The Beating of Angels' Wings

By Ann Forbes Cooper

Sitting inside the crematorium with the school motto, "By Courtesy and Learning" emblazoned on my beret's northern horizon, I wondered what it was like to be dead. I shut my eyes to imagine and zillions of zooming fireflies exploded into black eternity.

When I opened them, the wreath-covered coffin was slowly gliding out of view behind burgundy velvet curtains. As my stomach hit the back of my throat that morning's Frosties almost made it into the aisle, and an unseen organ whined into a hymn and we rose to our feet. From the end of the row the headmistress's contralto wavered that the lord was her shepherd, and she'd not want. Marnie Baxter and Doreen Dunnett warbled by my side.

It was not my first death. I considered myself an old hand. People dropped like bowling balls around me. Grandpa Cummings had died of bronchitis, six years earlier. Dad had a heart attack when I was three, and cancer claimed Uncle Bob a while ago. But this was different. They were old. Lizzie was 16.

Lizzie was my best friend. So she said. Lizzie and I hadn't always been friends. In fact, we couldn't stand each other at first. Lizzie was the sort of girl that stood out in a crowd, in clothes that acted as an early warning system. When everyone else's weekend uniform was ski pants and anoraks, Lizzie turned up in her mod lime green and navy striped trouser suit and red Stetson hat. When everyone else's face was pinched and red from the Scottish weather, Lizzie's was blistered and orange, meant to imply a fortnight in Majorca, instead of four hours under her parent's sun-ray lamp.

Lizzie was rich, and I was poor. Her father owned a tyre company; mine was dead. Her mother was a model; mine worked in Auntie Jeanie's Army & Navy Surplus shop. She lived in a granite castle in a posh suburb; I lived in a brick council house in an estate. At school, she was in B; I was in F. B meant maths and science; F, English and home management. In B, girls went to university, or teachers training college; in F, they got pregnant or became secretaries. Then, one day everything changed when we both accidentally walked down the road together after school. We turned a corner and there

they lay, as if in wait, Marnie Baxter and Doreen Dunnet, former friends turned arch enemies and united against us.

"Coooeeeee, Ooohheee, Warty Knees, Pekinese Face," they shrieked in unison just as the all-boys' grammar school was coming out. Lizzie was a very pretty girl apart from the warts on her knees, which she had burnt off at the hospital once a month.

"Coooeeeee, Ooohhee, Warty Knees, Pekinese Face," they yelled again, clutching onto each other in mock hysteria, just in case anyone had missed it first time round.

"Cheek, you don't look a bit like a Pekinese," said my new friend, nose in air. "Let's not lower ourselves by replying. Don't worry, we'll get them back later. People from Dunsworthy are all radioactive--it's the strontium 90 in the granite--it affects some brains more than others."

I looked at her with newfound respect. Us being radioactive was news to me and I hadn't a clue what she was going on about. But considering practically the entire town was built of granite, it felt true. And as for some brains being more affected than others, that would explain a lot about Doreen and Marnie. Strontium 90 was a radioactive isotope present in granite, and fall-out from nuclear explosion, she explained. Small amounts built up resistance. In a nuclear war Dunsworthians would be the only people left alive…Something to do with brain cells oxidising. I'd never heard the like. But who was I to argue. Lizzie seemed the kind of girl who knew exactly what was what and who was who. And we walked down the road together every day that week after that.

That Friday, when her parents went to the pictures, she invited me over to her stately pile. It had a long winding drive, umpteen domes and turrets, tons of rooms, acres of gardens and resembled something out of Daphne DuMaurier's "Rebecca." Four banana skins lay cooking on a central heating radiator in the vestibule next to the kitchen. She inhaled deeply, eyes closed in rapture and sank back dramatically against the wall. I watched, fascinated, waiting for something to happen. When nothing did, she snorted again, brow furrowed in concentration. Still nothing. So I tried; sniffing up one strip then down another. It smelt exactly how I expected it to: of banana. Lizzie moved on to Plan B, involving drinking cups of Nescafe laced with nutmeg. But that too failed to achieve the desired sensory affect. This getting high was more difficult than we'd thought.

