

The Warning Bell

Tom Macaulay

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Extract

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Tom Macaulay



Long ago, and in another age, my father worked on the fishing boats out of Falmouth harbour.

I discovered later that he was thirteen when he first went to sea as a deckhand on his great uncle Jack's wooden trawler, a vessel which had been built so far back in the days of sail that it had to be adapted to take an engine. My father never talked to me about those times. He never really talked to me at all. But even now I imagine him at night on a pitching deck, a thin boy in oilskins too big for him, scrubbing fish blood off the planking, shovelling the quicksilver catch into the hold.

Fishermen of his generation knew the sea floor between St Anthony Head and the Breton coast better than they knew the road to Exeter. But after the Second World War, my father never went back to the great waters, as he called them. I should have realised that at some moment in the past he had broken faith with the sea, and that this haunted him. I should have realised that, down all the years that followed, he was trying to protect me in the only way he knew how. But as a child I was frightened when I heard him shouting at night, wild shouting and things knocked over – a lamp broken, a chair overturned – and under it all my mother's calm voice, soothing him until he was quiet again. To my shame, I felt only the injustice of his withdrawal, and never asked myself the reason for it.

When at last he did tell me about the night in 1944 which had thrown so deep a shadow over him, it was very nearly too late. Perhaps it actually was too late.

This is how it happened.

Prologue: 1944

A running sea muttered along the hull. The launch rolled a little. On the foredeck, Pilot Officer George Madoc braced his knee against the wheelhouse bulkhead and checked his watch. The luminous hands momentarily hurt his eyes with their brightness. It was 1.14 in the morning. That made it the 20th of March already. His twenty-second birthday.

He sensed the tide falling away beneath the boat, and could feel her tugging at her tether like a restive horse. Inshore, white water flickered as the St Cyriac Shoals rose above the surface. A tocsin bell tolled unseen in the darkness, as if from a drowned cathedral.

Great Uncle Jack would have called this a smugglers' night – the dark of the moon, ragged clouds drifting like gunsmoke, and the threat of dirty weather. George remembered a hundred nights like it on this very coast, the trawler thudding steadily homeward, fish flashing like ingots on the deck. A real smugglers' night. Uncle Jack would lean on the wheel and peer into the murk, chew on his pipe and spit over the side for luck.

George wondered what the old man would have made of High Speed Launch 2548, if he had been alive to see her – sixty-three feet of mahogany hull with a cutwater curved like a sabre and a top speed of forty knots. There were those who said the RAF should leave the sea to the Navy, but to George it was altogether fitting that the launch should be piloted by airmen: she was more of the air than of the sea, more gull than fish, with the thunder of her Napier Sealion aero engines and the jolt of grey seas spuming away behind her.

Beyond the Shoals he could just make out the dark mass of

the Breton coast. Once he saw a wandering pin-prick of light, a bicycle perhaps, with a poorly masked front lamp. He imagined a German soldier wobbling back to his billet, full of wine, dreaming of a blonde wife in Hamburg. But there would be other Germans on those cliffs tonight, men who were more alert, sentries leaning on the parapets of pillboxes, scanning the waters with their Zeiss binoculars. Everyone knew the invasion was coming soon, and the whole North Atlantic coast bristled with tension. George shrugged himself deeper into his duffel coat. It wasn't especially cold, but he could not seem to get warm.

'You wish to be flying back to England, Captain,' Lucien whispered, almost in his ear. 'Flying home over the waves in your fast boat.'

Lucien's eyes were startlingly white in the darkness, and were fixed on him like a cat's. The man's dark camouflage clothing and his blackened face and hands made the rest of him all but invisible.

'Your friends are late,' George said shortly. He didn't like to be surprised. He lifted his binoculars again to peer into the rising wind. 'I won't wait much longer.'

The seconds dragged by. George kept his binoculars to his eyes, rain speckling their lenses, hoping to shut out the other man, hoping he would take the hint and leave. But he did not leave. George could sense him hovering at his shoulder.

He didn't know why he felt the way he did tonight. He had reason enough to be on edge, with the launch wallowing off the St Cyriac Shoals and her huge engines cold and silent, but it was more than that. It was something to do with this quiet Frenchman with his classroom English and his face as black as a demon from the pit. Lucien wasn't the first agent George had ferried across – the fast wooden Air Sea Rescue launches were ideal for the task – but he was the first to unnerve him.

