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Last Word

by Richard Lewis

Unbeknown to Stephen the familiar stranger was on manoeuvres. His father Jack was planning to escape from a loveless marriage. Stephen was just a pawn in the game.

Jack, who worked away, was an irregular visitor to the family home in Bristol. He was in fact leading a double life with a young woman in the tiny hamlet of World's End in Hampshire. When Stephen's mother finally found out it did seem like the end of her world.

Stephen was a naïve fifteen year old who's elder sister had already left home to start nursing training. He had no idea what he might do when he left school, the matter had never been discussed. But then discussion of any kind was almost unheard of at home where the rule had always been, "don't speak unless spoken to."

So it was a shock when on one of his visits, his father asked, "how would you feel about joining the navy? There's a fine establishment in Portsmouth where you could continue studying and learn a trade at the same time."

'Where did this mad idea come from,' Stephen thought, mumbling, "I've never thought about it."

"Well they have an open day, why don't you come and take a look, I'll drive you," his father continued enthusiastically.

At fifteen himself, Jack had been an army cadet and later joined the regular army at the start of the war. Life in the services had been important to him and perhaps seeing himself in his son, imagined the same could be true for Stephen. Army life had come with mixed blessings though. On the one hand, being an army officer had given Jack position and prestige but on the other had left him traumatised, suffering physical wounds and mentally from witnessing fellow soldiers being blown to bits. However he wore his scars with pride.

Jack was a master of disguise who hid behind defences, reinforced by his wartime experiences. A part of him still shuddered in that foxhole with its lid of corrugated iron. Poor protection from the hell raining down from above.

Stephen lived with an uneasy mix of love and fear toward his father. Never making eye contact they tiptoed around each other, eggshells getting caught between their toes. Honesty and openness were shy birds that rarely visited the family garden.

The four hour drive from Bristol to HMS St Vincent was excruciating for Stephen. Silence hung in the air like a bad smell. He had no real interest in the idea and thought he was just going along for the ride, not wanting to disappoint his father.

Arriving at the main gate they passed through the imposing archway, as the barrier raised to reveal a huge parade ground featuring a 120 ft ship's mast, complete with rigging and safety net, from a battleship scuttled at Scapa Flow in 1920. It was something that brought put fear into very trainee as they were all expected to go aloft.

Squads of new recruits were being put through their paces, marching at double quick time and Stephen wondered, 'why the rush?' The whole saluting circus seemed a very strange world, yet back in the car after the visit, when his father said, "well, how about it, I'm sure you'd like it here." There was only one answer. He couldn't say no, he'd never said no to his father in his life.

Events accelerated. Stephen felt caught like the chessboard pawn, where only forward moves were allowed. He was getting his father's attention for once but the reality was that he'd been played. It was all about Jack's determination to get Stephen off his hands and clear the way for him to divorce his wife and sell the family home.

One thing led to another. A visit to the local recruiting office, followed by a medical and before he knew it he was sitting in a room with other hapless recruits, faced with signing up papers. The full weight of what he was getting into was only now dawning on him. Strangely, everyone in the room felt the same. That it was a mad idea but they couldn't back out now.

Everyone thought they were signing up for three years and were horrified to discover that it was in fact nine years with no possibility of buying themselves out at a later date. In spite of this, like lemmings falling headlong over a cliff, everyone signed. The trap had been set, its piercing jaws closing around their innocence.

For the first few months living in a dormitory with thirty others, there was a ban on phone calls or making trips into town. Stephen had decided to make the best of it but as time went on his frustration grew and he vowed to find a way to escape. In spite of his father he'd have the last word.

Only years later did he see the irony of it. That his father's campaign to free himself had involved trapping his son.