Upstairs, the room overlooking the patio was dominated by a cream leather, gold-studded mini bar. Gleaming glass shelves supported bottles filled with exotic-looking coloured liquids. One contained a brown worm, another a willowy green plant. Yvonne poured two glasses of the dead worm she said was Mexican Tequila. Tasted more like Mexican paint stripper to my unsophisticated palate. But considering all you'd ever find in our house was the odd can of McEwen's Export, and a bottle each of whisky and strawberry cordial at Christmas, who was I to argue. Next, we tried the bottles labeled Blue Bols, and Chartreuse: followed by a combination of all of them, which I grew to quite like after the third glass. Perhaps my palate was already becoming more sophisticated.

After I'd finished puking, Lizzie told me all her secrets: about the blokes she'd gone the whole way with; dozens of them. And she wasn't making it up. She'd made a list, rating them with stars according to performance. I was impressed. What about me, she wanted to know. I couldn't think of any secrets and I had no list. We'd soon change that, she said. "I'm in with the in-crowd," somebody sang on the radio. "I go where the in-crowd goes." And so, it was decided, would Lizzie and Ethel.

Life quickly assigned itself into Before Lizzie and After Lizzie. Before Lizzie, I went to Mrs. Mac's. Mrs. Mac was French in origin, Scots by marriage, and septuagenarian in vintage. Each Saturday at six, she taught adolescents of single-sex schools enough basic dancing steps to propel them round a chilly church hall. Girls in tight jumpers and burgeoning breasts huddled at one end, while male counterparts in tweed sports jackets, nylon shirts and Old Spice after-shave, hogged the other. Mrs. Mac tapped her baton, Miss Roberts did her Winifred Atwell impersonation on the piano, there was a sudden charge and some awkward spotty lump smothered you in his tentacles and trod all over your feet.

After Lizzie, I went to the Scarlet Grotto, Dunsworthy's answer to Sodom & Gomorrah. Inside Mick Jagger complained he couldn't get no satisfaction, and the Who hoped they died before they got old. Chicks with Vidal Sassoon hairdos and fluorescent white bras under black jumpers woollied and bullied on the tiny dance floor while their male counterparts downed as many pints of Snakebite and Heavy as possible before chucking out time at ten o'clock. Now, that was more like it, I thought.

Before Lizzie, my boyfriend was called Fred and sang in the church choir. He wasn't exactly handsome. He had skin like putty, pale eyes, and fair hair that stood to attention at the front and was cropped short at the back. But he was a boy.

After Lizzie, my boyfriend was Danny Deans. Danny was an anarchist (so he said), who spent his days filleting fish in a processing house by the harbour and his nights writing poetry and plotting political anarchy in a council estate. He was very handsome. His lids slid suggestively over lazy brown eyes, his nose was big and his hair was thick and dark.

Mind you, you could say I was just as big an influence on her, as she was on me. Because Before Ethel, Lizzie was alive. And After Ethel, she wasn't.

The skiing holiday was her idea. We'd skied before, at Glenshee and the Cairngorms at weekends. She'd read about it in a brochure: a two-week package in the Austrian Alps for fifty-nine quid; skis, boots and sticks 13 pounds extra. Lizzie had been abroad before, but it was my first time. God only knew how Ma had scrounged up the bread.

We'd only been there two days when Lizzie, blind drunk, sprained her ankle tobogganing down a mountain at midnight. That was a drag, but nothing compared to the downer of the second week. It was the midnight sleigh ride in below freezing weather that did it. "It's your funeral," I'd predicted when she insisted on wearing just her thin maxi trench coat, ignoring the thermal vest her mum had knitted. And as it turned out, I was dead right.

I thought it was the flue. Though by that time we weren't speaking. I'd got fed up of her bossing me about; telling me how to hold my knife and fork and how to pronounce foreign words. So, I'd left her in bed that night, determined not to miss the final farewell party up the mountain. Last thing I remembered was some bloke holding my head while I threw up in the bog at about three a.m. I came to several hours later, and found myself in a blanket on the landing of an inn several thousand feet above sea level.

By the time I'd staggered back to our hotel in the gloomy grey dawn, I was covered in sweat, coughing and gasping for breath. And so was Lizzie. She didn't look a bit well. Her face was ashen and sweaty, her breath short and raspy, and the sound of

her laboured breathing filled the room, along with a miasma of doom, as if she were already decaying.