The cold wind slung a handful of rain over them both, and then curled back and slung another. Great blocks of water thudded into the sand ahead of them, and spray exploded over the Shoals. The launch swung and a cable groaned and the sea slapped against her stern. No matter what he had said, George

knew he would wait a little longer yet. Someone was out there even now, a local fisherman perhaps, who could thread through the wire and the mines and the white shoalwater where no one else would venture; someone who knew the suck and rush of every channel and could find his way with no moon and all the shore lights blacked out.

‘They’ve sent me to kill someone,’ Lucien said, conversationally. ‘I suppose you know that?’

‘I just drive the boat. Thank God, that’s all I do.’

‘Ah, Captain, how you would like to stay pure.’

‘I’m not a captain.’

‘You don’t like to risk your crew for an assassin. Your job is saving lives, not for ferrying killers. Am I right? But it is too late. We are all part of this madness.’

The Frenchman stood up, and for the first time George could see something of him in the light reflected from the water. He realised how young Lucien was, younger even than he was himself.

‘He lives in St Malo, this man I must kill,’ Lucien said. ‘Runs a firm making precision instruments. He’s a jolly type who likes a glass of wine with his friends and never hurt anyone in his life. An ordinary man, doing the best he can for his family and his people. There was a time when working with the Germans was the only option for men like him, but people think differently now.’ Lucien paused. ‘I’ll use a knife, probably. That’s what London will expect. It sends such an emphatic message.’

‘You don’t have to tell me this.’

‘I’ve lost count of them, Captain, to tell you the truth. Though there is one I will never forget. A man in Nantes. I waited in the lobby of his apartment building for over two hours. It was very dark, and when he came up the stairs, it was all over in a moment. I wasn’t to know his daughter had come down from Paris for the weekend. She was only eighteen or so, and looked remarkably like him. At least she did from behind, as she tried to find the lock. Looked quite different when she was dead, of course, but by then—’

‘Shut up.’

‘But no one could blame me for that. If they did, they’d have

to blame everyone else who played a part. The officer who gave the order, the people who trained me, the experts who forged my documents ... Even the pilot of the plane who flew me across the Channel.'

George stared out to sea.

'How will we all be judged, Captain? I used to believe that Good would triumph, and that our blackened souls would be washed clean at the end, no matter what we had done, but now I'm no longer sure. Now I tell myself I am just the ferryman. That comforts me. Charon, that's who I am. I ferry the souls of the dead across the Styx.' He looked at George. 'Just as you ferry me.'

'No.'

'You cannot stand away from the shore forever, Captain. None of us can.'

George swung to face him, angry now. But as his eyes met Lucien's he saw such emptiness there, such despair, that he could give no voice to the sharp words that were on his lips. He turned away again.

'Perhaps it will be different this time,' Lucien said, his tone gentler now. 'Perhaps I will not do what they tell me to do. Perhaps this time there is a chance for me to find my way back. I shall take it if I can.'

The launch swooped into a trough and up again and both men gripped the cabin roof.

George ducked into the wheelhouse. MacDonald, the Australian Flight Sergeant and First Cox'n, was huddled against the bulkhead, his binoculars resting on the edge of the window and trained out into the night. Spray shone on his coat. George stepped past him and took the wheel, though this was properly MacDonald's role. Glancing towards the stern George could see Darby Allen crouched between his engines, his pale brow a question mark in the dark, waiting for the command. MacDonald moved his binoculars left to right, and then quickly back again.

'Red light, Skip,' he said. 'On the port quarter. Again.'

George felt the wheel twist in his hands as the sea nudged at the rudder; 2548 was restless, anxious to carry him away. She

would respond at a touch. No one would blame him. The crew would thank him. *Full ahead all three.* The order that meant home, escape, freedom. Utter those words and they would be gone. They would be safe.

He left the wheel and climbed back out on deck.

