

# To the Sea Again

By Willie Meikle

I want to tell you about a summer's night and a meeting which was to change our lives. But first you had better buy me a drink; I don't think I can tell it without at least one drink.

It was last year. Remember what a scorcher it was? Andy and I were sitting over there in the corner, as close to the open freezer door as we could get. There weren't many folks in that night. They were probably all lounging around on their porches, sipping cold drinks and complaining about the heat.

Andy was looking for some action: that seemed to be the be all and end all of his existence at the time. Seventeen years old, fit and strong and bored out of his mind with small town living.

"Come on Jim. What do you say?"

I took a long gulp of beer before replying. I know what he was asking. Take out the car, have a few beers and head over to Landford to suss out the nubiles at the Trocadero.

"I don't think so Andy," I replied, seeing the disappointment on his face. "It's too hot; that place will be like an oven. Do you really want to sweat a couple of buckets full, get ourselves a hangover and come home on our own again?"

We hadn't been having much luck with the girls lately. I think it had something to do with our air of desperation. Andy and I were what was known as 'nerds'. We didn't play football, we didn't hang around with the gangs, and, probably the worst sin, we were capable of passing exams.

So, not only were we shunned by our peers as being 'know-all dickheads', we didn't have that spark of magic, of excitement that would allow us to get on with girls. Sometimes I felt that we had an aura around us, one that shouted 'These guys are nerds'.

Not that it worried me unduly. I knew it was only a matter of time before I got out. One more set of exams then it was bye-bye small town, and heigh-ho off to University.

Andy couldn't wait though. I think his hormones had finally woken up, and all he could talk about was women. Well, not women as such, just how he could use their bodies in a variety of sex acts.

I was about to have another try at getting him on to a different subject when it suddenly went cold. Goosebumps ran the length of my arm. I thought of something my mother always said, "Someone just walked over my grave", when I noticed that it wasn't just happening to me. Andy was rubbing his arm and, incredibly there was a thin film of frost on our beer glasses.

I began to speak, and that's when I caught it; the unmistakable salt-tang of the sea. It was something I'd only ever smelled once before, ten years and three hundred miles away, but I had never forgotten it. Then, as quickly as it had come, it passed on, leaving us with just the memory and the sudden condensation on our glasses. We looked at each other, and I could see the wide-eyes wonder in Andy's eyes. I looked around the room, but no-one else seemed to have noticed anything. There was old Joe fanning himself with his newspaper, and Eileen the waitress tugging her halter top away from her body. At any other time that small scene would have sent my blood racing, but at that moment I was too confused to take any notice.

And then they came in. You have to have come from a small town to realise the impact that three strangers can make in a quiet bar. Old Joe's newspaper stopped in mid-fan, and I swear that if his jaw had dropped any further it would have hit the table. Eileen was frozen with her halter

pulled away from her chest and she took two steps back before she realised where she was. I didn't blame her. I felt like getting out myself.

They looked like escapees from a fancy dress party, but somehow you knew that this was no pantomime. The clothes looked worn, lived in; they didn't have that crisp newness which always characterised hired clothes. I immediately thought of actors, people off the set for a quick drink; but who made pirate movies these days? Of the three, it was the middle one who caught my attention. Imagine Errol Flynn playing a buccaneer and you have some idea of his swaggering, cocksure presence. But Errol Flynn never looked this. His left eye had gone, leaving only a blackened charred hole to complement the sky blue twinkle from the right, and he only had an index finger and a thumb on his right hand. I wouldn't have noticed that so soon, but he was pulling at a lump of scar tissue where his left ear had one been, and it was hard to miss. The metallic click of his sabre against his belt echoed loudly in the suddenly quiet room.

"Rum!" he shouted. "A pint of rum for three thirsty men of the sea," and banged his fist down hard on the bar.

Nobody moved. Old Joe looked like he had been frozen to the spot, and I was trying hard to blend into the background. Somehow I didn't want these guys to register my presence.

"Rum!" he shouted again, and this time all three of them banged on the bar. Eileen came out of her daze and moved behind the bar to serve them. They might look as weird as a five legged dog but business is business.

Her first mistake was to try and make small talk.

"So what do you guys do?" she asked.

They looked at her as if she was something nasty they had just stepped in, and then the big guy turned his good eye on her.

"Women are fine for bedding, and bearing brats, but I've yet to meet one that made a fir barkeep."

His companions guffawed, and then the big one did it; the thing which changed the whole tack of our lives. He reached out and began to paw at Eileen's breasts.

I was out of my chair in a second, but Andy was even faster. He was already past me and well on his way across the room when I heard the metallic slide of metal on metal as a sabre was drawn from its scabbard.

"Leave her alone you bastards!" Andy shouted, and made a lunge for the big man. He lasted two seconds. That's the length of time it took for the man to release his sabre and club Andy over the head with the heavily armoured hilt. Andy fell in a limp bundle and Eileen screamed, just once, before the room fell silent.

I was in no-mans-land, caught in the space between the safety of my seat and the crumpled body on the floor. All I could do was giggle nervously as the big guy turned his one good eye on me.