"Are you alright?" It was as if I were seeing her for the first time. "Will I get the doctor?" My senses had sobered up. My hands felt clammy. Shivers pierced my spine. Her eyes flickered open. They were dull, as if the light had gone out inside. "If you don't hurry up, it'll be the undertaker," she rasped.

She always did have a good sense of humor. Turned out she was right. I'd never seen pneumonia before. She omitted to tell me about her history of bronchitis. The innkeeper summoned Herr Doktor, who wagged his finger at me, saying, "You're irresponsible. You should have called me much sooner. It will be your fault if she dies." Then he carted her off to der Krankenhaus

And she did die, exactly two days later. And it was all my fault. I was irresponsible. The doctor said so. I didn't remember much about the next two days. The details of getting back home evapourated in a damp mist. Waiting with platitudes and sugary cups of tea, and pretending that everything was alright were Mum and Auntie Jeanie. I'd given up eating and sleeping; I'd decided I'd fade away like a Garboesque consumptive heroine. But the maternal instinct was having none of that and force-fed me with plates of Scotch broth and oatcakes.

All of which explained my presence at the ceremony a few days later, miming to, "The lord is my shepherd and I'll not want."

Afterwards, we former enemies turned friends again walked outside into the dirty, yellow daylight, where the rain sang a chill anthem to the living.

"Well, girls," said Miss Battersby briskly, in a posh Scottish accent that had no known geographical origin. "What about a cup of tea at my house?" It was a statement rather than a question. "My car's over there. I'll run you home afterwards." There was no escape.

"How's the studying going?" said Miss Battersby, as her dark green Morris Minor swung out of the winding drive.

"Not bad," said Doreen, sitting beside her in the front. Good old Doreen, she'd have got the doctor in time.

"Highers this year?" said Miss Battersby, peering out over the steering wheel, hands clamped firmly on either side.

"Four. English, Geography, German and French."

You could tell Miss Battersby was impressed. She made a sucking sound with her false teeth.

"That's enough for university this year. What about you Marnie?"

While she quizzed Marnie, I sat studying the southern progress of raindrops on the outside of the car's window, thinking how much I hated Miss Battersby. I hated her crenulated grey hair, her aqua tweed suit, her thick, varicose-veined legs and her sensible brown lace-up shoes. I hated her gold-rimmed spectacles and the large Roman nose on which they rested. I hated her condescending manner and her Second World War virginity, worn like a pious badge of honor.

"What about you, Ethel?" Miss Battersby's bilge brown eyes bored into me through the car's rear view mirror. It was the first time she'd ever spoken my name. Our school was big enough and I was insignificant enough to have avoided attention. I wasn't a prefect like Doreen, nor in A, or B, like Lizzie or Marnie. I was the academic runt of the litter. Nobody in their right minds thought me destined for a sparkling academic career.

"English and art," I said.

"Then what?"

"Art school." First thing that came into my head. I'd been wondering what to say. Having temporarily abandoned suicide I was considering running away to London after Danny. We'd been going out together for about a year, off and on. Sometimes, it was more off than on. But there was something between us that wouldn't go away, although we never spoke about such things. And I always thought that one day he'd be famous, even if all he did then was gut the innards and hack the heads off lemon sole, halibut, and herring.

Danny lived with his granny. On Thursdays, when she went to the bingo, I'd go over to his house and we'd walk down to the pebbly shore across from the main docks. While Danny fished, I'd skim stones across the eerie surface of the cold North Sea.

"I'm going to London," he announced, last time I saw him. He'd talked of this often, but I never thought he'd actually get round to doing it. "There's nothing for me in this dump. Come with me and have my child."

I turned and stared at him as if he'd gone mad. Have my child! We'd only ever done it twice. The first time his granny walked in on us, and on the second, Lizzie and Danny's mate, Terry, were at it in the next bed. On neither occasion could I stop giggling. I'd no idea if we'd even done it properly or not.

Have my child! Nothing about getting married, I noticed. I knew what happened to birds at school that had love children. Everyone felt sorry for them and they ended up living with their mums on social security. Anyway, wasn't it usually the chicks, not the guys, that were supposed to want kids?

