

SHIPS THAT PASS IN THE NIGHT

I met an old Navy buddy of mine at the Mall the other day. I hadn't seen him since I was discharged and left him behind to take over the Navigation Division on the USS *Topeka*, lots of years ago. It was the last time I had seen Long Beach, California.

The *Topeka* is long gone, but Rick hadn't changed much. We chatted about what had happened to us in the intervening years. Rick had left the Navy a couple years after I did and had attended law school on the GI Bill. He had worked for a big admiralty firm in Washington for a few years, but it wasn't what he expected, and somehow he wound up in advertising - in Minneapolis. As a native Cape Codder, he was a little surprised to find that he enjoyed living in the Midwest. He found the people different but very nice all the same. Of his personal life he spoke little. He was apparently in the process of ending a second marriage. No offspring or present occupation were mentioned.

He was back on the Cape only for a while, Rick said - something to do with settling an estate. He probably would go back to the Midwest but didn't seem all that sure. I got the idea that a lot of Rick's future depended on whatever was going to happen with the divorce, but I didn't ask and he didn't tell.

As we were running out of things to talk about, he asked if I remembered John Hardiman. I did, vaguely; he was another *Topeka* N Division guy who happened to be from the Cape. Nice fellow, and, unlike most of the other guys on the ship, John was married, to a stunning girl who could have been a model but was in those days a Navy nurse. What made the situation comical for everyone except the Hardimans was the fact that - to put it bluntly - John was as homely as Julie was beautiful. John and Julie were definitely a contrast, and nobody could be quite sure what Julie saw in John, but the situation provided a great deal of discreet encouragement for those of us single guys who hadn't as yet located Miss Right.

Rick then proceeded to remind me of something I had forgotten long ago, namely the fact that Julie Hardiman had a friend who was also a nurse and was also a Cape Codder. Her name was Deirdre O'Riordan, a redhead with green eyes who was as pretty as Julie but with a slightly harder edge. I had met her once at a party and I remember hearing that she had grown up under less than ideal circumstances in Southie before moving to Harwich in time for high school. There were lots of siblings and problems of various types and degrees, and I got the distinct impression that being in the Navy three thousand odd miles away from the Cape suited Dee O'Riordan very well.

"You know I went out with Dee a few times," said Rick. I told him that must have happened after I got off the ship. "Yeah, probably ..." His voice trailed off, and I got the impression that he wanted to keep talking, so I suggested that he join me for

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lunch over in the food court. He glanced at his watch, and I thought he was going to beg off, but he said it sounded like a good idea.

We opted for Chinese, and I ate as Rick talked. Rude of me, perhaps, but I was starving and it didn't seem to bother him in the least.

The sum and substance of Rick's conversation for the next hour or so was the fact that he had fallen head over heels in love with Dee after knowing her for about five minutes. No surprise there, and I was reasonably sure he wasn't the only guy in N Division who could make the same admission, but Rick had convinced himself that this was the real thing and acted in the Standard Masculine Mode, i.e. he came perilously close to making a complete fool of himself where Dee was concerned.

Of course Rick wasn't the only member of the Pacific Fleet to experience a case of the Grand Emotion for some shoreside lass, but normally these relationships were brief and neatly terminated by the sailor's departure. Unfortunately for Rick, however, our good ship was in drydock for numerous pre-deployment repairs and wouldn't be going anywhere soon. (I should note for the record that *Topeka* was in fact a World War II-vintage cruiser that had been rejiggered for service in Vietnam, and there were times that she showed her age to an extent unacceptable to the top brass. As a result she was no stranger to various West Coast repair facilities, including the Long Beach drydock on Terminal Island where she was now berthed.)

Everything might have turned out differently in the saga of Rick and Dee if the *Topeka* had behaved herself on the sea trials that followed this latest drydock period. Had she passed the trials, deployment to the other side of the Pacific would have followed in short order. Alas for Rick, for the ship's engineers, and for the BuShips types in the Pentagon, the sea trials resulted in serious damage to most of the pistons, the main shaft, and several other important elements of *Topeka's* propulsion system. As a result the ship limped back to Long Beach at the embarrassing end of a tow line to spend yet more time in the yard. Deployment prospects were officially "unknown" and our buddies in the Engineering Division would only snarl like wolverines when we asked what the hell was going on.

