

## *Copyrighted Material*

### *HAL*

Will I be conscious after the impact? Will my brain still function for a few moments even though I'm in bits? Don't think, drive. It'll soon be over. I drive carefully, I've hurt enough people. I imagine what I'll look like. Bone splintered into the frontal lobes, cerebral tissue oozing through the cracked skull, thoracic cavity agape, revealing the heart, convulsing like the wounded animal it is. Fibula and femurs stabbed through the flesh. I deserve it.

The sun was low. Low like in Africa, on that day of yet another catastrophic decision.

Francesca. Francesca the bold. Francesca the lost. Francesca the most beautiful thing I had ever seen. Francesca the greatest fuck. Francesca the greatest pain in the arse. Francesca, my only love. In another life.

That other life began in the mid sixties, with a lumbering Argosy, a military transport aircraft otherwise known as 'the whistling tit' because of its breast-shaped nose and twin tail boom which whistled, landing in lashing rain and a heavy crosswind. I admired the blokes who drove these winged elephants in often hair-raising conditions. The pilot of this one, like me, had seen service in Aden so knew what it was like to have his hair raised. He was a natural flier, sensing which way the aircraft was going to buck and starting the correction before it did. These were aircraft so different from the Kestrel, now known as the Harrier, the new jet fighter which I could make duck and dive in almost any situation and which, if I had to, I could land on the back of a truck. Not anymore. Would I miss it? The excitement, yes. The rest of it? Oh God. Oh God, how could I have done it?

I drove into Cambridge on the bike. It was hell on a night like this but that was part of the attraction. I went into the pub, I've forgotten its name, in Benet Street, across from Kings and there she was. A smile with the sun in it, sparkling eyes, the loveliest hair, and energy around her like a rainbow. You know who she is. You make her up. Blonde, brunette, big breasts, small breasts. If you're a man, she's all you ever dreamed of. If you're a woman, she's all you ever wanted to be – or perhaps all you ever dreamed of too – and who could blame you?

Our eyes bumped as I walked in. I took a half pint of ale and sat with my book away from the student crowd but my mind would n't settle to reading, it could n't tear itself away from her. What age was she, eighteen, nineteen? Out of bounds for a mad man of thirty six with a questionable past and no particular future. Anyway, I looked like hell, in a sodden old flying jacket and baggy pants stuck into boots, my hair sweaty from the helmet.

"Hello" And there she was. I stood.

"Hello" *She needs a light. She thinks I'm someone else.* She sat. I sat.

"What kind of bike do you have? I'm Francesca Trestrail, by the way."  
She offered her hand on a straight arm, her head to one side, smiling.  
"How do you do. Hal Sinclair. It's a Sunbeam."  
"A Sunbeam?" A chuckle. "Jesus wants me for a sunbeam."  
"Is that the best he can offer?"  
"Well, I didn't say I would do it. Jesus is probably boring, don't you think?"  
"I don't know, but actually I think he's dead."  
"Cripes! Should we send a card or something?"  
I snorted some beer down my nose.  
"Oh, sorry, I didn't mean to make you laugh at the wrong moment."  
"And 'Cripes? Did you really say Cripes?"  
"Yes. Would it have been funnier if I'd said 'Christ!', considering the context?"

That was it. A 'couple foudre'. I'd heard of it but I'd never believed in it. I had to get out of there. This wasn't in the plan. A plan? I had a plan? Whatever, it wasn't this

"Tell me about your bike."  
"It's a Sunbeam."  
"Yes, you said. Sweet."  
"I'd never really thought of her as sweet."  
"Oh, of course she's a girl. 'Sweet Sunbeam'. Are you good to her?"  
"Fairly, but I'll be even nicer to her now that I know her name."  
I took a final mouthful of my beer and rose.  
"Do you have to go?"  
"Yes."  
"You haven't finished your beer."  
"Sweet Sunbeam doesn't like it if I drink. It was a pleasure to meet you Francesca."  
"Someone waiting for you?"  
"No. Bye."  
"Oh." She froze for the blink of an eye then smiled brightly. "Okay bye."

I headed for the door but before going through it I had to look round. She was sitting with my beer-mug cupped in her hands, staring into it. She didn't look up.