"I've got my Highers to sit!" I said.

"Don't complicate things."

"Look who's talking, you're off your head."

"I'm going."

"Go then. See if I care."

He stared out to sea, then back at me. "'Never seek to tell thy love, love that never told can be; For the gentle wind does move, Silently, invisibly.'"

"Eh?" I said.

"William Blake," he said. Then we both stormed off in opposite directions. Two weeks later, Lizzie and I left for Austria, and Danny went to London. And I hadn't heard from him since.

Miss Battersby maneuvered her large car into the small space in front of her granite mansion in the town's West End. We crunched over a path of granite chips, filed down the hallway hung with photographic memories, and into the lounge. It was filled with bulky furniture smelling of mothballs and felt like a tomb. Everything in it was stuffed or preserved, including Miss Battersby.

"There's nothing anyone can say at a time like this," she droned and switched on the electric fire. Tongues of flames licked coffin-shaped artificial logs. The antique clock on the mantelpiece chimed funereally. Above the mantelpiece hung a gold-framed painting of some bloody Highland battle filled with horses and dying men in kilts. Even

the three-piece suite regarded me disapprovingly. Lace-curtained French windows looked out onto a neat lawn rimmed by ordered beds of windblown daffodils. A stone birdbath full of rainwater stood forlornly on the terrace.

"If any of you girls want to see me privately in my study, if you have any questions." Miss Battersby gave me a meaningful stare. "I think the thing to do, is to throw oneself into one's work."

Huh. Far from throwing oneself into one's work, one felt more like throwing oneself into the nearest river. Not that that would do much good, it was never very high, even after a lot of rain.

"I don't want to stay long," I said, when Miss Battersby went to put the kettle on. "Just one cup of tea, okay?"

But it was three cups of tea later I suddenly saw Lizzie. She was skiing up and down, over the grapes on the wallpaper above the grand piano. A halo hovered above her head and she wore a long white nightgown, through which a pair of wings protruded. She was playing a harp and singing the words to, "I Heard it Through the Grapevine." She smiled cheerfully and waved. "See you at the Milk Maid tomorrow afternoon as usual," she said.

"Wha--t?" I muttered.

"Salmon, or egg and tomato?" repeated Miss Battersby, thrusting a doilied plate of crustless white squares under my nose. When I looked again, my best friend had disappeared.

"We're going to Cornwall for our summer holidays," said Marnie, occupying the awkward silence that had developed.

"It's so lovely there," said Miss Battersby, swallowing the last of a salmon sandwich. "I do hope you have nice weather."

"I'd like to work on a kibbutz in Israel," announced Marnie. I glared at her. First I'd heard of it. Marnie would no more want to work in a kibbutz in Israel than fly to the moon. She was the most selfish person I knew.

"I'm sitting my driving test in two weeks' time," said Doreen. "My Granddad's buying me a car for my birthday."

By my third cup of tea, I'd worked out a plan. I thought of telling Doreen and Marnie, but they'd probably think I'd lost my mind. So, I decided to show them instead.

"Meet me after school tomorrow in the Milk Maid," I whispered to them as Miss Battersby drove us home.

Home was a brick house, fronted with granite chips, in an estate full of brick houses, fronted with granite chips.

"You're home, are you, dear?" said Mum, antennae tuned to anticipate my arrival. I stuck my head round the kitchen door to see Mum and Auntie Jeanie, seated at the pale blue Formica table in the sunshine yellow kitchen, wreathed in smoke from the latter's Embassy Regal's. They were drinking tea and playing "*Fix the Ba*," in the evening paper. In the corner thundered the Hotpoint washing machine. A pan of mince sat on top of the cooker. From the living room came the muted sound of the *Six O'clock News* on TV, in front of which grandma would be cemented.

Wherever you found Mum, you generally found Auntie Jeanie. Ever since she'd lost Uncle Bob and her only daughter Corinne had married a moron and moved to London, she'd become a fixture in our house. Kind of like the pulley of damp clothes that hung permanently above our heads in winter, giving the place a steamy, sub-tropical atmosphere.

"Homework to do. Exams soon," I muttered, hoping to avoid cross-examination.

"What was it like? " said Mum, her eyes smarting from the smoke.

"Alright." I aimed my duffle coat at an over-burdened peg.