So, as Rick ruefully pointed out, the additional yard time certainly cost the taxpayers additional millions, probably delayed the war effort, and clearly made a lot of people - not least the officers and men aboard the ship that *Topeka* was supposed to replace - very unhappy. But these effects were mere trifles compared to the fact that the delay in Long Beach also provided him more than sufficient time to become incurable about Dee O'Riordan.

It didn't seem quite fair, but while the poor guys in E Division were sweating

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through twenty-hour days to patch up the machinery, Rick and the rest of the navigation gang - having nothing to navigate - were ashore every other night. Rick therefore had plenty of opportunity of seeing Dee, who worked days at the infirmary and had most nights off.

It should come as no surprise that sailors who think themselves in love with beautiful redheads generally rate poorly on tests for cool detached reflection. Rick was no exception "I was having too good a time, and I guess I just presumed she felt the same way about me," he said. "Subtext: I was afraid to ask her. Boy, was I in for a surprise."

It was the good-hearted Julie Hardiman who instinctively caught on to what was happening and decided to intervene before Rick could do further damage. "You remember that little bar with the pool table where the Topeka guys used to hang out? She took me aside in there one night and explained that Dee was pretty much - 'spoken for' I think was the phrase she used. Kind of quaint but I got the idea. Then she told me what was going on in Dee's life. When she finished I couldn't say anything. I swear I never in my life felt like a bigger fool. But I'll always be grateful to Julie Hardiman for telling me."

What Julie told Rick was this: Dee had been due to get engaged to a guy named Pete - Julie didn't recall his last name - who was an engineer on one of those death-trap Victory ships they pulled out of mothballs for the war effort. It was in such lousy shape that nobody thought it could possibly go anywhere - that is, until the morning it left Long Beach bound for Oakland to load six thousand tons of high explosives. Nobody knew these details at the time - it was some sort of top secret operation, if you knew anything you couldn't talk about it, half the crew were on leave, they had to pull guys off other ships, and so on and so forth. Dee had been down in San Diego for some kind of conference when Pete left, and she never got a chance to say goodbye. Official inquiries got her nowhere. She wasn't his wife and there was a war on, after all. She had to find out what had happened from the other nurses - who, like women throughout the world, were plugged into some kind of unofficial but infallible naval intelligence network..

All the foregoing events involving Pete had taken place some three months before Rick had met Dee. In the interim Dee had heard from her almost-fiancé only once, a brief letter full of no information whatsoever. In addition the shoreside scuttlebutt in Long Beach was full of references to Pete's ship, dark unpleasant rumors that Dee didn't want to hear but couldn't avoid. Dee's life had to go on, however, and for the moment Rick was part of it.

"She'll wait for him, Rick," Julie had said, "or at least wait until she finds out what the hell's going on. She's that kind of woman." It would have sounded hopelessly

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melodramatic if anybody but Julie had said it. Rick remembered shivering at what he knew to be the truth in her words.

It was abundantly clear: he had been a moron. And as if it required any further proof, he found himself - of course - angry with Dee for not stopping him from being a moron.

And as might be expected from a moron, Rick decided that the best thing to do that night was to get gloriously drunk. It would be his first time, and he was a little curious as to what it would be like. In any case, he was determined not to be like other drunks he had observed, rude and obnoxious. He planted himself purposefully at the bar and ordered a double Scotch because he heard somebody else order one. It burned like mad but he downed it in one go and asked for another one. To hell with Dee and everything and everybody, he thought. Or did he yell it? A couple guys at the end of the bar turned around to look at him. Rick made a face at them - in fact he might have stuck out his tongue. Not very mature but it could have been worse, and he was so proud of himself for maintaining his composure that he ordered and immediately threw back another double Scotch. He made up a little song about Dee and started to sing it, quietly he thought, but the barman asked him please to shut up. How had he heard the song? Rick was singing quietly, with refinement. His sister would have liked it but then he remembered he didn't have a sister and started to cry. But he couldn't cry and sing at the same time and he liked singing because he wanted to share his music. It was a good song and made sense. Screw the barman if he doesn't appreciate good music, thought Rick. But I was quiet. But now I see that the barman has rabbit ears so now I know how he heard my song. One ear pink, one ear green. Dee has green eyes but I forgot to put them in my song so I have to sing a new song but I can't sing as well from the floor here where I seem to be lying. Screw everybody. Oh god what's that coming out of my mouth it's not a song it's *****

