

The Still
Word Count: 2993

The barman looked up as the door opened. An old man stepped in bringing icy air with him from the snowy street outside. He paused in the doorway, nodded a greeting to the barman and shuffled towards a square table in the window. The small, cosy pub was quiet. Through the window, the barman noted that, even at two in the afternoon, it felt like the dark was closing in. It was going to snow again. The old man had removed his trilby and placed his plastic bag on the seat. The barman caught his eye.

‘What’ll it be?’

‘Do you have any stout?’

The barman looked uncertain and scratched his beard. ‘We’ve got some craft beer?’ The old man’s eyes widened and then he nodded with intrepid agreement as his brown lace-ups took a few steps to the bar. He held out his gnarly hand and picked through loose change in his palm laying down the pound coins and fumbling with an elusive twenty pence. He finally got it and placed it purposefully on the bar. Pointing at it with a twisted arthritic finger he said, ‘That one’s a little bugger.’ The barman smiled sympathetically. He deftly picked up the pound coins but his large fingers also fumbled and failed to capture the twenty pence. He shook his head and smiled in shared defeat. The old man chuckled and took his craft beer back to his table. But that was not an end to it. He sat down, looked back at the barman and said, ‘I’ve seen some tattoos in my time but yours are impressive. Lovely artwork.’ The young

barman looked down at his arms, heavily inked, disappearing over his biceps into his t-shirt sleeves and appearing again at his neck. The old man took a sip and continued. 'I knew a Norwegian chap once who had ravens like yours. And a Viking long boat all the way round his ribs on one side. And some swallows.' The young man stepped out from the end of the bar and, like a cautious wild animal, made his way, inevitably, to sit with the old man.

Haltingly, and then with more ease, they spoke. In 1930's Liverpool, working class lads did not become artists as he had dreamt. They got a job at the docks. Or joined the Merchant Navy. And so he had gone to sea with Mikey Dunbar who played harmonica, Joey Chin from Shanghai whose first name was almost certainly not Joey and Gunnar Pederson, with the Viking folklore tattoos. There was a pause. The barman looked up at a muted TV screen in the corner of the pub and saw a weatherman waving his hands. There had been talk of an Arctic blast for days. He looked out of the window and said unoriginally, 'It's going to snow.'

Twisting in his seat the old man looked out thoughtfully. 'Not for an hour. Not until the still comes.'

'The what?'

'There'll be a still. A hush before it starts.'

The young man stared uncertainly at him. 'Do you know a lot about weather? From being at sea?'

‘Snow and ice mainly,’ said the old man with a hint of humour. ‘It’s never still at sea. With the engines and the wind. But when you step on to land, then you notice it. The air is so clear it almost has a weight. A smell of crystal glass nothingness. Right now, all I can smell is your exotic aftershave but this particular snow,’ he gestured over his shoulder out of the window, ‘...is like meeting an old friend.’ He took a sip of his craft beer and thought for a second, as if he wasn’t sure he wanted to share. Then he looked at the young barman whose blue eyes reminded him of Gunnar Pederson. He had died when he was 25 and had taken his tattoos to the bottom of the Norwegian Sea. The old man hoped that the ghosts of drowned Vikings had appreciated them. ‘I spent four years on the Arctic convoys. Archangel and Murmansk.’ He waited for his statement to land but there was no recognition. The young man smiled apologetically. The old man was kind. ‘We supplied Russia during the war. We kept her going with food, weapons, aircraft and tanks. And, the quickest way to Russia was via the Arctic.’ He waited again for comprehension and was rewarded as he saw the young man nod and frown.

But then, his young mouth opened. He looked hurriedly over his shoulder as if frightened of discovery. He leant in to his new friend and whispered loudly, ‘You were a spy? You helped the enemy?’ The old man paused with his drink at his lips. His eyes scanned the ceiling as if seeking divine confirmation that this was a genuine enquiry and then he slowly lowered his glass to the table.

‘What’s your name, son?’

‘David.’

‘David. I’m Charlie.’ He cleared his throat, deciding where to start. ‘I’ve got a bad heart. Are you trying to see me off? What do they teach you in school these days?’ Then, gently, ‘Son, the Russians were on *our* side during World War Two.’ He waited while the young man computed this.

‘Where they?’ He was incredulous.

Charlie nodded emphatically and raised his glass back to his mouth but paused to make the final coup de grace. ‘And so were the Chinese.’

This was too much for David who scanned the pub dramatically as if looking for someone to share this startling piece of information with. A girl with heavily drawn on eyebrows sat on the far side of the pub not talking to her sullen looking boyfriend. David would have to handle this himself. He ruffled his hair as if to order his thoughts. ‘No way! They were on our side?’

