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To Him Who Waits

by Stornoway

(Conclusion)

The ship sailed that night back to Curacao, having discharged its cargo of oil, and there was no shoreleave. Roger and Charlie were on watch as the tanker sailed down the Elbe, and it was not until she turned into the North Sea that they were free to go below.

Charlie was very happy for the next few days and talked a lot about the dance place they had been to and about Hans who was a student, but he talked about them only when he was alone with Roger. Then a week after they had left Hamburg he became very morose, and for the best part of a day he hardly talked at all. Coming off watch that night Roger suggested a beer before turning in, but Charlie refused.

«I'm having one,» said Roger, and picked up a glass, but before he could pour the beer Charlie snatched the glass from him.

«Don't use that glass,» he said. «It's mine.»

Roger looked surprised. «Oh, all right,» he said. «I'll use my own. What's biting you, anyhow?»

«Nothing! I don't want to drink.»

«Charlie, you must be sick.»

«I am, Rog.»

Roger looked closely at him. He certainly looked pale, and had been unusually quiet all day.

«I think I've got a dose,» Charlie said very quietly. «From that slut in the Winkelstrasse. Look. I'll show you.»

Charlie bared his anatomy which Roger inspected. He knew the signs. «Bad luck, Charlie boy. I'm afraid you have.»

«The bloody old bag. If I could get my hands on her now I'd kick her teeth in. Give me a beer, after all.»

«Do you think you should?»

«I don't care. I want one.»

Next morning Charlie called on the Second Officer who did the medical work on the ship, as tankers do not carry doctors. He told Roger about it later.

«The Second, he made me drop my pants and he had a look at me, and then he got the book out and read it up, all the time with me standing there with my pants around my ankles, like a fool, and then he got out a syringe with a bloody big blunt needle and filled it with penicillin which he shoved into my stern end, and I've got to go back tomorrow and have some more. And he gave me some big white pills to take as well, and told me not to drink any beer. Cor, I'd rather have my dose than have those needles stuck into me.»

Roger laughed. «You'll get over it Charlie. Lots of people do. I had one myself once down in Buenos Aires. I got over it.»

«You're a dark one, Roger. You've done everything. No more women for me ever again. The last one was the last one.»

«I've heard that before. All the lads out of luck say it.»

«Not from me you haven't,» Charlie came back quickly.

Roger poured out a beer, but only one, which he proceeded to drink in front of Charlie. «You don't drink when you're in that condition,» he said. «You had one last night and that's your lot for a while.»

«You bastard,» Charlie said pleasantly, as he eyed the beer. «I'm going on deck. Come up and join me when you've finished guzzling beer. You can have my issue for the next five days, and I hope it makes you sick.»

Days passed pleasantly and uneventfully. Charlie recovered both from his disease and from the attacks made on it by the Second Officer; he had a blood test in Curacao which proved him healthy and he was happy again. The tanker had two nights in Curacao, and when Roger suggested going ashore Charlie was not interested.

«No,» he said firmly. «I'm not going, and you're not either. Let's swim instead.»

So at night they swam naked in the warm blue waters of the Caribbean over the side of the tanker with a few other men who either did not wish to go ashore or else had not the money to do so. Charlie, once again able to drink beer, seemed content. Then the ship sailed again, this time for Naples.

The weather was warm and the ship was mostly in tropical waters until she passed the Azores. Life was tranquil. One night after coming off watch at midnight they had their usual beer before turning in. Roger stripped off and lay down with a paper-backed edition of Plato. Charlie, instead of turning into his own bunk, sat down on Roger's.

«Move over,» he said. «I want to lie down here too.»

Roger was surprised, but not very much, as Charlie had long since ceased to surprise him.

«What's the matter with your own bunk?»

«I want to read.»

Roger knew that Charlie's tastes were for crime fiction and westerns. «There are lots of books over there.»

«I want to read what you're reading.»

There was not much room on the narrow bunk but Roger moved a little closer to the bulkhead and Charlie lay down. They read silently for a while.

«This bloke writes about friendships between men,» Charlie volunteered after a while.

«It was an old Greek custom,» Roger answered with a laugh.

«I was in Athens once,» said Charlie. «Is that where this Herbert comes from?»

«Plato? He lived, and died there, centuries ago.»

«What, and people still read his books?»

«Like some people read the bible.»

«Blimey.»

There was silence for a while. Then Charlie spoke again.

«Roger!»

«What is it?»

«I'm not comfortable.»