... John Hardiman and two gunner's mates from another ship had to clean him up and carry him back aboard. Julie was with them and only the fact that she was the Officer of the Deck's wife's supervisor saved Rick from being written up when he started to sing again. Somehow the lads managed to get him below, stuff him into his rack, and find a spare fire bucket for his personal use. Rick said the hangover lasted three whole days. He did not believe a human head could ever have contained all the pain he carried around. The constant sounds of metal-on-metal impact that are an inescapable part of shipboard life caused him untold agony; stuffing cotton in his ears only made it worse: it kept only part of the noise out, but kept all the pain in. Aspirin was useless but he didn't dare go to sick bay or to the infirmary because he knew that the story of his adventure had spread throughout the ship and into the yard beyond and into the lovely civilian world beyond that. He thanked his lucky stars that Dee was on a week's leave attending a family reunion

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in Texas, although he had no doubt that on her return she would hear about what went on. It was all her fault anyway.

When his brain began to function again, Rick thought long and hard about Julie's warning. The rational portion of his intellect told him that he should back off, that no good could come of his relationship with Dee. The other 98% of his intellect realized that he couldn't stop himself, even though - as he said - he couldn't shave in the morning without looking in the mirror and seeing the words "goddamned fool" tattooed across the forehead. For Rick, the simple words "just good friends" were the three most terrifying - and impossible - words in the English language.

It was a paradox: everything had changed, and nothing had changed. Rick had never been in the middle of a paradox before. It wasn't a pleasant feeling.

One evening about a month or so after Julie's revelation, Rick and Dee had attended an Ella Fitzgerald concert at the Hollywood Bowl, and had afterwards gone to dinner. It had been a great show, and the restaurant - a new one for them - had been excellent, but Dee had seemed out of sorts. Rick got the impression that she was pretending to enjoy herself. Since pretense wasn't Dee's style - normally what you saw was what you got - Rick wondered whether she had gotten any news about Pete. "Is everything okay?" he had asked. He couldn't get any more specific without the possibility of getting Julie into trouble, since Dee herself had never mentioned Pete. In any event, her response was of the "No, I'm fine, just a little tired" variety, and Rick thought it best to leave it at that.

As they headed back towards Long Beach - Dee driving, since Rick didn't have a car - they spoke about ... anything. Pets, recipes, football, old acquaintances. Once Rick mentioned Hyannis, and Dee brightened. "How do you know about Hyannis?" she asked, and Rick gently reminded her that they had commenced their relationship with a long conversation about the Cape. "I'm from Falmouth, remember?" he asked in what he hoped was a gently ironic tone. "Of course ... I'm sorry," Dee replied in a voice that made Rick realize that she had taken his silly remark as a stinging rebuke. They didn't speak again during the remaining twenty minutes of the drive.

They were about ten blocks from the entrance to the naval base when Dee suddenly pulled the car over to the curb. "Would you like to back to my place for some coffee?" she asked. "You don't have to be back aboard until tomorrow afternoon, right?" Rick said he was almost too surprised to answer, but finally blurted out something affirmative. Dee turned east at the next intersection - away from the base - and fifteen minutes later they arrived in front a nondescript but respectable garden apartment. In another five minutes they were in front of her apartment door.

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Rick had never been in the building before, and now he stood watching the love of his life opening the door to her apartment. Before his conversation with Julie, it probably would have been the occasion for his greatest earthly happiness; now, however, there was no sense of triumph or expectation. Passion was out of the question. “god, it was weird,” he said. “She didn’t want me there, I guess I didn’t want to be there, and yet ... there we were. She went into the kitchen while I stood looking at a big map of the Cape she had taped to the wall. I saw names, faces, roads, houses ... there were a million memories there in front of me. I was having such a good time in the past I almost forgot the present ...”

He didn’t realize until she spoke that Dee was standing behind him holding two cups of coffee. “It’s a great place, isn’t it?” she asked. Her voice was low and sad, bare of all pretended cheerfulness. “I miss it. I couldn’t wait to leave it, but now I think I want to go back someday. I could work at the hospital ... what about you?”