Charlie didn’t understand how wifi worked so he thought he and the boy were probably quits. David was studying Art at college which had warmed Charlie’s heart. He had the same open, easy-going nature as Joey Chin. Joey, shouting with glee in his unique Scouse-Chinese accent, ‘Wait til you see Shanghai. You won’t believe it. It’s like the bloody Pier head!’ Then, he saw Joey Chin’s perfectly frozen, blue face devoid of all glee when they pulled him from the drift ice a few years later.

He met David's eyes. David said, 'I'm going to Google it later.' And followed with narrow-eyed tenacity, 'Because I know at some point we fell out with Russia over...something.' And, right there, comically, was Mikey Dunbar's truculent injects which he would throw into the conversation and then return to playing his harmonica so no-one could argue with him. Mikey, furiously chipping ice off the deck to save the ship from toppling; then, with frostbite so severe he lost his fingers and, later, homeless and begging on Lord Street before no more was heard of him. David stood up with naïve enthusiasm. 'I'm going to get us more drinks. And then you can tell me about sailing to Russia.'

The table in front of them had become a map. Charlie's glasses case was now the UK. His wallet was Iceland. Rolled up paper napkins were Norway and Sweden and an old menu was turned over to its blank white side to represent the expanse of the Arctic and Russia. Charlie spoke: 'I'm more of a visual person you see. Not great with words. So this is not to scale, obviously.' He adjusted Norway, which had soaked up a few dribbles from his craft beer and gone floppy. With his now familiar gnarly finger, he pointed at the UK. 'So, we started in August 41. It was important to demonstrate our support to Russia you see. Because Russia was keeping Germany busy. And the busier Germany was with Russia, the less chance she had of crossing the channel and invading the UK. We were still recovering from Dunkirk really.'

'Oh! I know about that! It was a huge battle that we won. Dunkirk spirit. My Nan used to talk about it.'

'Was she there?' said Charlie with deadpan delivery which went over David's head.

‘No. I think she was a baby at the time.’

Charlie nodded, feeling the weight of his 85 years. ‘Well, I hate to break it to you but we got thrashed at Dunkirk. You can Google it later.’ The look of disappointment on David’s face was almost painful to see. Charlie thought for a second and then said philosophically, ‘I think what people today forget is that, in 1941, we were losing. We had no idea that it would all be ok. Here you are, quite relaxed, safe in the knowledge that we won –with our allies...’

‘Russia and China,’ David said dubiously as if the jury was still out.

‘Yes. And America, of course, and many other nations that we forget like Canada. Canada Boulevard is literally a few minutes from this pub. Anyway, we were losing and, as far as we knew, we could get back from a convoy and find the Germans in our beds.’

David moved the white arctic menu absent-mindedly on the table mulling over this idea of imminent defeat. Charlie waited until David removed his hand and then re-adjusted its position carefully and started ripping the edges. He ripped a thumb size chunk off and placed it in the wooden ocean of the table and said, almost to himself, ‘There’s Svalbad.’ Then he pressed his finger in the remaining menu and said, ‘Here. This is Archangel.’ And he was standing on a jetty, alone, looking back up the river mourning his friends as a stillness fell almost like an answering prayer. From a

blinding sky, the snow had begun. 'Archangel.' He could see David's lips moving echoing the strange place name.

Charlie nodded slowly, 'We'd set off and assemble at Iceland. Sometimes Scotland. Us merchant ships and our escorts from the Royal Navy or the American or Royal Canadian Navies along with air support from RAF Coastal Command. And all the while, the U-boats lurked, invisible, like great black sharks.' His finger traced the route from Scotland, across the brown wooden table sea to Iceland. Then up and round Svalbad. From there he traced towards Russia but paused in the sea as if unsure where to go. His finger hovered where the whine of the engines had changed, and the convoy had been ordered to scatter. The pub darkened as the snow clouds outside grew and Charlie watched with horror as the destroyers left them. David sensed the hesitation in the old man's finger as if he had forgotten something. Or just remembered it.

David nodded. 'I get it. Makes sense.'

The old man sat back in his seat, perplexed. 'I'm afraid I may have over-simplified it. This, here,' he hovered a trembling hand over the table, '...was the longest naval campaign in history. Four years. But it seems like I am the only person in the world who remembers it now. The worst journey in the world. I'm not good at describing, sorry.'

‘Great big black shark U-boats was a pretty good description,’ said David. ‘Made the hairs on my neck go. I feel like such a fraud. I’ve done nothing exciting with my life. Nothing like going to sea. I can’t even swim well.’

‘We tried to avoid swimming. We did it so you didn’t have to. So you could study art.’

‘Ok.’ He smiled. ‘At least you made it.’

