous. And Ernie was not callous.

Some of the other crew chiefs had told him you shouldn't get too close to your aviators. Ernie didn't share this view. The United States Army Air Force was his family. He'd never married and had no kids. So he made a fuss of all the new boys.

He made a quick tally in his mind. The crew of the *Macey May* would be the fourth he'd looked after since he arrived in the late winter of '42. It was a tough life, and that bastard Colonel Kittering wasn't going to be offering them

any kindness. So why shouldn't he? The flyers usually had a wake-up orderly to get them up on mission days. Ernie made it his personal job to rouse his flyers.

As the men approached, Ernie called to his boys over the roar of the generator truck that was recharging the bomber's on-board power supply. 'Hey, fellas, knock that thing off and come and meet the new crew!'

The generator ground to a halt and a fresh silence settled around them. It was easy to see who was in charge of this bunch, and Ernie stepped forward to shake Holberg's hand, turning swiftly to do the same with the other flyboys who had gathered around him.

He waited for the final two of his team of oil-stained mechanics to clamber down from engine number three, which had its cover off, exposing its cylinders, pumps and gears to the elements.

'Meet the team,' said Ernie. Each man nodded as Benik introduced them. 'Lenny, Hal, Ray, Ted, Woody, Frank, Vic . . .'

'They're good guys,' Benik said to Holberg. 'You can count on them. Never let me down yet.'

Holberg introduced the crew of the *Macey May*, finishing up with LaFitte.

'And this is Second Lieutenant Ray LaFitte, our flight engineer.'

Benik shook LaFitte's hand. 'How'd she run over the Atlantic?'

'No problem at all,' LaFitte said.

'We'll do our best to keep it that way.'

Formalities over, Ernie said, 'Well, you fellas will want to get your bearings. Why don't you go stroll around the perimeter. You'll still be back in time for chow.'

The crew of the *Macey May* left. When they were out of earshot, Lenny said, 'Poor suckers. Hope they last longer than the previous lot.'

Ernie, who towered over all seven of his men, cuffed him lightly over the head. 'Hey, no sourpuss talk here. Who says these guys aren't gonna make it to twenty-five missions.'

Harry's crew wandered right to the edge of the airfield perimeter before their captain spoke. 'Nice guy, isn't he?'

They all murmured in agreement. How would anyone not like Ernie Benik?

'Maybe this place isn't so bad after all,' Holberg said, waving his arm towards the field before them. It looked beautiful in the soft, early-evening light. Two horses were grazing in the pasture beyond the hedgerow, and the nearby village looked impossibly picturesque. A church spire stood silhouetted against the sky, and there was a manor house and several cottages that wouldn't have looked out of place on a chocolate box. It was a world away from the teeming streets of Brooklyn. Harry was wondering how soon he might get the chance to explore outside the airbase when John Hill brought him swiftly back to reality with a question for Holberg.

'Excuse me for asking, Captain, but that thing Captain Schwarz said – about losing one in five of the bombers today –'

Holberg cut him off.

'Schwarz had no business raising it like that. The colonel was right to chew him out. It might be true, it might not. And even if it is, maybe most of those guys got out before they crashed. I want you all to put it out of your minds. All we can do is train the best we can and make sure we're among those crews that always do come back.'

The church clock chimed seven. 'We got an hour before the mess closes,' said Holberg. 'It's been a long day. I suggest you all hit the hay as soon as you can. But tomorrow evening, if we can get a pass out, I want us all to go find one of those Limey pubs.'

Harry liked Bob Holberg. He was like a favourite teacher or uncle. Holberg had actually been a teacher before he'd joined up. English had been his subject and he'd taught in a prep school in Connecticut. He'd told them they only needed to salute him when other officers were around. Other captains were far more formal with their crew – and would only be addressed by their rank and surname.

Harry had been training with the crew of the *Macey May* for four months now, and most of them were great guys. He was looking forward to trying out the local beer with them and getting to know a bit more about this country. So far he hadn't even heard a Brit speaking.

* * *

They arrived at the mess at the same time as the non-coms from another Fortress. The boys from *Carolina Peach* introduced themselves. Like Harry's crew, they were from all corners of the United States.

They had arrived late that afternoon and they too had seen the still-smouldering remains of the B-17 on the main runway.

'Beautiful evening though, ain't it, boys?' said the shortest airman among them, obviously keen to change the subject.

'You're the ball turret gunner, right?' said Harry, and put out his hand.

'Damn right! Charlie Gifford.' He had a really firm grip, the sort that hurt your hand. 'Takes one to know one.' Gifford smiled. He was several years older than Harry and a striking man, with blond hair and blue eyes – the perfect Aryan, if you believed that garbage the Nazis spouted about the 'master race'.