Roger raised himself on his elbow. «Well, I like that. Whose bunk is this anyhow?»

«Yours, and your elbow is digging into my side. Now if you'll just put your arm this way,» he sat up, and pushing Roger back on to the bunk he arranged Roger's arm sideways, «round my neck, like that, it will be better.»

«You're a pest, Charlie.»

«I know, but I'm a nice pest.» With a lot of wriggling around and changing position they eventually got settled. «Now let's get on with our reading.» Charlie said when he was comfortable again.

In a few minutes Roger was aware of Charlie's quiet, regular breathing. On looking sideways, he saw that he was asleep. Roger threw the book aside and switched out the light. With one hand he managed to light a cigarette. He could have gone over and slept in Charlie's bunk, but he was too conscious of Charlie's head on his arm, and of the warmth of Charlie's body against his own in the narrow bunk. He smoked several cigarettes, lighting one from the end of the other. He was tired, but did not want to sleep. His feeling for Charlie, always strong, had grown even stronger since their night in Hamburg. Charlie,

always popular with the other men on the ship, seemed to have drawn away from them, and closer to Roger. He did not talk about girls any more. When the other fellows had their bull sessions Charlie just listened quietly, or else he walked away. He appeared to be becoming increasingly dependent on Roger, and rarely left his side. Roger wondered if Charlie had ever thought over their conversation of the night they had their fight. As they lay in the dark side by side Roger could not resist turning his head sideways so that his lips brushed Charlie's rough cheek. Eventually he too slept.

He was awakened by Charlie shaking him and offering a mug of tea.

«Here's your breakfast, Rog. First course.»

He drank the tea, got out of the bunk, and dressed. The day passed as usual. That night Charlie turned-in in his own bunk.

A few days later the ship made Naples where they were to discharge oil. At night Roger and Charlie went ashore. They had drinks in a bar in the Galleria Umberto, and a meal in a restaurant on the Via Roma. With the meal they drank a bottle of Chianti and a bottle of Orvieto and they felt very good after that. They walked up and down the Via Roma, elbowing their way through the crowds, and then turned into the Via Chiaia which was no less crowded. Here they met two of their shipmates. They were a little at a loss to know what to do next. Roger had wanted to go to the opera, but San Carlo was closed. More particularly he had wanted to take Charlie to the opera, if there was something on that he might appreciate. When the other two suggested finding a bar in a side street off the Via Chiaia Roger and Charlie agreed; they were not enthusiastic, but it was the normal routine thing to do. The other two led the way as they had been here before. It was a very narrow street consisting mainly of stairs. Lines of washing hung overhead from one side of the street to the other; people sat on their doorsteps talking to their neighbours and taking the air; children played in the street and men sat in the dark wineshops which were like caves in a wall of rock. Now and again they heard bursts of music. The air was hot and heavy.

Eventually they found the place they were looking for. It was the usual non-descript bar with bare marble-topped tables. There were several men in the bar, and a few women lurked in the background, but did not come out into the main bar. They drank some rough red Sicilian wine which the proprietor siphoned out of a cask with a length of rubber tubing. Conversation was desultory. Roger wished they had not met the other two men and Charlie was unusually quiet.

The proprietor came up to them. «You want something else, maybe? Girls, maybe?»

«Not for me,» said Charlie. «Not tonight.»

«I'll have a go later,» one of the others said. «I'll look 'em over and let you know.»

«I'll take a chance,» said Roger, without looking at Charlie.

«Roger! You can't mean that,» said Charlie, consternation in his voice.

«Why not?» Roger answered coolly. «It's what we usually do, isn't it?»

«But...»

«Why don't you come along?»

Roger got up and followed the proprietor. Charlie did not move. The man led the way into a back room. There were half a dozen girls there and Roger beckoned to the first one he saw, and the proprietor gave her a key. Roger paid the man two thousand lire and followed the girl down some steps. She opened a door, and when they were both in the room, which was more like a cellar furnished as a bedroom, she closed it, and turned the key. She moved towards him, a bored smile on her face.

They had not been in the room five minutes when they heard raised voices outside

«Where is he? I've got to get him out of here.» Roger recognised Charlie's voice, angry and alarmed. Above it he could hear the voice of the proprietor, excited and also angry. The two voices made so much noise he could not distinguish what was being said. Someone rattled the door handle. Roger heard fists pounding on the door and boots kicking it.

«He's in here. I know he is. I want him out of there.» It was Charlie again.