‘I did.’ He paused, ‘But two thousand men didn’t.’ He swallowed and his voice was rhythmic as if reciting an old lullaby he knew well. ‘If the U-boats didn’t get you, the air attacks would. And if you survived the enemy attacks, then the wind would cut you like a blade and the sea itself would freeze you faster than you could drown. Or the spray would crystallise in the air as it flew and the ice would build up so badly that the ship would roll right over. And if it didn’t roll you, it would crush you or rip the rudder off from under you and leave you drifting, ice-blind and crippled. In the winter months it was always too dark to see the danger and in the summer, the endless light betrayed you to the enemy, and then it was his turn to try killing you again.’ His voice was mesmeric like the swell of the ocean and David rose on foam capped waves and then sensed more foreboding black water below them than sky above them. Charlie finished, ‘They say the sea is a cruel mistress but the Arctic is positively murderous.’ And David felt a monstrous wave swell behind him and feared to turn around. It surged over their heads and they sunk into freezing blackness.

‘Can I get some drinks?’ said the eyebrow girl. The spell was broken. He and the old man surged back to the surface and sucked in air as if they had been holding their breath. David attended to his customer and then returned, smiling, to look at the Arctic convoy map before them. A shared journey they had taken together on a dark and icy December afternoon.

‘I’d better be going,’ Charlie said and scooped up his wallet and glasses.

The young man looked suddenly bereft. ‘But,’ he struggled for a reason for Charlie to stay, ‘...it’s going to snow.’

‘I know,’ said Charlie. ‘A visit from my Arctic mistress.’ He stood in the doorway and put his trilby on. As he opened the door, David noticed that in the brief moment of twilight before the dark consumed Liverpool, the imminent snow seemed to brighten the sky like a blinding light for the duration of a breath taken and held. Charlie, his silhouette against the glowing light, looked back at David. He pointed outside over his shoulder and said, ‘That, is the still.’ And, smiling, he left.

David moved behind the bar carrying their empties and watched out of the window as the snow finally began to fall. He imagined a woman in frozen white crystal standing outside the Liver Building looking back out to sea from where she had climbed waiting for Charlie. He picked up a cloth and slowly returned to the table where nothing remained but a torn up menu and a soggy napkin. A single ring mark remained where Charlie’s drink had been. David hesitated, not wanting to wipe away the final evidence of the man from the Arctic convoy. As he did so, he spied Charlie’s

plastic bag on the bench seat. Reaching over to look inside, he saw a large A3 sketch-pad. As he opened it, his heart chilled.

Inside were page after page of detailed drawings, annotated and dated. David turned each one, as reverently as if he were praying, and the details that Charlie had been unable to describe crowded each page. A young Chinese man smiling as he smoked a cigarette. A hand, calloused and cut, stretching desperately out of the water; haggard eyes under brows heavy with ice crystals. A wave swelled, incredible and threatening and hung against the sky like a looming mountain range. A burning ship, fire spreading across the fuel on the surface of the icy water. A face with dead, staring eyes, and a mouth in a black 'O' of horror frozen in a futile cry. A cry drowned out by the thunderous sound of a battleship, roaring, as it split apart and was swallowed by the sea. Page after page of friendship and horror in intimate detail were seared into a man's memory: a tired face, battered by wind; the unmoving swallows on the exposed chest of a frozen body; a blackened ear eaten by frostbite; an arm tattooed with ravens reaching for something with every sinew and muscle lovingly drawn. There were lines on fingernails, split and ragged, filthy and chewed, holding cigarettes or binoculars. All of them with the beautiful, murderous Arctic and the steel grey battleships like fragile toys in the background. Most of the sketches were simply annotated, 'PQ17 July 1942.'

Then, as he reached the final page, he felt a rush of heat to his throat as he saw his own young bearded face looking back at him, hurriedly drawn, but unmistakably him. When did Charlie manage that? Charlie had written simply, 'David, December 2005.'

Google it. Love Charlie.’ He turned to look out of the window and Charlie’s footprints vanished in the snow as he watched.

Charlie found a bench. He sat, looking out to the Mersey and smiled at the familiar presence of an old friend who came to him this time, not with murderous intent, but with reconciliation and the reunion of friends to offer. He thought it was about time and let the cold creep over him like slipping under water. The silence of the snow carried with it the sound of Mikey Dunbar’s harmonica and Joey Chin’s laughter, which Charlie thought only he could hear. However, running through the snow, David recognised the frozen figure, and he too caught the harmonica and the laughter. He knew that while they were not real now, they had once been as real as he was. In his t-shirt, the cold seemed not to touch David. She had not come for him. But she watched as he sat gently, touched the old man and knew that he had gone. Placing one tattooed arm around his shoulder as Gunnar Pederson had often done, he said quietly, ‘I will. I’ll Google it.’

David looked at the Mersey, black and brooding, a terrifying gateway to the Irish Sea, and then on and on to the endless ice of the Arctic. The expanse of the ocean filled him with horror. But Charlie’s face was peaceful and the man from the Arctic convoys had gone willingly where few could ever imagine or possibly know.

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