Sunbeam was parked undercover in the square. The streets were deserted, my footsteps a forlorn sound in the dark and the deluge. *What an extraordinary, wonderful girl. But there had to be something amiss, her coming on to me so directly. Then maybe that's what teenagers are like now, how the hell would I know?*  
*But she felt so familiar...so familiar, as though I'd known her all my life.*

I climbed on and kicked the starter. As the engine fired I heard another noise. A voice? I looked in the mirror and saw Francesca running towards me, waving. I kicked into gear and moved off. I could see her waving and calling but I drove on. Better like this. Another glance in the mirror saw her standing, her arms down by her sides.. in the rain. *Oh.. hell... bloody..*

*Bigger!* I turned the bike around. What? You'd have been the big strong one and driven on, would you? Oh, sure. But then you didn't love her. I did. I loved her. Just like that.

"Sorry." Her fingers curled over her cuff, she lifted her sleeve and wiped a drip of rain off her nose. It made me giddy how much I wanted to hold her.

"Are you angry?" she said.

"Why should I be angry?"

"Because I came after you."

"It's not yet a capital offence."

"Then the defence rests."

"Are you reading law?"

"No, I'm getting wet."

I laughed and she smiled her gorgeous smile.

"I'm sorry. You can go if you like."

Fat chance and she knew it.

"Are you all right, Francesca?"

"Of course." Then, laying her fingers on the handlebars - "So this is Sweet Sunbeam."

"This is she. Isn't she beautiful? Though she's a bit wet at the moment."

"Like me. Yes, she's lovely. Can I buy you a coffee or something? Or, or not." She made a face as though she had committed a transgression.

"Are you hungry?"

"No, really."

"You are, aren't you? You're hungry."

She crinkled her nose. "Well, a bit."

"Will Italian do?"

"My favourite. I haven't got much money though."

"My treat."

"Really?" Her eyebrows shot up.

"Really."

She started to climb on the bike behind me.

"No, we can't go on the bike. You don't have a helmet."

"That's all right."

"No, it's too dangerous in the wet." The thought took me by surprise. I *liked* danger.

"You don't have to go fast."

"You don't have to be going fast on a bike to break your head. Anyway, it's only across the square. C'm on."

During the next hour and a half in an Italian restaurant, I learned, among other things, that she was reading French and Italian. I learned about Boccaccio, about Cesare Pavese and Italo Calvino, that she liked classical music, as did I, and that her parents were heading towards divorce but that they had never paid much attention to her anyway. She didn't tell me that. Perhaps she didn't even realise it. Her early years and school holidays were spent in East Africa where her father had been in the Diplomatic Service. I also learned that of course this wasn't a sexual attraction for her, she was too young. *I was too old*. She wanted a chum - or

the dad who never was one. She was just a precocious youngster who either didn't know or didn't care that she was living dangerously. And I loved her. What a shame.

She learned that I didn't go to university but to The Royal Air Force flying school at Cranwell and had, until today, flown jet fighters

"Until today?"

She could unexpectedly look very serious and concerned. For a brief moment it was as if she knew of the horror I'd recently experienced. My guts fell as the image again ripped into my mind, but mercifully she dispelled it with her next question.

"Is that the end of your whatever you call it, your national service?"

I smiled at her slender grasp of recent history.

"No, we don't have national service anymore. I was a career officer.

"Oh I hope you weren't cashiered or something. My uncle was"

"Really? Why?"

"He was caught doing it to the sergeant's wife. Apparently you're more likely to get away with fucking up than fucking down. He was a Major."

She said 'fucking'. Well, it was 'the sixties', we just didn't quite know it then.

"Yes, I suppose that's true. What does he do now?"

"He's at the Home Office."

"Doing the charladies?"

"Yes, I imagine so. So what happened to you?"

"Nothing so exciting. I quit."

"Really? Why?"

"I'd had enough, I suppose. It's time for a change."

"Did you ever have to drop bombs on people or shoot them down or anything?"

"No", I lied.

"Do they mind that you've left?"

"I'm sure that they're heartbroken"

"Well I would be."

What did she mean by that? *Nothing, fool. It was a joke.*

"So what will you do now?"

Smiling and shaking my head, "Oh God."

"Sorry I didn't mean to be nosy."