"Cup of tea? Something to eat? " chirped Mum, whose answer to everything was a cup of tea. Not too strong with milk, sugar and a digestive biscuit propped in the saucer. It was no end of annoying to have a mother who only saw the sunny side of life: completely opposite to me, who clung to every sinking ship.

"We had sandwiches at Miss Battersby's."

"Here, don't throw your duffle coat on the floor like that," she said.

"I'll hae a wee wordie wi God, for ye," offered Auntie Jeanie, who attended church every Sunday, which in our family practically made her a religious fanatic. "We all have to be brave and lift up our chins to Jesus…"

I fled, slamming my bedroom door so hard it reverberated on its hinges. Outside, the rain sounded like angels wings beating against the windowpane. To drown them out I tuned the radio to Radio Luxemburg, where Marvin Gaye sang of how he'd heard it through the grapevine. I removed the blue Corporation of Dunsworthy notebook from its hiding place under the bed. "Isabelle" was scrawled across the front. It sounded French and much more interesting than Ethel. Mind you, just about anything sounded more interesting than Ethel, even Lizzie.

"I feel like I'm in outer space,

Sometimes, I wish I could see your face."

It was my ode to my best friend. Didn't think William Blake had much to worry about. On the page opposite, I'd drawn her, stick insect-like, with huge eyes and inflated lips, and underneath, pasted her death notice from the *Gazette*. Over the page, was a stick insect version of Danny, and a similar poetic tribute:

"This boy is death for me,

Oh God, I wish I could be free,

But this love will never grow dim,

And now I fear I'm losing him."

I didn't even have a photograph of him. Just a poster he'd given me, hanging on my wall, of seven heads in silhouette with "The Chicago Seven" written underneath. He said it had to do with a trial in America. He said they were anarchists who'd tried to overthrow the American Government. I pretended I knew what he was talking about.

Danny was always talking about overthrowing things. The Government, the school, the fish processing plant. But all he'd ever done was drive away his boss's fish lorry without his permission. He'd got as far as Stonehaven before the police caught him. Lizzie and I skipped school to see him sentenced in court. He got two year's probation. It was dead dramatic. We sat and giggled in the back until the judge threatened to evict us.

I checked my post office savings book. It contained only 25 quid, but enough to get me to London. I'd worry about getting back when I got there. I spent the next hour cutting out squares of paper from the notepad, inscribing them with letters of the alphabet and thinking about Lizzie. Then I turned to *King Lear*, which we were doing for Higher

English. We were at the bit where Edgar is suffering alone and in the mind. He was my kind of guy.

At four o'clock, the next afternoon I headed out of the school gates. It was a fine day. The silver flecks in the granite buildings lining the High Street sparkled in the afternoon sun. They called the granite, grey gold. It had supplied jobs for my father, and his father before him. And I often felt like a lump of granite myself, hewn by a harsh history and climate beyond my control. Schoolboys who were too fat, or too thin, or too tall or too small, lounged lazily in shop doorways, smoking brazenly and lying in wait to lure weakling female counterparts with their limited charms.

The Milk Maid café stank of percolating coffee and was filled with juvenile delinquents in school uniforms, puffing away on No 6's and sharing bottles of Coke. I joined Doreen and Marnie in an alcove at the back. My stomach fluttered. But then, my stomach always seemed to be fluttering. Marnie was singing tunelessly along to "I Heard it Through the Grapevine," on the jukebox.

"Must you?" said Doreen, silencing her with a look.

"It's a free country," said Marnie.

"Get a clean glass," I ordered Doreen.

When I explained what I wanted to do, they looked at me as if I were mental.

"Don't be daft," said Doreen. "You can't bring her back, you know."

"Anyway, somebody always pushes it with their finger," sneered Marnie, the corners of her fuchsia mouth turning down in a sardonic curve that was becoming part of her personality. She offered round her chewing gum. "We did this once at Pat Walker's house. We got her dead Uncle Ernie as the Spirit of the Glass."

"Shut up. Your brain cells are over-oxidising again," I said, and smiled for the first time in days. My nickname at school was "The Smiler." I didn't mind not smiling. It would avoid wrinkles later. Then I removed an envelope from my briefcase, and emptied the squares of paper onto the table. I placed the letters alphabetically in a circle round the table and turned the glass upside down in the middle of the table.

