

JOHNNY COME LATELY

Distant thunder rolled across the chopped waves and old Tam looked up in mild consternation at the gathering thunderhead, the shining white edges contrasting vividly with the darker cumulus. It had been gathering since mid morning, just after he had returned from his daily walk to get the paper. It was a ritual old Tam had been performing for the last seven years. Most days his dog accompanied him, today had been an exception and although he had tried cajoling her, Jenny was not budging from her spot by the fire and after checking the guard was in place, he had set out for the store. Jenny's whining bark lengthened his stride up the hill to the old stone farmhouse. The stones were original, the rest was the result of careful blending and sculpturing. The farm had stood for two hundred years, but the last fifty had seen it abandoned to the ravages of nature, until Tam had put in a bid to the local council. Surprisingly he had secured the right to buy and renovate the property, over the objections of the local historical trust, who would have preferred that everything remain in a constant state of disrepair in an attempt to lure tourists to the forgotten coastline where 'things always stay the same.'

"What's the matter, hen?"

Jenny's wet nose pressed against his hand as he opened the door, she was shaking and Tam made a cursory examination of the rustic interior. The bin was on its side but nothing was missing, she had probably knocked it over in fright. He scratched her ears and murmured softly as he comforted his friend. His constant companion, she followed him everywhere, unlike the women in his life who had come and gone just as quickly.

"Tis only a wee bit of thunder," he straightened up and closed the door, "its bark is worse than its bite," he stepped into the tiny kitchen and setting the paper down, picked up the kettle and filled it with water. Satisfied that her master had returned, Jenny returned to her spot by the fire while Tam made a coffee.

The weather page held his attention momentarily as he stared at the isobars, they were closer together than yesterday and he glanced out the window at the clouds. Seasonal storms hit with regularity but this wasn't the season for storms. He glanced down at the paper and eventually sighed and flicked on the short wave radio sitting on the bench. The radio was his only link with the past, a life on the ocean waves had made him unfit for the life of a landlubber. The girl he had taken to his marriage bed when he had been on the HMS Calcutta had stayed a mere twelve months, long enough for both of them to realise that Tam would always be married to the ocean first and a wife second.

Static noise filled the air and he glanced at Jenny's ears that were now pricked forward. He grinned weakly and twirled the dial. Most of the transmissions were choppy and to the untrained ear they were unintelligible, but he had spent a lifetime hunched over a radio, deciphering radio message in a dozen different accents and as many languages.

He stopped for a moment and listened to one broadcast. A trawler was struggling in heavy seas and he felt a shudder go up his spine as he heard the coordinates. It couldn't be, he opened his eyes as the coordinates were repeated. A moment later he felt himself recoiling again as a British naval vessel responded and the name echoed in his mind. His old ship, the Calcutta had been scrapped not long after he left, but the name had been re-registered. A smile nudged at his cracked lips as he recalled the glory days of his youth, Korea, Malaya and a dozen other exotic locations. He glanced down at the date on the paper. Over twenty years ago, he had sailed through those same waters. He would be sixty five in two months and his eyes misted over as he realised it was also the twentieth anniversary of Johnny's death. He stared into the distance as the transmission between the trawler and the new Calcutta continued unabated.

Johnny Come Lately, the lanky, long haired kid who sang rock and roll and boasted he had once met the members of Led Zepelin. Whether that was true or not mattered naught to the crew of the Augusta, all they cared about was whether he could do the job. Out here your life and the lives of your fellow crew members depended on teamwork and while they fought and talked behind each other's back, there was not the same kind of bitchiness Tam had encountered in the factories before

he joined the navy. Twenty years on submarines had taught him the value of camaraderie, the trials endured seared his soul but strengthened his heart and when he finally left, it was for the merchant navy. His future lay before him, a life on the ocean waves free of the constraints of married life. Nevertheless, Johnny Come Lately seemed almost too fragile for the sea. The gods of the deep were a vengeful, vindictive breed, eager to snatch the unwary from the safety of the decks and take them down in a watery embrace. His long hair, soft, feminine features and the way he bopped along the deck spoke volumes about the kid and to the hardened seaman of the Augusta, he was a kid. Mick had summed it up beautifully.

“Fresh meat for old blood and guts.”