Rick was again surprised. He said she never asked him personal questions. He had the feeling she was keeping him at arm’s length, not wanting to know too much about him, resisting the commitment to which a careless exchange of information might lead. “I asked her about that once, and she laughed. ‘It’s an Irish thing,’ was all that she would say. What the hell was that supposed to mean to an Italian Hungarian like me?”

In the midst of mumbling some inanity supposedly related to his future, Rick’s eyes fell on a picture. A man’s picture, face only Good looking, dark. For some reason “Greek” flashed across Rick’s mind.. Dee caught the direction of his glance. “That’s my fiancé,” she said softly. “He’s a Marine lieutenant. He’s been in the hospital in Okinawa. He was wounded near Cam Loc - not badly, but enough for a Purple Heart. I guess he did something special because they’re talking about a Silver Star for him too. He writes pretty often but he doesn’t talk much about what happened.”

“Fiancé? You never said anything about being engaged!” should have been Rick’s indignant response, followed by protestations of love et cetera et cetera. But he couldn’t bring himself to do it. “What’s his name?” he asked instead, thinking “Am I ever going to hear anything I can believe?” But she had another lie ready: his name was Jeff and would you believe it, he’s from the Cape too ...

He paused, and I was alarmed to see tears in Rick’s eyes. “If I hadn’t loved her before, I would have started to right at that moment,” he said in such a low voice I had trouble catching the words. I muttered something about fragility, and he nodded. “And yet, somehow she knew that I knew it was a lie. But she didn’t seem to care. The lie was for her more than for me or anyone else...I was miserable. “

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Dee asked him to spend the night, god knows why. The sadness never left her, and finally there was nothing left to talk about. No more pets, no more football. . They spent twenty silent minutes sitting and staring at the Cape Cod map on the wall. He thought about putting his arm around her but knew that it would be a bad idea. He couldn't comfort her about Pete because Pete existed in a part of her world that was off-limits to Rick. It broke his heart, but he understood: you know nothing, you say nothing. Never in his life would he have imagined that love would ever be this strange.

Finally Dee mumbled something about a "really long day" and headed in the general direction of her bedroom. Rick got the message loud and clear. He kissed her on the cheek; she said "Thanks" and, eventually, "Good night". He slept badly on the couch in her living room, got up before she did the next morning, and took a cab back to the ship. The pain he felt was almost physical. Two days later he got orders transferring him to a guided missile frigate down in San Diego. They deployed to the Far East shortly thereafter and he never spoke to her again. He kept loosely in touch with the Hardimans. Eventually his squadron started some risky business above the DMZ that made communications difficult; Rick got promoted, but the ship was short-staffed, his workload doubled, and by the time he caught his breath a few months later, the Hardimans had disappeared to no one knew where.

Topeka had apparently - at long last - put to sea again, but not bound for the Far East. Consensus seemed to be that she was instead bound for Norfolk via the Panama Canal for additional yard time. In any event John Hardiman was not aboard, nor was Julie working at the hospital any longer.

Dee's whereabouts were also a mystery. According to one of Rick's college pals who had just taken over as medical officer on another ship in Rick's squadron, Dee had left Long Beach to transfer to a hospital unit in Danang. He wasn't sure of a time frame but thought that Dee had left only a few weeks after Rick did. However - despite the fact that Rick's ship called in Danang fairly often - Rick was never able to find out for sure if Dee were in the area or not.

Oh yeah - *Topeka* had never made it through the Panama Canal. She had broken down again and actually had to be towed to Norfolk, where she was eventually decommissioned and sold for scrap. It had been a sad end to a noble career.

There was a long pause, and I thought that was the end of Rick's story, but it wasn't.

"Dee's back here, you know," he said. "She came back here to the Cape, like she

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said she would. She's a grandmother now." I started a question. "No, someone else. No one ever heard of Pete or his ship again. It disappeared in a typhoon somewhere between Honolulu and the Philippines. As nearly as I can figure out, she couldn't have gotten the news until a week or so after the last time we were together ..."

He said he had no idea what her married name was. He had called a few of the O'Riordans in the phone book as soon as he arrived on-Cape, but none of them knew anything about Dee.