"No, no, you weren't. I was just laughing because I haven't a clue. No, that's silly. I have. I'll probably find another flying job somewhere."

I'd lied again. I did have another job, actually in East Africa, as a pilot to the flying doctor service, based in Nairobi. But I wasn't telling anyone because I was trying to escape.

Swilling the dregs of her espresso, Italian style, she asked - "Where do you live?"

"For the moment, on the station."

"The railway station?"

I smiled at another laugh to spare her from feeling silly.

"No, that's what we call the airfield, the airbase."

"Oh, sorry." she chuckled, "I was worried for a minute that you might be a train spotter or something."

The ridiculously large bill was paid and we left.

"Which college are you in?"

"Newnham. Do I seem like a Girton girl?"

"I don't know. How do you tell Girton girls from Newnham girls."

"They have more teeth."

"I'll walk you back."

The rain had stopped and the cloud had broken from nimbostratus to cumulus, allowing moonlight. We walked down King's Parade and crossed the Cam on Silver Street. As we were approaching Newnham,

"Would you like to see my room?"

This was asked with the bright, excited smile of a youngster proud of being a Cambridge student who wanted to show off her college billet. I got the impression that her parents had never been here.

"Do your parents bring you down at term time?"

"No, Hopkinson does. He's my father's driver – well general factotum really."

"I see. Yes, I'd love to see your room."

"Then follow me."

We cut off Sidgwick Street and headed around the back of the college.

"Francesca, where are we going?"

"We can't go through the porter's sledge. Chaps aren't allowed in at night."

"Oh no, wait a minute –"

"No, it's fine, really. There's a bent railing behind the lab. We can squeeze through."

"No, Francesca, this is bloody crazy. We'll be in the News of the World. 'Diplomat's daughter sent down in Cambridge scandal. Group Captain sought.'"

"No, silly, we all do it. If they cared all that much, they would have fixed the fence."

Why was I doing this? I had no sexual intentions so why take risks? I supposed because I knew that I would never see her again, therefore wanted to be with her a little longer.

We were in. As we walked along the path, hidden by trees and shrubs, she linked her arm to mine. So familiar. I'd known her forever.

"See? It was fine."

"Yes, but we're not in yet."

The next move was alarming and laughable. It resembled a commando assault. Our objective was Sidgwick, in the middle block. Francesca was legitimately in the grounds but I was an alien. When we broke cover from the trees, she would walk forward, check for the enemy, then beckon me. I would dash for the nearest cover. Fortunately there were lots of little hedges and bushes. By this means we reached the door, which, as Francesca knew, was locked.

"Now what?"

She raised an eyebrow and, holding my eyes with hers, brought her hands to her mouth – and made the sound of an owl. Oh God, how I loved her.

"What's the response," I asked, "A cuckoo?"

"At this time of night? Hardly."

The response came a few moments later when the crashbar was pushed and the door opened. We scuttled in.

"Thanks Jill. This is Hal."

We how'd 'ye do'd. Jill was holding a towel around her.

"Sorry. Are you with Tom?"

"Yes No, it's okay. Bye."

As she sped back along the corridor, the towel slipped and we were treated to her bottom.

"O ops!" said Francesca, "Rather nice, actually."

We climbed the stairs and tiptoe'd along the corridor to Room 224. It must have been one of the best rooms in college, small, in the eaves but with a beautiful window and little balcony. It was tidy, despite piles of books, photographs and posters on the walls - one of which read something like 'College girls do it standing up.' I didn't comment.

"This is lovely. I envy you being here."

"It's all right. It's a bit boring really. Well, no, it's not. That was silly, it's not boring at all, it's wonderful but you're not supposed to admit that. Would you like a coffee?"

"No thanks"

There was a picture of her by the Pitti Palace, on the hill overlooking Florence. She was sitting on a wall, a boy in front of her, her legs over his shoulders

"When were you in Florence?"

"I was there for the summer."

"Is that your boyfriend?"

"No. Well.. he was sort of my boyfriend there."

"I see." *A breath* "Francesca, it was a delight to meet you"

"Oh. Thank you. You too. And thank you for supper"

"A pleasure. Good luck. Enjoy your time here."

"Are you around tomorrow?"