No one doubted old Mick, the man had survived the worst of Glasgow’s east end and it was said that if he ever returned, there would be a few hard men leaving town in a hurry, Mick still had old scores to settle. Blood and guts Captain Cranshaw would make short work of the kid with the rock star features and stars in his eyes.

Their first transatlantic sailing with a new crew member and everyone held their breath, Johnny seemed to adjust to the rolling motion apart from a momentary bout of seasickness. It had been the captain who nursed him back to health and a day later he was back on deck, looking a little worse for wear but functioning. There were a few raised eyebrows not long after that at the relationship between Johnny and the captain. Bob Cranshaw was the hardest, meanest captain that Tam had ever served under, he was known for his fiery temper and abusive bullying tactics. A dozen seamen had come and gone in as many years thanks to Bob’s inability to get on with anyone if it didn’t involve bawling and screaming. Bob was essentially a bully however, and with hardened seamen such as Tam and Mick he was a little more pliant, more than one captain had gone for a swim in the early hours of the morning over the years. Johnny however had attracted his eye and at first the men suspected he was just saving himself up for a good session of abuse and torture. It was George, the First Mate who had remarked that Bob and Johnny both shared a love of card tricks. It was the captain’s only weakness and now that Johnny, the card shark had come on board, he had found a fellow soul mate who could outdo him in card tricks. The men began to relax, perhaps the kid would survive old blood and guts.

But it was on that trip he had unfortunately gained the name, Johnny Come Lately. An old Eagles song had been playing down in the engine room when he had strolled in nonchalantly to take his shift. Lateness was frowned upon in the navy, there was little excuse for turning up late. The old hand had rolled his eyes as the song finished.

“She’s all yours,” he slapped his shoulder, “Johnny Come Lately.”

The name had stuck, along with his tardiness. There were some, Tam included who had quietly murmured that old Mick had cursed him for eternity. But try as they might, through a dozen transatlantic trips, Johnny Come Lately had always been late for every shift. The men began to grumble. Blood and guts and Johnny Come Lately were often ensconced in the captain’s cabin, swapping card tricks. Mick had only complained once to the captain and received a tirade of abuse from the captain, no one tried that again.

But the men of the Augusta had an ace up their sleeves. First Mate George could approach the captain if he thought it important enough and Johnny’s lateness was beginning to get beyond a joke. He was beginning to turn up stinking of whiskey, anyone else would have been put ashore, but Johnny seemed unable to do anything wrong in the captain’s eyes.

Things came to a head when he failed to turn up for three shifts in a row and George had finally agreed to approach the captain. The two had spent half an hour arguing and although the words were unintelligible, due to the fact they both spoke Welsh, it was apparent that the First Mate was winning the argument for Bob stormed out of his cabin and thumped the railing three times before staring down at his crew who promptly turned away. Johnny stared up at his friend and mentor and Tam could have sworn something indescribably strange passed between them, before the captain stepped back into his cabin and in that instant they all knew that Johnny Come Lately was about to get his books.

It was with with great reluctance that the captain finally ordered him off in Dublin. Old Tam would

remember that parting to the end of his days. Johnny standing with his bag in his hand looking sorrowful as the ship pulled away from the quay and Bob standing tall and straight, trying to avoid eye contact.

That trip had been the quietest he had ever known. Bob kept to his cabin, and his bottle for most of the trip, only emerging when they were within sight of New York. Once they had docked he hadn't even gone ashore, leaving the men to fend for themselves. Normally he saw to it his boys behaved themselves, but for the first time in living history, thirty seamen ripped up the town under the eyes of their captain.

Two weeks later they had docked in Dublin and the men had rushed to the rails when a man called out.

"Hey, Johnny Come Lately is early!"

It was true, Johnny was standing right where they had left him, his bag in his hand and a look of anxiety on his face. The creature at his side was well known to all as the worst dressed transvestite in all of Ireland. The captain had taken one look at the pair and hurried down the gangplank. No one knew what was said but by the hurtful look on the transvestite's face, it obviously wasn't a compliment on his outfit. Johnny had followed the captain up the gangplank and Tam had felt a strange tingling at the back of his neck as he released one of the chains holding the container on deck. Bob looked radiant, the all conquering hero returning with his maiden.

Tam blinked as the radio blared to life again. The Maria was in trouble, serious trouble and the Calcutta had finally pinpointed her location.