But eventually Rick's diligence somehow paid off. "I found out she works at a dress shop here in the Mall," he said with a big smile. "I watched for a few days and figured out when she takes her lunch break. I spent a lot of time looking at kittens and hamsters in the window of the pet shop next to her place. I was so nervous I thought the security guards were going to ask me to leave. But finally she came out. I wasn't going to say anything, I wanted to wait. But she walked right past me. Looked me right in the eye and kept walking. But she's as beautiful as she ever was ..." "You didn't speak to her?" I asked. No, Rick said - it wasn't the time yet: she had to remember who he was. Then they could talk. and ...

I couldn't think of anything to say. "She's the reason I came back," Rick said quietly. I told him I had figured that out and wished there was some way I could help him.

Rick had been glancing at his watch the whole time we were together, and as he checked it again he gave a yelp of dismay, "Oh god ... almost time! Sorry but I've got to get going ... it's almost her break ... hey, let's keep in touch, okay?" The last words were fairly shouted as he disappeared around the corner of the food court.

My little story might have ended there but for an odd twist that took place a few weeks later.

My wife's cousin came to visit us from New Jersey. Val is a great lady and loves to shop, and particularly loves malls and all that pertains to them. My wife, bless her, is not normally so inclined, but we figured we'd do lunch and keep Val company while she did her personal best to boost the retail economy of Barnstable County.

I have to confess that other matters had intervened in my life since my meeting with Rick, as a consequence of which I had forgotten the little matter of his obsession. The memory came back to me with a crash when I realized that the shop in whose window Cousin Val had found some item of interest was Dee's.

I must have done something to get my wife's attention. "Honey, are you okay?"

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she asked. I mentioned indigestion and pretended to burp - politely. The ruse seemed to work. "Do you want to come in with us or wait out here?" asked Cousin Val. "We promise not to be too long." I said I'd wait for a bit, but I knew that I'd be summoned to approve any intended purchases, and at that point I'd get to see Dee. I didn't flatter myself that she'd remember me.

The woman behind the counter had once been beautiful. There was no mistaking the fact that it was Dee, but time had not dealt kindly with her, and without going into specifics it would I think be fair to say that only Rick - seeing less with the eyes than with a heart full of love and hope - could have thought her anything more than a plump but pleasant-looking middle-aged lady who might have been a redhead at one time. I noticed she wore no wedding ring.

There was the briefest flash of recognition in the green eyes when she saw me. Or, far more likely, I imagined there was a flash of recognition. My wife and Cousin Val were keeping Dee pretty busy, so there was no chance of my saying anything stupid like "Hi - were't you a gorgeous redhead one time?" or "Remember me from that beer bash in Long Beach forty years ago?" Painful, especially if my wife or Cousin Val happened to overhear ...

The women concluded their purchases and we left the shop. We turned to the right to continue our exploration of the mall and passed close to a line of those benches that had recently been installed by kindly management for the benefit of weary shoppers. On the first bench - the one closest to Dee's shop - I was startled to see Rick, pretending to read a newspaper. He glared up at me as we passed, but said nothing. I was about to say hello but the look on his face offered no sign of encouragement, in fact quite the opposite.

My first guess was that Rick felt resentment for having told me the details of his earlier relationship with Dee. He wouldn't be the first person to feel that way, especially since he and I had never exactly been bosom buddies. Or maybe he felt threatened in some way: it was one thing to tell me that Dee worked in the Mall, and another thing to see me coming out of her shop. Maybe I had talked to her about Rick. Maybe we were all laughing at him Whatever his problem was, his angry eyes followed me until we turned the next corner.

I was disappointed but not surprised that Rick never made any subsequent attempt to contact me. With all due respects to the management, it was another couple of years before I had any reason to be back in the mall. There was no sign of Rick; Dee's dress shop was now a day spa or some such, and none of the spa employees knew anything about the previous occupants of the space.

Well, that's that, I thought.

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A week later I saw Rick's obituary in the paper. Suddenly at home, it said, and you were left to draw your own conclusions. The nearest relative mentioned was a nephew and the arrangements were off-Cape. I thought about attending but then decided that curiosity was hardly the proper motive for doing so.

She probably wouldn't have been there anyway.

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