In less than a minute the little boat nudged alongside, a cockleshell of a skiff with two figures in it. George caught a glimpse of a man reaching for the nets and behind him at the tiller a boy of perhaps thirteen who, astonishingly, smiled up at him with guileless pleasure. One of his crewmen took the thrown rope and made it fast, and there were hissed exchanges of French and English in the darkness. Lucien dropped a clinking bag over the side.

‘It seems there is no escape for us, Captain,’ he said.

Lucien swung himself over and found his footing on the nets. He gripped George’s wrist, twisted his hand and pressed something hard and cold into his palm. A strange expression crossed his face, and then the boat fell away into the darkness.

I

Pablo handed his Mont Blanc pen to me across the leatherclad acreage of his desk. 'Two mill and change, you'll come out with. Plus the share option, and pension rights, healthcare and so on. It's not a fortune, but if you're careful, you won't have to work again. Which I suppose was the idea.'

'Isn't that everyone's idea?'

Pablo grunted in a noncommittal fashion, and peered at the label of the champagne bottle over the top of his half-moon glasses. I rolled the fat pen between my fingers.

'Well don't sit there staring at it!' Pablo bellowed. 'Sign the bloody thing!'

I scrawled my name and he snatched the document from me as if he feared I might have changed my mind at the last moment. He reached for his pen and tucked it away inside his immaculate jacket.

'Congratulations, Iain. You're a free man.' He leaned back in his oak captain's chair until it groaned. 'So it's to be bliss in Burgundy, is it? Passion in Provence?'

'Not sure where yet. Somewhere in France. A little place I can keep a pig.'

His chair came forward with a bump. 'A *pig*?'

'I always wanted a pig.'

He stared at me.

I grinned. 'Don't worry about us, Pablo.'

'I don't worry about *you*, you weird bastard. But you're even madder than I thought you were if you seriously imagine that the lovely Chantal is going to be happy digging in a dunghill and slaving over a hot Aga – even if she *is* French. That woman of yours is an adrenalin junkie.'

‘I’m sure she’d be flattered, Pablo.’

‘Where is she now, for example?’

‘On her last assignment. Lebanon.’

‘I rest my case.’

I smiled to myself. Pablo was secretly in love with Chantal, and sometimes not so secretly. I expect he fantasised about her in sweat-stained khaki, dodging bullets in some distant war zone with cameras strapped around her body. He wouldn’t be the only man who did. It was different for me. I was married to her. I’d got past the fantasy stage some time ago and moved on to being worried sick every time she went off on assignment. Now, thank God, all that would change too.

I said, ‘Chantal’s spent enough time running around disaster areas with nothing more useful than a camera in her hand.’ I raised my hand to silence him. ‘Her words, not mine. She’s already told the agency. After this trip, she’s out.’

Pablo filled my glass, but the look of doubt never quite left his face.

I said, ‘Don’t you ever wish you could break the pattern, Pablo? Feel the sun on your back? Watch the sunset and not think about the office on Monday?’

‘Is this a multiple choice question?’

‘I want to build something new. That’s all. Can you understand that?’

‘So buy a Lego set.’

‘We both want to build something new.’

‘Get her one too.’

‘You can say what you like.’ I lifted my glass and gave him my biggest smile. ‘Nobody’s going to stop us now.’

I left his office an hour later and wandered through Covent Garden and down towards the river. I was euphoric from the champagne and from my newfound freedom. It was April, cold and bright, and the buses shone like big red toys. I sat on a bench by the Embankment and stared out over the flashing river. I was scared to death of boats, but whenever I needed space to think I loved to gaze at water. My office in Camden Lock – my former office – overlooked the piazza on the Grand Union Canal where

young people in bright clothes crowded the Asian and Mexican food stalls in summer, and sipped latte on terraces beside the narrowboats. Through my windows the crystalline blocks of central London stood against the sky like Camelot in a Burne-Jones canvas, but it was the shining strip of the canal that my eyes always found.

I thought about the energy and optimism of that office, and the fun I'd had there. We designed on-line expert systems for the medical and legal professions, and our rooms hummed with hard drives and glowed with plasma screens and brainpower. The business had consumed me for nearly twenty years and the members of the team I had built up were the nearest I had to friends. For a moment, I couldn't imagine what life would be like without them.

But nobody would stop us now.

My mobile rang.

'Dad?' Kate's voice was urgent. 'It's Grandma.'