Tomorrow. Was I around tomorrow? No, I was going up to London tomorrow. *Get out the door.*

Tomorrow? Yes I suppose so. Why? *Wimp!*

"Well, I just thought maybe we could go to a recital or something. I mean if you like."

"Yes, I like. What time?"

"They usually start about seven thirty"

"See you at seven, where I parked Sunbeam?"

"Great. I'll see you back to the outside world."

"No, I'll be fine. And if I'm caught I won't break under torture and reveal your name. Is there anyone here you don't like?"

"Yes, Margo Caldicott."

"Okay, I'll say I was with her. Good night Francesca."

"Good night, Hal."

It was the first time she'd said my name. I was surprised she'd even remembered it. Again she offered her straight arm, firm handshake and I left, praying that I would n't hear 'Oi, you there!' on my way across the gardens

I mounted Sweet Sunbeam. 'Sweet Sunbeam'. Once I had a motorcycle, now I had 'Sweet Sunbeam'. It was all I could do not to say hello.

Despite so many years in the RAF, it remained a thrill driving past the guard and under the red and white pole on to an aerodrome. World War II movies and David Niven were to blame for that. The reality of what I'd been doing these last few years did no longer fit the romance however, so these were my final two nights as a serving officer. Then off to London and real life, one I'd never known, having been sheltered by the Air Force – and Cadell's outfit.

Cadell. The voice which once caused my senses to thrill and tighten was now the voice which I'd read hearing, from which I was now running.

'Hello Hal, Cadell here. How about coffee tomorrow at about eleven at Robert's' This translated as 'Be in London tomorrow for a briefing at the safe house in the unlikely named 'Fifth Avenue', off the Harrow Road.' It didn't matter where I was, I'd have to be in London the following day.

Again, the nightmares. Not even the image of Francesca as I'd ropped off, could frustrate them.

The recital the following evening, was hysterical. A student piano trio. The piano and the cello were fine, but the girl who played the fiddle had wild hair, wild enthusiasm and a wild, anarchic notion of tonal accuracy. The first few clinkers we ignored, then during a presto passage when she accurately hit only one in every seven notes, I felt Francesca turn. I looked at her. She was smiling at me with her eyes crossed and we got the giggles – but well controlled, so as not to upset those around us who were surely deficient in either hearing or humour, or both. We suffered until the interval then scarpered.

"We could have omelette and salad in my room if you like?"

"Fine, if you can be bothered. Shall we get a bottle of wine?"

"Oh yes, shall we?"

Again we successfully ran the gauntlet through the gardens. There was something even about the way Francesca ate that was attractive, an enthusiasm, a concentration. I suppose she ate like an Italian. Again, the evening passed in easy conversation. A few probes, 'was I ever married?' Enthusiastic questions about my girlfriend which confirmed to me that this was, in her eyes, a platonic friendship – as it should be. I didn't have a girlfriend, well, not a steady one.

As I made signs of leaving, –

"You should stay some night and we could have breakfast in hall. It's lovely."

*'Stay some night?' She's so innocent, it doesn't occur to her that someone of my age might make a pass at her.* And I didn't – and me a hopeless cuntaholic. Cripes! A social kiss on the cheek and I drove home on Sweet Sunbeam. We felt virtuous, Sunbeam and I.

The next night, her knickers were off.

It was absolutely not my intention. Even though we had now spent three consecutive evenings in each other's company, I still refused to see it as anything other than platonic. As I moved to give her another social good night kiss, she slid inside my arm and offered her mouth. Well, Your Honour, I didn't want to seem rude, so....

I should n't joke, it wasn't one bit funny. It wasn't a amazing sex, either - then. She was very eager and energetic, probably to indicate how sexually experienced and emancipated she was. What was amazing was how I felt as I held her, how I felt knowing that she wanted me. She was so soft, so smooth and when she wasn't being energetic, so tender. And there was a fragrance from her upper lip which was, well.. it was a 'fuck me' smell. We fell asleep entwined.