Twenty years ago this week, thirty foot waves crashed over their bows and the men had held on grimly, keeping an ever watchful eye on the containers stacked above their heads. If the weather kept up like this, they would either turn tail and head south to try and escape the storm or cut the containers loose. But then a warm weather front had moved in from the south, a hurricane of epic proportions and the gate had been closed. The captain had come into their mess hall early that morning and issued the order quietly.

"Cut them loose, all we're all dead."

The loss of a ship's cargo was a serious matter, you guarded your cargo jealously, but when it was a case of going down with your cargo or cutting it loose and surviving there was no option. No one liked going up onto the pitching, rolling deck to undo the chains holding the containers aboard. One false move could see a chain whipped around in the wind to smash a man's skull. Tam had seen it happen twice and both times had vomited black bile all over the decking. The captain looked around at all of them.

"We've got a hell of a storm, boys so I'm asking for six volunteers."

Old Mick was the most obvious first choice, followed by Tam and three other men, but when Johnny had raised his hand the captain had stared blankly at him.

"No," he replied, "you won't be going up in that."

Tam's mouth dropped, it was unthinkable that a man should be denied the chance to prove himself and Johnny had yet to prove himself. Granted he had sailed the summer with them, but this was the end of summer. The captain had stared at him and Tam thought he saw a slight reddening of his cheeks, Johnny seemed to wilt beneath his stare and bit his lip.

"Jock," the captain nodded at the crusty Aberdonian, "you're up."

But up there on the decking, disaster had struck as under the eyes of the watching crew, Jock had slipped and fractured his leg, requiring two crew members to scramble up and help him down. Johnny had been one of them and so they had waited for the sixth man to clamber up the ladder, while they held onto the railings and stared death in the eye as the gods of the deep hurled wave after wave over the ship.

Johnny's head appeared over the railing and they heard a scream of horror or was it anger?

Nevertheless, Johnny was ignoring the cry as he made his way down the walkway. Tam rose slowly, his hand still clutching the railing, Mick shouted in his ear.

"Little poof has decided to ignore the old man."

Tam stared at him, not wanting to acknowledge the obvious sexual acts that had been going on

under his nose and yet knowing it had been happening all along. Perhaps it had been Johnny's youthful looks combined with his long hair, or maybe the captain had merely taken a fancy to him, but either way Tam knew then that the young man pulling himself down the railing towards them was nothing more than a ship's cat.

"A ship's cat?" Tam stared at his old mate.

"And you thought they were swapping card tricks," he howled into the wind.

Tam stared at Johnny making his way to one of the chains holding the containers down.

"Ship's cat or not," he yelled back, "if we let him loose on that, it'll take him with it."

Neither man moved as Johnny began undoing the bolts. It was George who rose to his feet and stumbled down the walkway, bellowing at the top of his lungs.

"You crazy bastard! You'll take us down with you, let go of that!"

It was a sight Tam would carry for the rest of his days, Johnny's radiant face as he stared up at the grizzled Liverpudlian, the chain suddenly coming loose and the look of bliss as it broke free.

Johnny should have leapt out of the way but instead he latched onto it, letting the chain yank him off the deck and high into the air. Five men watched in horror as he sailed over the ocean and for an instant they thought he was laughing. Then he was tumbling into the ocean with a white splash of water and the captain was screaming at the men on the deck to throw a line overboard. The chain smashed against the containers and Tam cursed. Now their work was doubly dangerous, a swinging chain could take them all into the water or smash them to pieces.

It took an hour to finally release the chains but by that time it was confirmed, Johnny Come Lately was officially late no more, his body had disappeared beneath the waves along with their cargo, a mute offering to the gods of the deep.

Bob lasted another month on ship before the company doctor ordered him offshore and into an alcohol rehabilitation unit, his mind finally snapping under the strain of a bottle of whiskey a day for years on end. With Bob gone, the First Mate, George McTavish took over. George proved to be an able captain, he knew the men better than he knew himself.

Tam blinked suddenly as the static broke up and he heard the voice loud and clear.

"Maria, this is the Calcutta, we have you in our sights, we're coming in from starboard."

Tears coursed freely down his face and a low whine came from Jenny as he pictured Johnny's laughing face and heard the scream of horror from the captain. A wet nose pressed against his hand as she stood on her hind legs to nuzzle him, then he was sinking to the floor cradling the border collie like a lover while the men of the Calcutta brought the crew of the stricken trawler aboard.

Written by Alastair Rosie © 2007