

A WING AND A PRAYER

By Sandra Dempsey

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TIME: 1943

PLACE: Allied Air Base, Limerick, Ireland

CHARACTER: Royal Canadian Air Force (R.C.A.F.) Flying Officer Hamish Horgan

(Officer Horgan is dressed smartly in his R.C.A.F. uniform. The left side of his face is badly disfigured from a severe burn; the skin from his forehead to his neck is unnatural and shiny and very tight. His mouth is pulled tightly to the left so that he must speak out of the right side only. He has no eyebrows and his burned left ear is shrivelled and unnatural. He wears his officer's cap cocked to the left and down on his eyes to try to hide his disfigurement. He has a duffle bag full of his kit on the floor)

OFFICER HORGAN

I guess maybe I was one of the first to lose my eyebrows, if not my nerve, to a spray of liquid fuel fire and shattered Perspex. And I was definitely one of the first featurelessfortunates the R.C.A.F. shipped off to religion-rich Ireland – so's my melted face wouldn't injure the morale of those still flying. It was a harsh punishment, sure enough.

(mimes casting a fishing line) But I soon developed a keen interest in the solitary pastime of fishing, and the salmon were plentiful.

As for any sort of personal religion, well, I had been raised to believe I was Protestant. A lapsed, definitely non-practicing Protestant, but a Protestant all the same. But when I arrived here in the new Republic of the south, I discovered it just wasn't possible for a *Horgan* from Killarney to be anything but *Catholic*. So I had unwittingly become my own Irish-isms: *(mimics an Irish accent)* "He went to Ireland a Protestant and was coming home a Catholic."

I was, to say the least, *confused*. Fortunately, the war's drained every last drop of faith from my soul, so the confusion isn't really not an issue. I mean, how could God permit such relentless suffering and

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carnage in all corners of the world?

Anyway, it turned out this Limerick posting was somewhat less than completely useless because, of course, it's the main base for all the Allied flying boats – in fact, it's the first point of land for all trans-Atlantic flights. And there's nothing I love better than watching those big ugly, ungainly, Yank PBV Cats thumping down onto the water like arse-heavy constipated geese.

I guess eventually I started to get used to the stares and whispers of the few civilians I didn't manage to escape, and I was probably staring right back at them wondering how they could remain *neutral* in the middle of all hell breaking loose all around them. But what I never could stand was the children - hoards of them - grimy, little Irish guttersnipes, as filthy and infested as they were desperately poor – and one little devil in particular, who apparently could find no greater entertainment than to trail everywhere after the resident melted flyer with the hairless face and potato-chip ear. He was everywhere, and I lay awake every night with his vicious tauntings echoing in my patched up head.

When finally I got news of my seven-day to London, I was elated. Not that I was looking forward to horrifying a different audience with my presence, but that I could visit and stay with an irreligious rogue aunt who wasn't particular about appearances. And typical R.C.A.F., my release got mislaid and only found at the last minute - so very last minute, that I almost missed my flight - **(mimics an Irish accent)** And sure, that wouldn't have been a good thing in any religion.

(as HE describes them, HE mimes his actions throughout) So I grabbed a duff full of personals, **(picks up his duffle bag)** dirty laundry mixed in with the clean stuff, and raced off to the flightline. **(looks back and forth for his aeroplane)** I flinched when I saw the only kite doing a run-up was a decrepit, war-weary Lysander. I mean, I remember us back on the prairies, at Elementary Flight Training, roaring with laughter as we watched these remarkably inept old gals drifting *backward* over the airfield as they flew slowly into a headwind! But a kite's a kite, and I'd take a *Crout Junkers 88*, just so long as it got me back to London.

(makes his way to the aeroplane, shouting against the noise of the engine) The Erk mouthed some unhearable words to me, and I nod like I understand and I clamber into the aft cockpit. 'Not the QE on wings, but not bad, and pretty roomy considering. I was starting to look forward to my first date with this old *Lizzie*.

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