"We've got to concentrate," I said. "No giggling. No interruptions. Fingers on the glass." Reluctantly, Doreen and Marnie did as they were told. "Oh, Great Spirit of the Glass. We want to get in touch with Lizzie Rattray. Please, can you help us?"

We stared at the glass, waiting for something to happen. Seconds passed and nothing did. The glass remained motionless in the center of the table.

"Don't think the spirit's listening," snorted Marnie.

"Oh, shut your gob," I said.

"Go on, ask it its name," said Doreen.

"Oh, Great Spirit of the Glass, please, can you tell us your name?" I enunciated.

After what seemed like an eternity, the glass started moving, slowly at first, then round and round in a progressively widening circle, spelling out "M-Y N-A-M-E I-S H-I-T-L-E-R."

"Hitler!" shrieked Doreen. Her finger shot off the glass.

"Bloody hell." Marnie giggled uncertainly. She and Doreen exchanged looks.

"Put your finger back, " I ordered. My hands felt clammy. My eyes were on the glass. "We want to communicate with Lizzie Rattray. Please, can you help us, Hitler?" The glass remained quite still in the middle of the table, oblivious to the three pairs of eyes boring into its surface exterior.

"It's gone deaf," tittered Marnie. She blew a bubble, which exploded with a splat over her lips.

"Ask it if it's got a message for anyone," said Doreen, back rigid, leaning forward, her eyes wide, and face flushed.

"Oh, Hitler, Great Spirit of the Glass," I said. "Have you got a message for anyone at this table?"

We stared at the glass willing it to move. After seconds it did, slowly at first, then gathering speed as its circuit expanded. It stopped first at E, then T, followed by H, E and L, then Campbell. I felt giddy with excitement. A message from beyond the grave!

"Oh, Great Spirit of the Glass, what is your message for Ethel Campbell?" My mouth felt like the Sahara Desert. I licked my lips. The background hubbub of chinking china and chattering counter assistants faded, as if someone had turned down the volume. Doreen's eyes bulged out of her head. Marnie chewed hypnotically.

Mesmerised, we stared at the glass, our fingers poised on its upturned base. It started to move almost immediately, much faster than before, until it fairly flew round the

table, hurtling from letter to letter. "Y-O-U-R G-R-A-N-D-M-O-T-H-E-R I-S G-O-I-N-G T-O D-I--"

I snatched my hand away. The implications were obvious.

Doreen's face had turned chalky white "Ye Gods," she said.

"Hell's bells," said Marnie, eyes glittering.

"This is sick," whispered Doreen. "Just sick." She flicked back her long auburn hair, scraped back her chair and stood up.

We left the cafe and without saying anything more, caught our buses home. Sitting on the top deck, I kept wondering, maybe it wasn't that Hitler. Maybe, it was another Hitler. How many Hitler's were there in the world? Was there a Graham, or Margaret, or Seigfreid Hitler? Certainly not in the Dunsworthy phone book, which I looked up later. Besides, anyone in their right mind would change their name. Probably Lizzie's idea of a joke.

Eventually, the frigid spring turned into a cold summer, with the temperature rarely rising above the sixties. And I wondered if there'd been a dramatic change in climate, because I kept remembering the long, hot days of my childhood, when every day was spent down by the beach, or playing in the garden. And the weather, like everything else in life, didn't make much sense anymore. Or maybe it was the Strontium 90 in the granite. I'd no idea why we'd summoned up Hitler, any more than I understood why Lizzie had to die in the first place. But as usual, being Scottish, we never spoke about such things.

In the end, I didn't go to London in search of Danny. When he couldn't find a job down there he came back to Dunsworthy and to me. And I still thought he'd be famous one day. So I sat my Highers after all and got an A for English and a B for art, much to everyone's surprise. Then in August, grandma went on a bus holiday with a bunch of old age pensioners to Bognor Regis. In the second week, she had a heart attack and died. And of course, I remembered the message of the glass and wondered whether I'd somehow caused that death too. But as Danny pointed out, "'If the doors of perception were cleansed, man would see everything as it is, infinite!' William Blake." And after all, grandma was 84.

The End