

The Last Note Of The Song

Neil Williamson

Overture

The music begins far out and down deep, a shiver of strings and bells flashing up out of the nightwaters, fleet and sudden as mackerel. It breaks the surface with a sigh soft as the bow wake sluicing from the prow of a blackened merchantman, the painted name burnt away, the figurehead blinded. The music takes on the woody beat of plucked cellos and basses, the slap of oars, the draw of dory hulls through the chop, the stifled instructions to the rowers as they alter their bearing, a little down the coast from the lights of Montegrosso, a little further still to avoid that scattering of lanterns abroad on wreckers' business. The music builds to a dark boil as the surf draws the boats into the craggy cove at the place where the island's great mountain cools its feet in the sea.

Who hears the music? The monkeys do. It chases them, screeching flutes mocking their cries of fear, out of the jungle, through the plantation fields and into hiding in the eaves of the shacks and rusted lean-tos that fringe Montegrosso's periphery like a crusty scab. Here the music leaves off its malicious play. It's time for the serious business.

It changes its tune.

Now, rolling down the street towards the harbour square it becomes rousing, boisterous, avuncular.

Who hears the music now?

Everyone hears it, though few recognise it for what it is. Few, besides the one who has been listening for it – or something like it – all his life.

Gifts

The potboy's name is Roger. He weaves between tables, adds a tankard to the bunch in his fist, skips away from the drunken grasp of its former owner, treads on a booted toe and attempts to dodge the kick that will follow.

Unsuccessfully. It's been a bruising night, but no more than usual. Working in the inn now is no different to the years in the orphanage, where a fair complexion and freckles were more than enough reason to attract abuse. He ignores the throb in his buttock, and finds himself humming a tune.

Now, where did that come from?

He listens, and faintly, under the inn's bray and clatter, faintly, under the coughs and chatter, faintly, he hears the music. His heart illuminates.

"I sense a gift," he sings. "I sense a lift from this humdrum..."

A querulous growl squalls up from the quartet of card players as he swings by their table. "Hey, Blondie!" The Magistrate grabs his sleeve. "More rum."

The blue pipesmoke stares of the Minister, the Pilot and the Harbourmaster add their heft to the command. "More rum," they chorus.

"Yes, sirs, more rum." As Roger scurries off he sighs to himself, "from this pitiable, humdrum life."

The bottles are stacked at the far end of the bar where Mrs Hutton slouches over the counter, displaying her blubbery, whalewhite *décolletage* to any who are desperate enough to cast a glance in her direction, which on any given night is most of the sorry tars unfortunate enough to be berthed at the east end of the harbour. The lazy cow could easily have served the gentlemen, but her attention is fixed on the door. So, Roger circumnavigates the woman's fat arse and retrieves a fresh bottle himself.

Cracking off the wax, he breathes, “I sense a lift from this fetch...run, beer...rum, hum...drum life.”

He had thought that last utterance had been under his breath, but Old Andy must have heard it because he has hefted his squeeze box up to his mutton-chopped cheek and wheezed the line right back at him. It’s a plaintive, pathetic sound right enough. Roger plonks the rum bottle on the card players’ table and then drifts off to resume the quest for empties.

But the music won’t leave him alone. The strains he hears aren’t pathetic, they stir him. The music makes his heart skip and his fingers itch and the sudden, embarrassing hardness in his breeches twitch.

“I sense a gift,” he sings, louder this time. “I sense a shift to a life of adventure.”

Behind him someone – the Magistrate from the snide tone – snorts a laugh.

“I sense a lift from this life of indentured drudgery. I see. Something coming for me.”

“The only thing you’ll see coming, my lad,” Mrs Hutton’s grip on his shoulder makes him jump and the dregs slop from the pint pots. Her eyes barely flicker from the door. “Is the back of my bony hand, if you don’t hold your noise. So be glad of what you have.” She spares the room a sheepish shrug. “Honestly,” she sings, hoarse and coarse. “Boys!”

More laughter. This time he does look and it seems that everyone is in on the joke...well, maybe not everyone. There’s a stranger in the corner who’s been nursing a jar all evening. Not the sort of fellow you’d notice particularly, just an ordinary looking down-on-his-luck sailor, but there’s something about the square of his unsmiling jaw, the eagerness in his eye that sets him apart. That

and the brazen wink he tips in Roger's direction. Oblivious, the proprietor deals him one last pinch before waddling back to the bar.

