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Devil's Elbow

by Richard Lewis

Having survived the first few months, a creeping normalisation started to take over. Stephen realised there was no point in fighting a battle he couldn't win and decided to just get on with it, though the long hand of time turned so slowly that year at St Vincent, it felt like a life sentence.

Mealtimes were always a scrum, with everyone funnelling into what was known as the 'covered way,' a narrow, oak panelled corridor with a low ceiling and poor lighting. It was a claustrophobic space that seemed to symbolise the navy's hold on trainees, where they huddled together like pees in a pod. Arriving late was not recommended as best rations always favoured early birds. While waiting to sample the culinary delights of the NAAFI canteen, trainees would mark the days, creating little etchings of time on the panelling, like prisoners might on a cell wall. A line to represent each day, with nine lines in a row and one diagonally across indicating ten. Some had scratched, 'only 165 days to go,' or such like, along with the obligatory 'Jack was ere.'

Having forced himself to stop obsessing about the hours and days, a survival mechanism kicked in. Change took place and before long he'd forgotten what had happened and what lay ahead. He lived only for the present.

Maybe Stephen was in denial but the navy with its rules and regulations began to seep into his bones and he could feel his old self slipping away. The manic activity became a way of coping and like an actor portraying a square peg forced into a round hole, he would play the part he'd been dealt. All he had to do was endure, it wasn't going to kill him.

Leave, after three months of being confined to barracks was welcomed by all. Great excitement filled the mess and no one slept the night before. There was a strange rule that boys must travel wearing uniform and pack up all their kit as well as troubles, in the old kitbag, which was almost as big as Stephen. This pointless exercise was apparently in case war broke out, when they might be required to report direct to a ship. This was in spite of the fact that even in those days fifteen year olds were not sent into armed conflict. Such were some of the daft rules her majesty insisted upon.

Another outdated rule was that every boy would scale the mast. The one hundred and twenty-foot monster stood ominously on the parade ground and dated back to 1829. The original HMS St Vincent began her career as a convict ship, sailing on the 'Australia run' from Portsmouth to Tasmania, carrying both emigrants and convicts. Average sentence for convicts being nine years. It seemed little had changed. Stephen had this crazy phantasy about rigging the mast with sail and watching the whole flying circus being swept out to sea, to sink without trace in the Atlantic.

The winter of sixty-four was severe and a scattering of snow had settled on the ground the day Stephen's class first scaled the mast. The task was to climb the rigging up to the 'Devil's Elbow,' a section that jutted out about ten feet, scramble around the outside, virtually hanging upside down and then over the guardrail, up to the crow's nest and down again. The safety net was about as much use as a chip slicer, should anyone fall from the top. In fact, several boys had fallen to their death over the years, though fortunately not during Stephen's time.

Chalky White was a serious individual with sharp features and an equally sharp sense of dress. He was usually eager to impress Jackson but on this occasion, feeling rattled by the task ahead, attempted to get out of it, telling Jackson he had a bad headache. The Petty officer barked a favourite line from the 'Jackson book of sayings,'

"it's only pain boy,"

to which Chalky responded,

"yes sir but it fucking hurts."

This didn't go down well and Chalky was given the honour of being the first onto the rigging.

Everyone was shitting themselves; Stephen clung to the slippery rope with grim determination, steadily hauling himself aloft, repeating to himself, "hold on, hold on."

Jackson was there shouting, "come on you pussies, get your sorry arses over that guardrail." He was accompanied by two trainee instructors who only one year previously had been 'nozzers,' or novices like themselves. They strutted about giving the impression they'd sailed the seven seas and done whatever in the next.

Like all things navy there was just no way out, anyone refusing or incapacitated due to fear would receive a severe dressing down, public humiliation and eventually be forced to comply one way or another.

Stephen thought, 'we're just numbers in uniform, blindly following orders and doing our time.'

