

Bourne
toWrite...
creative writing
workshops

Main Gates

by Richard Lewis

As Stephen wandered along the Old Paradise Road in Brighton, his mind returned to his navy days. Even at this late time of life he needed to know why, why it had happened. Why he'd fallen for something so huge; stepping off the edge of the world he knew, into something he didn't believe in. As if willingly offering himself up for sacrifice. Why had he not just said no? It seemed he had no free will and his life was not his own.

He fell into a coffee bar and headed below ground to an underworld, away from the bustling Lanes. It was quiet with just a few other customers, buried in their phones and laptops and there he started to write.

It was too late to question his father, he was long gone but he thought if he could just drill down into the past, through the years, to that fearful place, he might still be able to make sense of what happened.

It was more than fifty years since he'd left St Vincent, and yet it had never left him. The imprint of that year was etched on his mind and echoed through time, invading his dreams, as if trying to haul him back. Back through the imposing main gate on Forton Road, with its gilded clock tower and sentries, still as statues.

Back to the knowing look of 'Old Jarvie,' the bust of Admiral Jarvis, Earl of St Vincent, who'd watch as you stepped onto that vast parade ground. A place of pain and suffering, with its fearful mast that pierced the sky and peered down from above. Master of all it surveyed, that mast was St Vincent.

He remembered well those hard-nosed Petty Officers, who indeed could be petty. Always ready to pick you up for some real or imaginary infringement of Her Majesty's regulations. From minor irregularities like needing a haircut, to more serious matters like being adrift returning from leave. Two minutes late was enough to be put on a charge and some of the more sadistic PO's would adjust the clock just for fun, making you late even when on time.

They were invariably men who like Stephen's father underwent the horrors of war and were changed by the experience. Having been through the mill themselves in their younger years they seemed compelled to pass it on. Stephen had never put his father in the same camp but now he was not so sure.

As he forced his mind back to those unhappy days, he realised there was something familiar about passing through the main gates. It was similar to how he'd felt as a child, opening the gate leading to the front door of the house where he grew up in that sleepy Welsh village; apprehensive about how he'd be greeted on the other side. What mood would his mother be in? Would he be welcomed or chastised for some reason he couldn't understand. Like the Petty Officers nothing escaped her attention, especially of the negative variety. When unhappy with her world, which was most of the time she just couldn't resist infecting Stephen with her mood.

In many ways, home life, navy life and school were much the same. It didn't matter whether guilty or not, if someone decided to pin a charge on you, you just had to pay the price and absorb the harsh words of your accuser.

The parallel was so clear, regulations broken and being met with disapproval. Like the proverbial black sheep, Stephen was a target for his mother's frustration and that sharp tongue always hit the mark.

As a child he'd always taken solace in the great outdoors, hurling himself along woodland trails and soaking up the delights of nature. Running through fields, building dens and finding adventure, away from the stifling confines of the family home.

It was much the same at St Vincent, though there he had less time to escape. The precious green woodland had been replaced by a grey sea and whispering beach. He'd take himself down to the foreshore, perch on a wooden breakwater and watch the restless sea. The constant swell like breath itself, the gentle rattle of pebbles, caressed by the motion of the waves. Like a meditation, peace washed through him and he'd feel refreshed, like shell and shingle, rinsed by the tide.

Sitting in that underground world, thinking about his past, Stephen found the very act of writing brought a clarity that he'd not felt for years. 'Though will I ever make peace with it,' he wondered, '*only time will tell.*'