'You a volunteer?' he asked Harry, and from the way he said it, Harry got the feeling he suspected he was underage.

Harry nodded.

'Recruiting officer must have forgot his glasses the day he interviewed you.'

Harry tensed, but Gifford winked. 'Don't worry, I ain't about to go tell the group commander.'

All ten of them sat round the same table and ate an unappealing stew and some kind of sponge, with a tasteless

white sauce with a skin like a plastic balloon and a lumpy, paste-like texture.

'I guess the USAAF isn't famous for its haute cuisine,' John Hill said. He had been training to be a chef in a New York hotel when he joined up.

'At least we ain't on the diet they got the Limeys on,' said Skaggs. 'I read they get one egg a week.'

Gifford was sitting next to Harry. 'This the posting you wanted?' he asked.

Harry shook his head. 'I was hoping to get some place out in the Pacific. See something different. Somewhere I'd never get the chance to see in civilian life.'

But Gifford scoffed. 'England's much better than some flyblow island in the Pacific, fighting the Japs.'

'Japs execute Allied pilots if they capture them,' chipped in another of the *Carolina Peach* boys.

Harry had heard about that too. A photo had been passed around in the mess hall at the training camp in Nebraska. There was a blindfolded Allied fighter pilot, kneeling down about to have his head chopped off by an officer with a samurai sword, while a crowd of Japanese soldiers looked on. Harry had felt a wave of nausea when he'd seen that. He couldn't imagine what it would feel like to be that young pilot, waiting for the fatal blow. Maybe England was better after all.

'Hey, Charlie, you see that doll on the *Yankee Doodle*?' called out another guy in his crew. 'She's buck naked, man!'

The *Macey May* had parked next to it when they had arrived. Their own nose illustration was more restrained. Corrales made the whole table laugh, telling the story of the *Macey May*'s nose art. Holberg had named his Fortress after his wife, and had been shocked to see the painting Stearley and Hill had done – a blonde girl with a Betty Grable hairdo, wearing nothing but a pair of red stilettos.

John Hill laughed. 'Captain made us put her in a red bathing suit when he saw it.'

After they'd eaten, the non-coms from the *Macey May* said a friendly farewell to the *Carolina Peach* boys and went for another stroll around their new home and watched the last of the sunset. It was magical, but it reminded Harry how fragile his link was to this beautiful world. He noticed Ralph Dalinsky cross himself and mouth a silent prayer and envied him. Harry didn't know what to think, but he found it hard to believe in a God looking over his creation if even half of what he'd heard about the Nazis was true.

It was almost dark when they returned to their hut. Jim Corrales turned on the light switch and they were shocked to see that half the room had been cleared out. All the cases and pin-ups and drying clothes that had been there this afternoon had gone. And the bunks had been stripped of their linen. The hut had been given a clean too and smelt of bleach.

'Sweet Jesus,' said Corrales. 'Those guys were standing here this morning, just like we are now. Then they flew to Schweinfurt and they're gone.'

'Maybe they moved to another hut?' said John. Everyone else just shook their heads.

It reminded Harry of the time he had spent in the Beth-El Hospital in Brooklyn with his elder brother, David, during the 1941 polio outbreak. His brother had been far sicker than him and was sent to another ward. When Harry went to see him the next morning, he found an empty bed laid out fresh and ready for the next patient. A sharp smell of bleach had hung in the air. Knowing at once that David was dead, Harry had fled in helpless tears. Every time he smelt it now it sent a shiver through his body.

They prepared for bed in silence, each man lost in his own thoughts. Harry stared at the bottom of the bunk above, wondering if he was ever going to get to sleep. He was too tired. And, he had worked it out, it was still only six o'clock in the evening over there in Brooklyn. He thought of his mom and dad. He had promised to write to them the minute he arrived in England, but he just wasn't in the mood. The day's events played out in his mind. It had been a real roller coaster. The joy of flying above the clouds. Relief when they had landed safely after such a long flight. The thrill of being in a strange new land. Horror at witnessing such a gruesome crash.

When Harry finally fell into a restless sleep his dreams were troubling. As a child he had read about the gods of ancient Greece and how they could cut the silver thread of life according to their whim and fancy. In his mind's eye he saw himself gliding like a bird through sunset clouds,

suspended from that silver thread. At once he felt in terrible danger and woke with a start. His chest felt heavy; his mouth was dry. Outside, dim light peeped through the flimsy curtains. It felt cold and damp in the hut and he shut his eyes tight, dreading what the next few days would bring.