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Midway

by Richard Lewis

Midway through his year of years, Stephen once again began obsessing about the slow drift of time. The days inched along like a sailboat becalmed, left to the mercy of the tide, its sagging sheets waiting to catch the wind once again.

The stone frigate of brick and mortar that was St Vincent, stood like a container for lost souls, gathering all in her powerful arms. She glared at Stephen like a disconsolate wife, reflecting the sadness he kept locked inside.

‘It that it?’ Stephen thought, ‘am I married to the navy now?’

It had been a long day and he was weary, having literally tied himself in knots, learning all about Bowlines, Sheepshanks and Carrick Bends, he wondered, ‘before long they’ll have us splicing the mainbrace.’

Returning to the mess during a rare quiet period, lying on his bunk, he drifted into the land of dreams. Stephen stood at the altar of the ship’s chapel. The Padre appearing before him, his benign face giving Stephen a pitying look. His shipmates filled the pews and gazed on in bewilderment as the music chimed up to ‘Here Comes the Bride,’ and a giant, full breasted goddess in laced veil, sailed up the isle; like the figurehead of an ancient galleon, above him she towered.

When the Padre enquired, “Will you take this woman to be your lawfully wedded wife,” a disembodied voice replied, “I will.”

The Padre continued, “Whom god has joined together let no man put asunder.”

Then incredulously, Stephen watched as the Padre, speaking in high, refined tones morphed into the urgent, gravelly features of Eric Burdon from the Animals, belting out,

“There is a house in New Orleans they call the rising sun.”

The song echoed in Stephen’s ears as the real world tried to brake in; the welcoming familiarity of the music bringing him back to reality. His friend Nobby was giving his latest forty-five a spin on the turn table of the little Phillips portable. A wave of relief washed through Stephen to realise it had just been a dream, yet he thought, ‘how easily the lines between phantasy and reality blur.’

Six months in, Stephen and his class finally broke free of their moorings, leaving the concrete palace for a weeks sea training on HMS Finistere. The light frigate distinguished herself in WW2 playing a part in capturing the German Uboat carrying the Enigma machine; leading to breaking the Nazi codes and shortening the war.



A squall was blowing up as they left Portsmouth harbour and the sea was starting to exercise its muscles. Half way across the channel the troubled sky darkened, rain fell in sheets and the wind grew to a force eight gale. The bow began to heave at an alarming angle, falling down with a mighty crash.

Stephen felt queasy almost as soon as they'd entered open sea and when it was his turn to take the wheel, his stomach lurched with the ship and he struggled to raise his eyelids. Focussing on the ship's compass to keep the vessel on course proved impossible. The skipper was about to drag him out of the wheelhouse and send him back aft when Stephen threw up, sprinkling the deck with the colourful remains of breakfast.

Having spent the rest of the voyage huddled at the rear of the ship with other seasick sailors, the Finistere finally arrived safely in Amsterdam. Shore runs were the highlight of the trip; there was no problem with under-age drinking, though some would take the matter too far. Jock Stanley had been bragging about how much he could put away and ended up the full three sheets to the wind.

Tattoo's were a centuries long tradition for sailors and anyone becoming incapacitated by alcohol was in danger of being dragged by his mates into the tattoo parlour, picking up an unexpected souvenir. It was not until the following morning that Stephen heard about the prank. Jock woke with an aching arm and the striking image of an anchor emblazoned on it, with the heading 'Hold Fast.' The sharp needles of the tattoo artist had produced a remarkable representation in red and black ink.

Jock, initially outraged at being taken advantage of soon became proud of the adornment, showing it off to all and sundry. It would accompany him for the rest of his days and he imagined it bringing him good luck and preventing him from drifting in life.

It was just another aspect of the navy to haunt Stephen's dreams, fearing he might also be taken unawares; branded like a helpless steer. 'Who needs an anchor,' he thought, there was already a great weight causing the year to drag, on the seabed of that endless year.