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The Weather Forecast

'Good evens, my name is Arri van Gelder, your Captain, shpeaking to you from the bridge. Just to let you know that the *Pride of Bruges* is now ready for sea and we will be leaving the berth in a few minutsh time.

The wedder forecash is for moderate eashterly windsh, backing north easht. Sea state is moderate to rough. So take care when moving around the ship.

We expect to be on the berth in Zeebrugge at eight forty-five Continental Time. On behalf of P and Oash I wish you a pleasant crosshing.....'

I was all ears. It was over thirty years since I had been on a large boat – the ss *Orsova* of P & O Orient Lines. Surely this North Sea ferry couldn't live up to the pedigree of the iconic company that epitomised the cream of the British Merchant Marine. Could it?

The thirty thousand ton ferry (I couldn't believe how big it was) slipped its moorings and inched, or even centimetered, forward. It had barely travelled twice its own length before it spun dramatically to starboard and headed for the entrance to the lock which it would have to navigate before it could enter the River Humber en route to the North Sea. I wanted to go out on deck but it was dark and the weather unpleasant so I stayed in the Sunset Lounge with Terry, Pat and Jonesy. The last two were in their early eighties and laughing and drinking beer, no doubt feeling liberated from the normal presence of their wives. I was by far the youngest as I had yet to celebrate my fiftieth.

The beer flowed like Niagara Falls at a price below normal pub prices. A holiday atmosphere was already in the air. I gave my Dad a quick call on my mobile, fearful that the signal would be lost as soon as we reached the open sea.

'Have a drink with me and your Mum, Boy, in Bruges won't you?'

Mum had passed away a decade earlier but a lump still came into my throat. I felt a little guilty not taking Dad with me but his emphysema and limited mobility would have made it very tricky for him. There was another forbear I wanted to take a drink with as well but breakfast time the following day was not, to put it mildly, the time to raise a glass.

As a little thank you for organising the trip and the tickets, I took Terry to the *Four Seasons* restaurant which operated on a self-service buffet system. It was busy and the fare on offer was well presented and tasty. Washed down with beer and accompanied by numerous roll-up fags (for Terry) all was well with the world. You could still smoke in restaurants in those days.

After supper we rejoined Pat and Jonesy who amazingly were still drinking beer. I was surprised when an Entertainments Officer came over the microphone and announced that the on-board resident duo would soon start. I can't remember their names but a girl sang and a guy played keyboards.

'Any requests?' was met by a loud 'Bluebells over the white cliffs of Dover' by a now three sheets to the wind Terry despite the fact the ship was propelled by four giant marine diesels and not sails. Two hundred people laughed and Terry lit another roll-up. Once past Spurn Point the sheltered waters of the estuary were left behind and the correctly forecast easterly caused the ship, on a south easterly bearing, to roll more than a bit. It didn't bother me at all. As my father had once said to me

'You can't beat a bit of rough weather for keeping the queue down at the bar.' Not that there was a queue anyway. Stewards seemed to be everywhere.

At about midnight GMT we repaired to our cabins for the night. The top bunk was my allotted station which suited me just fine. The motion of the ship gently rocked me to sleep and I think my last conscious thoughts were of the old P & O mantra of 'POSH' - denoting port out, starboard home. In the days before air-conditioning this was a reminder for passengers travelling to join the British Raj in India to select a cabin on the port, and thus cooler, side of a ship for the outward voyage and the opposite when homeward bound. Our port-side cabin was also booked for the return journey so it was 'POPH' which doesn't quite have the same ring to it - does it?

Bing bong! 'Good morning ladies and gentlemen.' The Tannoy system was in good voice.

'The time is seven o' clock Continental Time and breakfast is now being served in the Four Seasons Restaurant.'

I switched on my light and looked at my watch. It read six o'clock. Oh heck, of course, I had forgotten to put my watch one hour forward. I was still on GMT – or Zulu as my Dad called it in his non PC vernacular. I remedied that error instantly. With the ship still rocking I took care to arrive at carpet level in one piece and entered the en-suite bathroom to ablute, shave and 'put my eyes in' as I always described it. We had an 'outside' cabin and I peaked out through the gap in the curtain. It was pitch black but I could make out some lights in the distance which I guessed were the Port of Zeebrugge. I left Terry asleep and headed for the restaurant which was on the same deck.

Hardly anyone else was eating breakfast and to be truthful I wasn't really hungry. I ate sausages, eggs and toast and then made my way up three further decks until I found myself on a weather deck – that means outside to you non-maritime types. I climbed up a ladder to the boat deck just as the *Pride of Bruges* passed between the red and green lights marking the harbour entrance. It was a poignant moment for me.

'Hi Grandpop! I finally made it to Zeebrugge. I'll raise my glass to you later. Promise.'

Almost eighty-five years earlier, my paternal Grandfather Clement, an Electrical Artificer (First Class) had been on the daring Zeebrugge Raid. Zeebrugge, and further inland Bruges, had been German U-boat bases and the Raid was an attempt to block the entrance by blowing up merchant ships loaded with explosives., Many were killed and more Victoria Crosses were awarded that day since the notorious Rorke's Drift in the Zulu War in 1879, coincidentally the year my Grandfather was born in London. So at thirty-nine he was no spring chicken to be in the thick of the action. Mind you he had already survived Gallipoli and Jutland so maybe a day trip across the Channel before breakfast, so to speak, was a walk in the park.

At that moment my daydream was brought to an end by a lashing of cold rain against my face as the ship turned quite sharply to starboard to head for the Leopold berth where it would dock. I descended several decks to our cabin to find Terry rolling some fags. Coffees had arrived on a tray via a Steward which I had ordered the previous evening. Good old P &O. Some things don't change. This wasn't the *Orsova*, *Oronsay* or *Orcades* but it still somehow emulated the swagger of those golden days. This was however Zeebrugge and not Hong Kong or Singapore. We disembarked into the rain and the coach to Bruges. I was not to be disappointed.