The music roars in Roger's ears like the wind on the cliffs, tug-tugging him towards the crumbling precipice, towards the waiting waves. It makes him want to scream like he sometimes does when he goes there alone.

"I hear escape," he sings in quiet defiance. "I hear escape from this slavish confinement. I hear the call to a life of excitement. I hear the song of the open sea..."

Something *thunks* against the inn's front door.

"I sense a shift," he chokes as a second *thunk* shivers the old oak timbers.

"A lift..." His voice is little more than a whisper.

A third and final time. *Thunk*. The door swings open. Cold, salty air knives through the soupy atmosphere. The warped timbers frame a view of stars and the darkling sea.

Roger's lips move, but there's neither the breath nor the hope in him to sing, "I sense a gift for me."

Then there are men filing into the inn. Their oilskins are slick wet, their boots crusty with sand. Their coats are bulging to ridiculous proportions, one is even wriggling. The inn's residents take a sudden and intense interest in their beers.

Roger's heart sinks even as Mrs Hutton heaves her slovenly frame into action, bursting out from behind the bar like a cow off the transport just arrived from Blighty.

"Gifts!" she bellows. "Boy, you know what to do...at last we have gifts." A dunt in Roger's back throws him forward and he stumbles over to the cellar trap. "After so many weeks of arduous thrift," the bar owner simpers as if she knew the meaning of the word. "Such fortune, such kindness, such gifts." The

oilskinned men shuffle nervously, three-quarter turned away from the Magistrate and his cronies who are affecting an equally unconvincing pretence. As Roger heaves at the trapdoor ring, Mrs Hutton aims a kick at his rear. “Well, hurry, you shiftless, listless lump. The gents ain’t got all night while you lounge on your rump. Be grateful for once, though it’s sad to say. That we’ve lucked from the flotsam of others’ dismay. There’s sailors out there who have gave their lives, there’s orphans at home and there’s grieving wives, and the Good Lord has seen fit to provide us with...” Now she has warmed to her theme there’s no stopping her. It’s just as well everyone in the inn knows well enough to forget everything she has said. “...this luck of the tides, this bounteous drift, these gifts.”

The cellar trap comes at last and falls open with a crash.

Mrs Hutton shoots Roger a furious look, and then continues her ridiculous pantomime of obfuscation. “Gifts for everyone! Drinks on the house!” she bellows as if the noise of her braying will distract anyone’s attention from the newcomers’ progress down her cellar steps; from that dropped package, the squealing fury of the escaping piglet, and most especially the four bottles of good liquor slipped under the card players’ table.

The clientele, of course, while not fooled for a second, are only too happy to play along. “Gifts for all,” they sing, taking up her tune and thumping their tankards on the tables. “Drinks on the house.”

Roger, immediately pressed into satisfying the demand, is rushed off his feet transporting armfuls of rum bottles and foam-flying mugs of beer to all corners of the bar room, all the while holding on to his own, pure melody as Mrs Hutton and her customers make a racket of their tawdry gifts, so he does not notice how the next thing happens. All he knows is that the Magistrate is blustering – which usually means trouble for someone – and rubbing furiously

at the back his hand, and that his companions have forgotten their cards and are staring at him with a mix of cunning and slack-jawed fear. And that the stranger from before is nowhere to be seen.

It's the Harbourmaster, a stupid, superstitious man, who voices it, adding a disharmonious shriek to the cacophony.

"He's got the spot!"

The Magistrate pretends not to have heard, but slips the offending hand under the table. His whiskers twitch. "Sorry? What?"

"I said," the Harbourmaster grips the Magistrate's flounced sleeve. "You've got. The spot."

"No, I've not," the older man protests, but one yank and the evidence is there for all to see. An unmistakable mark, black and greasy.

"It's the spot!" chimes in the Pilot.

"It's grot," protests the Magistrate.

"It's the spot!" growls the Minister.

"What rot!" The Magistrate rubs hard enough now to scour away the layers of skin blackened by the mark. "It's a duelling scar, where I was shot!"

"The spot!" the three chorus now, ganging up on him. "The spot!"

The Magistrate is getting desperate, but he's surrounded by the crashing of tankards that sounds to Roger's imaginative ears as loud as militia rifles.

"Gifts for all," bellows Mrs Hutton, sensing the trouble even if she's not seen it yet.

"Drinks on the house," enthuse the rabble, like they're thirsty for more than booze.