And so dawned the day I became a civilian. The squadron lent me a Land Rover in which to move my modest goods to London. Some books, some clothes, hi fi, that was it. Until I left for Africa, I would stay with a chum, Harry, one of my crew when I flew Canberra in the early days. He, now a Captain of The Queen's Flight, lived with his wife Gwen and their children in a gigantic flat in Chiswick. Not too convenient for Northolt, where the Flight was based but Gwen taught painting for bugger all money at a local Arts Centre and couldn't bear to give it up. Quite right.

London was a mystery to me. Apart from a few days now and again and the briefings by Cadell I'd spent no time there and knew no one.

I didn't see Francesca for the next few days. When I did see her, I got my first warning sign. It was a Saturday afternoon. I was an hour late and there was no way to contact her. This time I entered at the porter's lodge and announced that I'd come to visit my niece.

The porter appeared almost to stand to attention.

"O h yes, Group Captain, you're expected."

What a devil Francesca was

"Thank you. You were in the service?"

"Yessir. 617 Squadron."

"Good lord, The Dambusters"

"That's it, sir."

"Delighted to meet you," I said, offering my hand. As he shook it, I felt a tap on my other arm.

"Hello."

It was Jill, who let us in at night.

"Have you come for Francesca?"

"Yes, I have."

"I'll show you up."

"Bye for now," to my new friend the porter.

Jill took me along an endless corridor to the staircase.

"Know where you are now?"

"Yes, thank you"

"Have a nice afternoon."

"Thank you" How long, I'm used, would it be before we were featured in the college mag.

Francesca was not alone, and the floor was covered in tiny pieces of tom paper.

"Hello, I'm so sorry I'm late."

"This is Meg."

"Hello Meg."

"Hello. I'd better get back. Nice to meet you. Bye Francesca."

"Bye." says Francesca, smiling.

"Bye." say I, also smiling. She left. Francesca picked up a book, plonked herself heavily into the arm chair and started reading. Or pretended to. I was astonished.

"What happened here?" Indicating the paper on the floor.

Without looking up - "Nothing."

"Nothing? What, no wedding?"

"What are you talking about?"

"The confetti on the floor."

"That's not confetti."

"No, I know that, so..."

She was chewing her lip. "I was angry, all right?"

"Looks like you still are."

"Yes, well..?"

"Because I was late?"

"So there was someone much more important than me."

*Get out now. This is bad news. If she's this unreasonable when she hardly knows you, what's it going to be like in a month? Just say "yes, much more important" and go.*

But I said -

"They were important. Two children."

Here eyes came up from pretending to read. She no longer looked aggressive, but defensive and frightened.

"You've got children?"

I remained friendly and reasoning -

"No not mine. Harry and Gwen's, the people I'm staying with. Harry was working and I agreed to stay with them until Gwen got back from her doctor. There was some drama in the surgery and she was kept waiting."

Francesca could n't just leave it but she was simmering down -

"Didn't she phone you or anything?"

"Yes, but I could n't very well say that I had to leave the children alone because I had a date. If you had a phone, I'd have phoned you, Francesca."

She rose and rushed at me, hugging me.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry. Please don't be angry. Of course you had to stay with the children."

I wasn't just angry, I was furious - and troubled.. The girl I so loved was damaged.

"It's all right. I'm not angry, Francesca."

Her mouth broke into a wide smile and she kissed all over my face. Then she pulled up her top exposing her breasts and pressing them against me. I wondered was it just me she wanted or would anyone do?

"I've made a pasta sauce, is that all right?"

"Very all right. Thank you. How was today?"

It was okay. I had an Italian tutorial. I think he's a bit of a lech."

"You mean like me?"

"Yes, just like you except I don't fancy him. You're a nice lech."

*A vision of my tombstone 'HALSINCLAIR, A NICE LECH'.*

She's unbuttoning my shirt and rubbing her breasts against my chest.

"Some of the students let him fuck them."

"No, really?"

"Yes, a lot of the tutors do it."

"Do the girls do it for higher marks or just for the kudos of pulling the prof?"

"Both, probably. You know, until recently, if you had a male visitor in your room, the bed had to be moved into the corridor."

"What, they were so academic that they didn't know you could use the floor? Have you ever done it?"

"Not here, no."

"Not here?" I laugh. "So where?"

"At school."

"No."

"Yes."

"You did it with a teacher?"

"Yes, the Frenchmaster."

"My God! Did you want him to?"