"How about you, pup?" he said, and I swear there was a starry twinkle in his eye. "Do you have the same spunk as your young friend here?"

That was the pivotal moment. I knew it, and he knew it. And that was when I was found wanting.

My mouth had gone dry, and yet again I felt the goosebumps race across my arms; but it wasn't the cold this time. I willed my legs to move, willed my mouth to speak, but all I got was that same pathetic giggle.

There was a look of disappointment in the big man's eye as he turned to his companions.

“Looks like it’s only the one then,” he said, and motioned to them to pick Andy up. They carried him between them as they made their way to the door. And I didn’t even move, feeling nothing but the dry cold taste of cowardice in my mouth.

That blue eye was staring at me again when I looked back to the bar.

“Are you sure you don’t want to protect the virtue of this fine wench?” he said, and laughed, a deep booming thing which set the lights swinging above him. I shivered again as he ran a callused hand over Eileen’s cheek, but still I didn’t move.

“Ah well,” he muttered. “Maybe next time.”

He leaned over and took a bottle of whisky from the bar as he left, the evil, metallic clicking of his sabre echoing round in my skull even after the door had closed behind him.

Joe and I stared at each other for a long time, my fear reflected in his eyes, but it was the look I got from Eileen that made me move.

It wasn’t so much the disgust that bothered me, it was the pity; and it was the pity that drove me away from her, away from the bar and out of the door into the night.

She was nestled in the cornfield, the yellow waves lapping at her hill, and I couldn’t believe it. She was blue and silver and white, all at the same time, and the moonlight glistened in rainbow aurora off her rigging.

A gangplank stretched down towards me, black and inviting, and her name stood out in gleaming white from her bow: “The Saucy Sue”, registered in Liverpool, 1607. Her sails were full and stretched to their limit, although the night was so still I could hear my heart pounding. And up there above me, on the deck, I saw the two men drop Andy at their feet, and heard their manic laughter as they disappeared out of my sight.

The big man was nowhere to be seen, and I think that’s what allowed me to function; if he’d still been around then I don’t think I could have made my next move. As it was I didn’t really think about it; I was up the gangplank and on to the deck before my hind-brain had time to be worried. I was almost surprised to find, firm hard wood beneath my feet.

Andy was still out when I got to him, but he was breathing steadily and there was no blood. He was going to have one hell of a black eye though.

I had just got my arms underneath his shoulders and had just begun to drag him towards the gangplank when I heard the voice at my back.

“So, m’lad. You have more spunk than I thought.”

I almost wet myself, and I just managed to get a foot under Andy’s head as it fell to the deck. I turned to face the one-eyed pirate.

He was leaning on his drawn sabre, the bottle of whisky at his lips. He was now wearing a hat, a huge, plumed, monstrosity of a thing which flopped above his forehead, casting his eyes in shadow. I could still see the glint in that crystal blue eye.

“Have you come to join us?” he said, his voice a whisper as he stared at the sky. “To sail to the mountains of the moon, to clip along the Spanish Main, running just ahead of the wind, to see the great whales feed off the krill at the edge of the great ice sheets, to search for the sea serpents in the black depths of the yellow seas. Have you come to join us?”

“No,” I said, but my voice was muffled by the one from my feet. I looked down to see Andy looking straight at the pirate.

“Yes,” Andy said.

The pirate slapped his thigh and that great laugh boomed out once more. The resemblance to Errol Flynn was even more pronounced.

“Raise the anchor,” he shouted, and two men appeared from below decks to do his bidding. “Set sail for the west. We have a long journey and two new recruits to break in.”

“No,” I said again, louder this time, and looked to Andy for support; but he was staring around the ship, eyes wide in wonder.

I grabbed him by the shoulder and turned him around to face me.

“Andy. We have to get off this thing.”

He shook his head. “No Jim. You go. This is what I want.” He pushed me away, towards the gangplank, but my body was blocked by the tall pirate.

“You both stay,” he said, and this time there was no humour in his voice. “Sailmaster!” he shouted. “Two deck-hands to be broken in.”

There was a sudden loud creak, and I felt the boat sway under my feet as the stars started to spin in the sky. That was enough for me. I leapt from the rail, vaulting over it, feeling the pirate grab at my ankles but not strongly enough to stop me.

I fell and fell, and blackness spun around me, and I tensed myself for a hard landing before suddenly and unexpectedly I hit water and tasted that long forgotten taste of salt water in my mouth. I looked up and could just see the great ship fade into the black sky.

I think, at the last, I heard Andy’s voice; a small thing in the distance which called just one word.

“Goodbye.”

There’s not much more to tell. I was at the sea-shore, four hundred miles from home; and that in itself look a lot of explaining. I made up some story about Andy and I running away, but I’m not sure anyone actually believed me.

I fell behind in my schooling and I never did make it to University. Nowadays I mostly sit in the bar, jawing with Joe and Eileen, all of us trying to make sense of what happened that night; all of us waiting for those hot sultry nights, waiting with a mixture of trepidation and excitement for the salt tang to come back.