Roger retreats in the direction of the kitchen. "I sense..."

The Magistrate's erstwhile friends have him on his feet now.

"We suggest," hisses the Pilot, "that you leave here and never return."

“You suggest? You’re my friend. Now talk sense to me man...”

“We insist,” continues the Minister. “Through that door now, make nary a turn.”

“What’s this? You insist now? *I insist* you unhand...”

“You’ve no choice,” grits the Harbourmaster dragging the poor man to the door. “Lest the mob are to learn.”

“*I demand...*”

“About your unfortunate little burn.”

“Gifts for all,” screech Mrs Hutton, scream the mob.

Roger flees for the kitchen door.

Outside is a blessed relief. Roger takes a shuddery breath of sea air. He can still hear the rabble inside, but the clamour has lost that manic edge. And now, faintly, he hears the music, and it reassures him.

“I sense a gift...” Roger sings, but he stops because the music has shifted cadence, become mysterious. And from the direction of the street there’s a whimpering noise. The combination is compelling. Sidling along the wall, Roger comes upon an odd tableaux: a lamp standard illuminating the trembling outline of a man in the act of bending over a lumpy sack, like an image from a storybook rendered in cut-paper silhouette. The man’s identity is no mystery. The Magistrate cuts a wretched figure, but it’s not from him that the whimpers issue. The sack moves. The old man aims a tentative prod with the toe of his boot, but the moment that he does so four dark shapes melt out of the shadows like black wax. There’s a burst of violence, a scuffle, a quickly stifled cry and then the shapes and the sack are gone. And the Magistrate is splayed out on the road, and the dark shape that melts out from beneath him is not wax.

Roger has barely time to stifle a gasp before his arms are pinned to his sides, his vision roughly obscured and his sensibility abruptly shut off by a thunderous rap on his skull.

Kidnapped!

The music sways Roger awake. He blinks. The world is too bright, its odours too sharp. The combination of them with the swaying sensation makes him nauseous. His mouth tastes sour, his head pounds. All he can think about is sleep. Instinctively he attempts to curl up into a ball.

A none too gentle kick in the pants denies any chance of that. A rough hand rolls him over.

“What’s this?” The face is red and lumpy as a beetroot, as whiskered as the inn’s ancient tomcat. “So the other one’s awake?” A pair of chapped lips split into what may be intended as a smile, but the revealed teeth are as grey and eroded as the rocks of Lucifer’s Spit.

Roger shrinks back.

“Naw, don’t run away, fer pity’s sake. Old Angelo be yer friendly, mate. Here...” The creature rummages a battered copper flask from his ragged britches. “Take a swally. Get you ship-a-shape, so it will.” He winks. “And no mistake.”

Roger is nervous of the bizarre old man, but the taste in his mouth is becoming unbearable. He takes the flask, sniffs the unstoppered neck, experience preparing him for something noxious, but it smells surprisingly inoffensive. So he takes a long, deep draught, and then immediately flops

forward, vomiting up the burning liquid. He retches and retches until he is empty, his eyes streaming and his belly sore from the spasms.

“Oh, but that’s rough,” he croaks. “What is that stuff?”

“Nowt but old Angelo’s grog,” the old man cackles back at him. “Cuts right through the morning fog.”

As obtuse as the answer is, Roger realises that it’s also accurate. The drink has scoured the taste from his mouth and sluiced the furze out of his mind, and soon enough he feels well enough to sit up and consider his position.

He’s in a damp, roofless, wooden room. The bright sky spins, dizzily high above his head. He’s sitting on a pile of sacks between a stack of salt-stained barrels and a tower of crates. A knotted rope sways behind the old man.

In fact, in spite of the miraculous work done by that abysmal alcohol everything, still, sways.

A rush of realisation froths up from his belly like the air bubbles that leak from his mouth when he is swimming. It’s a mixture of excitement and fear. It’s got the tart, spicy flavour of adventure. The music had promised him a shift, after all...a gift indeed.

“I’ve been kidnapped,” Roger sings. “You’ve stolen me.”

The man called Angelo manages to crease his face into an expression of dismay. “Harsh words, little chap,” he scowls. “By any measure.”

“I’ve been *kidnapped!*” Roger repeats the word now, relishing it. “Smuggled out to sea.”