Herbrow furrowed - "Of course. I wouldn't have let him if I hadn't."

"Where did you do it?"

"In the chemistry lab. On the floor, naturally."

"How old were you?"

"Fourteen."

My expectation was to be in Nairobi within a few weeks of leaving the RAF but the pilot I was going to replace had stayed on because the job he was moving to had fallen through. It was like being caught in a property chain.

I had to get out of Harry's flat. Apart from imposing upon them, I could easily have been found by Cadell if he'd needed me.

Harry had been ribbing me about where I was going on the nights when I went to Cambridge so I told him. He said that I was a lucky bastard and that I should feel free to bring her to London for the occasional week-end, so I did. Francesca was sweetly delighted to be included. Harry and Gwen liked her on sight. She was wonderful with the children. She was always wonderful with children, she didn't ever consider them a nuisance, she gave them her full attention and they loved her. I remembered the night of the tom paper and how her anger had dissipated when I mentioned the children. Anyway, the evening was a great success then.. there was a problem.

When we got into the bedroom, her mood changed. From being good company all evening, with everyone obviously liking her, the moment we were alone she fell silent. We'd had a few 'scenes' over the last weeks so I recognised when one was coming. Sometimes, in fact usually, I knew what it was going to be about and could avert it, but there were occasions when it seemed that she needed to expel her rage, and then there was nothing that you or I or

the Great Psychotic in the Sky could do about it. I tried but this time I had no idea what it was about.

"You're a hit, Francesca, everyone instantly liked you."

"Not everyone."

"Well, no, I don't like you because you've got buck teeth and a moustache."

She didn't laugh.

"Are you fucking her?"

I could never have guessed that this would be it -

"You know me fairly well now Francesca, so do you honestly think that?"

"She wants you to fuck her."

"Is this women's intuition?"

"She didn't take her eyes off you all evening."

"You know, when I was in the kitchen with Gwen, she said of you 'she never takes her eyes off you'. Now, if you were watching me all evening, how could you have seen that she was watching me all evening?"

"Oh, you're so clever, aren't you?" She pulled her shoes off and threw them on the floor. I let rip -

"Yes, and so are you Francesca -" her eyes flared in alarm for an instant at my raised voice but it had to be said - "so why don't you engage your fine mind and understand that even if Gwen did want me to fuck her - and people are entitled to want, perhaps not always to get, but certainly to want - that's no reason to take it out on me. And since there's no chance that I am going to fuck her, why don't you feel a little sisterly sympathy instead of upsetting yourself over nothing. Now will you please get on your knees, take your knickers down and lean your elbows on the bed so that I can fuck you."

She did and I did, though we didn't stay that way for long. Well, love making needs eyes, doesn't it? We fell asleep at peace.

My happiness though, was adumbrated by the knowledge that one of my generation had no right to Francesca, that she had been only lent to me and that it was incumbent upon me to give her back, re-attach her to her true life and watch it spin her away, knowing that I would never love or know her like again.

Francesca didn't see the age difference as a problem. She would when I was nearly fifty and she was thirty. Still hungry for everything and realising how many of her child-bearing years she had wasted on me. It had to end - soon, before she became too dependant and it hurt her more. That was why I didn't ever tell her that I loved her.

I had to find something to do until I went to Nairobi. What I knew best, obviously, was flying. I could have been contracted back to the RAF as an instructor, but then Cadell would easily have found me, so I phoned round the flight schools looking for a post. The only one available was in Scotland. Well, that would precipitate the break with Francesca.

Telling her was awful. This was her greatest fear, being abandoned. We were in bed, in Cambridge. She didn't rage, or protest. There was a long silence then she said,

"But I love you, didn't you know that?"

And she turned her back and curled into a ball. I tried to hold her but she pulled away.

"No, it's all right" she said.

The next week was grim. I went to Cambridge a couple of times, but each time I regretted it. It was too sore. Francesca wasn't unpleasant, just distant. On the second visit, her bed was unmade and the room had an odd odour. Sex. The smell of sex. There was a tingling at the sides of my throat and a rush of saliva as though I was going to vomit. I said nothing, it wasn't my right. I couldn't tell her that all I wanted was her, that there could be nothing in my life, now or ever, as important or beautiful in every way, as she.