Roger thrust the girl away from him and with a single stride was at the door which he threw open. Charlie burst into the room, with the proprietor behind him. Charlie's face was white and he was almost crying.

«Roger, come out of there, please, at once,» he pleaded.

The proprietor bowed. «*Scusi signore,*» he said. «Your friend has hysteria. I do not like this disturbance in my house.»

«Please come away, Roger.»

«Why Charlie, I haven't started anything yet.»

«Roger please. Do it for me. I can't explain here.»

The proprietor also showed signs of hysteria. «What kind of place you think this is?» he demanded. «There is too much noise. I give your money back, but go with your friend. Go now,» he ordered.

Roger ignored him. He put on his jacket and threw some lire at the girl. She was sitting on the side of the bed, languidly smoking, and apparently disinterested.

«*Grazie,*» she said, as the two men left, followed by the proprietor, still protesting volubly. «*Ciao.*»

In the bar their two shipmates were starting the second litre of wine. A waiter was picking up an overturned chair which lay half under the table.

«What's the matter with you two types?» one of their friends asked.

«Nothing,» Roger answered tersely. «We're going back to the ship.»

«We were just sitting here having a quiet noggin when Charlie upped and away down the stairs after you,» the man explained to Roger. «We thought he wanted to make it a threesome. What's the matter with him, anyhow?»

«There's nothing wrong,» Roger tried to explain. «We've just got something else to do. See you later.»

They went out, and without speaking they made their way down the narrow street, back to the Via Chiaia which they crossed, and down more sidestreets until they came to the Via Caracciola, and from there on to the waterfront. They climbed down to some rocks, Roger leading the way. They sat down. Roger gave Charlie a cigarette and took one for himself. Charlie lighted the cigarettes and his hand was shaking.

«Now Charlie,» Roger demanded, «for the love of Mike, tell me what's biting you.»

«I don't know, Rog,» Charlie said in a weak voice. «I honestly don't know. I'm sorry if I busted it up for you.»

Roger said nothing. He puffed at his cigarette, waiting. It was dark on the rocks, and he could just see Charlie's hand on his arm as a real thing.

«I didn't want a woman tonight, Roger, and I didn't want you to have one either.»

«That's really matey of you Charlie,» Roger answered. He tried to make his voice sound cold.

«It's not that,» said Charlie. «I can't explain. I hated to see you go down with that slut. I thought of Hamburg, when we were there.»

«What's Hamburg got to do with it?»

«You remember what happened to me there.»

«You got over that, didn't you?»

«It wasn't that. You said once, before we got to Hamburg, when we had that fight, you said that you . . . that you . . .»

«That I what?»

«That you loved me.» The words came out explosively, and there was a minute when no one spoke.

«I remember. I did say that,» Roger answered slowly.

«And you said the time would come, when I would feel the same way about you.»

«Yes, I remember saying that too.»

There was another pause, while Charlie fumbled for fresh cigarettes. «You must think I'm crazy, Roger,» he went on dispiritedly.

Roger turned towards him and threw an arm across his shoulders and drew him close.

«Why should I think that, Charlie boy?»

Charlie brightened a little, but was still a little unsure of himself. «You weren't just stringing me on when you said those things to me?» he asked. «I mean, you meant what you said, didn't you?»

«I meant it, then and now, Charlie.»

«And when you said I'd get to like you too, like that, I laughed, but you were right, Rog.»

«I know.»

«Rog, what are we going to do?»

Roger laughed. «Right now we're going to have a bottle of wine, over in that bar on the waterfront. [We'll have the best they've got.»

They drank a bottle of champagne sitting at a table at the water's edge in a bar by Santa Lucia, watching the fishermen trying to attract the fish with their bright spotlights in their little boats.

«This is the best time to drink champagne, late at night, by itself, and when you're happy,» said Roger.

«What's the time now, Rog?» Charlie asked when they were halfway through the bottle.

«Almost midnight.»

«We don't have to get back before six, do we?»

«No. Why?»

Charlie sipped his wine slowly. «You know your way about Naples, Roger. Don't let us go back until we have to.»

Roger looked at him through half-closed eyes and smiled. «Whatever you want, Charlie,» he said.

«I want what you want, Rog, but I mean, if two sailors don't want to go back to their ship, there must be somewhere they can stay the night, and it's no one's business but theirs. You know what I mean.» He looked closely at Roger, no longer uncertain of himself.

Roger poured out the last of the champagne. «Let's just finish this first. There's lots of time.»

They touched glasses and drank. Then they left the bar.