Angelo waves his hands in a placatory manner. “Naw, you’re simply a guest of the Captain’s pleasure. ”

Roger laughs and shakes his head and swears he can feel the memories of Montegrosso, of Ma Hutton’s squalid rumshop and all the slaps and smacks he suffered there, and in the orphanage before it, tumble out like pebbles kicked

off a cliff edge. “You’ve kidnapped me! You’ve *rescued* me,” he yells. “At last, I’m free!”

Old Angelo blinks in startlement. “Free,” he sings slowly, “is not for me to say. But it’s true enough the Ship’s your home now. However long you youngsters stay.”

There’s an unreadable look in the old man’s eyes, but Roger is swept along by the music. He doesn’t think about the implications of the lump on his head that brought him here, or even where, precisely, *here* is. He’s a lad for whom the words “press-gang” have long been a fantasy. It’s a phrase that has traditionally launched many a renowned sea-going career, and the starting point in Roger’s mind for any number of adventuresome possibilities. For now he is slave to the music, caught up in the heart-racing, helter-skelter symphony of his escape from the limited horizons of his former life. And he has just become aware of a new melody woven into the arrangement.

“You said *youngsters*,” he breathes. “Called me *the other*. Am I not alone then in this escapade? Have I brother?”

“Too true! The Captain sent for English beans – a special yellow type.” Angelo ruffles Roger’s fair thicket. “But *two* sacks came aboard, which means. Now he’s trying to decide which is wrong and who is right.”

Roger hears a troubled tone in Angelo’s voice, but he’s still too caught up in the music. Not only has it swept him at last to the beginning of an adventure, but it’s delivered him a comrade-in-arms into the bargain. On cue, the music flourishes a fanfare that conjures images of two young men fighting back-to-back on the deck of a sleek ship, repelling bloodthirsty cutthroats; and then, perhaps later, fighting face-to-face over some young lady, or even the owning of the ship itself. Never having had a friend of any sort, he sees no disadvantage

in having one that someday may become his rival. Indeed, the music appears to demand it.

Roger springs for the rope, but Angelo's age belies his reactions. Roger squirms, but the old man's grip is fast.

"'Tis rumoured," his rheumy gaze loses all of its friendliness, as he enunciates his words clearly. "There be treasure in the Captain's mind, and one of ye be the key?"

It is clear that Roger is expected to answer, but he knows nothing of treasure. Disappointed, he shrugs himself free of Angelo's grip. "In my life I've never seen a coin of any kind," he says. "So, I doubt, it's never me."

"Well I can see that you don't lead old Angelo a dance," the old man sings. "Do the same with the Captain, and you'll give yourself a chance."

The rope-end thrust into his hand, and the curt upward nod gives him no opportunity to ask: *chance of what?* And the music, changing again, trilling and thrilling, propels him monkey-clambering up the rope. The climb turns out to be slow work, though, because the old hemp is slimy, but the music spurs him on, furnishing flourishes to the mental picture building in his mind. There's a roll of drums that names the vessel around him as one of the King's navy, the military impression reinforced by a rising horn call that conjures sailors standing to attention on gleaming decks, as stiff as the taught white bells of the sails. A fine place for a lad to start a new life, true enough. Then a shrill tootle of pipes announces the Captain, as resplendent a figure in his serge and braid as the ship itself with its own bright trim of flags and insignia, but he's more than just a dandy. A slash of cymbal is bright and threatening as sabre-steel. A hard man, then, the Captain; but for an eager young lad, a good man to learn from.

This ship, the music tells him as his fingers grip at last the rim of the deck, is the answer to all his wishes.

By the time that he's pulled himself onto the deck, however, the music has fallen silent.

It's a big ship, right enough. It has three tall masts and what must once have been a proud prow, but where Roger had imagined fresh paint, clean lines, white sails, what he sees are sooty scorches, splintered wood and tattered canvas.

Is the music capable of deceit?

Roger decides that because he hears it with his heart, not his ears, it is not. The mistake is his fanciful interpretation. "I sense a shift..." he sings to himself.

His small words are snipped away by the wind, but his is not the only voice in the air, because while the ship is not the bustling military vessel of his imagination, it is nevertheless alive with activity. Seamen swarm the rigging and gather in gangs to haul at the sheets. They glitter in the sunshine, clothed more in steel than linen and sweaty with their exertions, and their voices are ragged and rough as they offer their work song to the wind. "Cry haul!" they bellow. "Aye, a-diddle-aye-dee."

