

THIS IS WHAT HAPPENED. On a calm, black night in June 1941 Sergeant-Pilot Thomas Prosser was poaching over northern France. His Hurricane IIB was black in its camouflage paint. Inside the cockpit, red light from the instrument panel fell softly on Prosser's hands and face; he glowed like an avenger. He was flying with the hood back, looking towards the ground for the lights of an aerodrome, looking towards the sky for the hot colour of a bomber's exhaust. Prosser was waiting, in the last half hour before dawn, for a Heinkel or a Dornier on its way back from some English city. The bomber would have skirted anti-aircraft guns, declined the publicity of searchlights, dodged barrage balloons and night fighters; it would be steadying itself, the crew would be thinking of hot coffee fierce with chicory, the landing gear would crunch down—and then would come the poacher's crafty retribution.

There was no prey that night. At 3:46 Prosser set course for base. He crossed the French coast at eighteen thousand feet. Perhaps disappointment had made him delay his return longer than usual, for as he glanced up the Channel to the east he saw the sun begin to rise. The air was empty and serene as the orange sun extracted itself calmly and steadily from the sticky yellow bar of the horizon. Prosser followed its slow exposure. Out of trained instinct, his head jerked on his neck every three seconds, but it seems unlikely he would have spotted a German fighter had there been one. All he could take in was the sun rising from the sea: stately, inexorable, almost comic.

Finally, when the orange globe sat primly on the shelf of dis-

tant waves, Prosser looked away. He became aware of danger again; his black aeroplane in the bright morning air was now as conspicuous as some Arctic predator caught in the wrong fur by a change of season. As he banked and turned, banked and turned, he glimpsed below him a long trail of black smoke. A solitary ship, perhaps in trouble. He descended quickly towards the twinkling, miniature waves, until at last he could make out a tubby merchantman heading west. But the black smoke had stopped, and there seemed nothing wrong; probably she had just been stoking up.

At eight thousand feet Prosser flattened out and set fresh course for base. Halfway across the Channel he allowed himself, like the German bomber crews, to think about hot coffee and the bacon sandwich he would eat after debriefing. Then something happened. The speed of his descent had driven the sun back below the horizon, and as he looked towards the east he saw it rise again: the same sun coming up from the same place across the same sea. Once more, Prosser put aside caution and just watched: the orange globe, the yellow bar, the horizon's shelf, the serene air, and the smooth, weightless lift of the sun as it rose from the waves for the second time that morning. It was an ordinary miracle he would never forget.

Julian Barnes, *Staring at the Sun* (1987)