"Quick smart, now, don't dawdle there." Contrary to Roger's laboured ascent, Angelo has clearly found the rope no trouble. "The Captain he don't like to wait. Straight ahead and up the stair." He prods Roger in the direction of the foc'sle. "And knock before you enter, mate."

Roger covers the length of the rolling deck as fast as his unsteady legs will allow him. He trains his gaze firmly on the boards, trying to ignore the scars and missing limbs, the dull metalwork and harsh, violent tattoos that pass through the peripheries of his vision. He can still hear their songs, though. And that's bad enough. Roger doesn't understand half of the words in the shanties,

but the half that he does know terrify him, although they thrill him too. Just a little.

His knock on the cabin door is as trembly as his heart. Judging by the crew he has now entirely revised his expectations of the Captain. Now, he imagines a hulking, brooding monster, worse than all the rum-soaked bastards in Hutton's innroom together. He imagines a thick black beard not quite covering up a horrific facial scar, brows as portentous as stormy clouds and eyes as dead as a shark's.

He listens, but the music holds its counsel.

Getting To The Bottom

The voice, when it comes, sings out as clear and melodic as the single trumpet that heralds the music's swelling return.

"Well come in, if yer coming, lad. Come in if you will. Don't stand around sunning. There's work to be done while the sun's on the sill."

The Captain's cabin also confounds Roger's expectations. It's a comfortable room with a bunk on one wall and a *chaise longue* on the other, both embellished with brocaded cushions. A dangling lantern adds a homely quality. It softens the harsh daylight flooding in through a window that has been opened to dry some rags. There's a map table and a scrolled *escritoire*, both with their instruments and papers stowed neatly away. The red feathered tail of a quill pen ruffles in the breeze and a gimbaled inkwell rocks gently with the ship's motion. It's more like the drawing room of a gentleman than a rogue sailor's bolt hole. The floor's even been newly washed, judging from the mop standing to attention in the corner.

All of this Roger takes in instantly, but after that it's the Captain himself who commands his attention. He's a powerful man. Not especially tall, no, but the living angles and planes of his naked torso phosphoresce with compact energy even as he covers them up with a shirt as white as the smile that is like looking into a crack of the sun itself.

"Welcome, Blondie," the smile sings as the Captain tucks the shirt into britches the colour of blood and adjusts the cuffs, "to our happy delegation. We apologise for the uncouthness of our invitation, but time was pressing and you seemed less than happy with your present station."

It's the wink that tells Roger that he's seen the man before. Only he wasn't smiling then.

"What happened to the Magistrate?" he stammers.

"No concern of yours, little man, but in the interests of seeing justice served, there was a cove who surely got what he deserved." That wink again. "Don't you think?"

Roger has to admit that he's not unhappy that the Magistrate is dead. He manages a nod.

"Grand!" The Captain claps his hands, which Roger notices are pink from a fresh scrubbing. "Now, to the business in hand, but first of all, let's have a drink."

Roger is faced with his second flask of the day, but this one – silver and embossed with *fleurs-de-lis* – is a damn sight more inviting than Angelo's diseased old antique. The Captain's smile turns conspiratorial, and Roger is unable to refuse. The drink is sweet and minty, and when he catches an escaping drip on his finger it is like liquid emerald. He sucks it off with relish and raises the flask for a second gulp, but the Captain takes it from him with a laugh.

“Steady now, that’s quite a thirst! And you shall have your fill. But I’d have yer attention first, so hearken if you will, while we get to the bottom of it...”

“But I know nothing!” Roger interrupts, sensing a tension in the music’s underscoring of the Captain’s words. Thinking, for the first time, that perhaps that smile is too good to be true.

“That’s good son, ignorance is bliss.” The hand on his arm is meant to be reassuring.

Roger edges away from it. “I know nothing,” he repeats. “Ask the other one...”

“Other one?” The Captain gestures around the cabin. “What ‘other one’ is this?”

And with surprise, Roger realises that’s what’s missing. The other boy. His companion-in-adventure-to-be. The music draws out a *mysterioso*, tremolos on the brink of an unresolving cadence. He looks around the room a second time, but for all its relative opulence there are no hiding places – unless one counts the small sea chest that sits beneath the window with those two pale embroidered rags stretched for drying on its lid, but even for a boy smaller than Roger that would not be possible. “I’m sorry,” he stammers. “I must be confused, perhaps Angelo’s forgotten...”

“Well, p’raps there *was* a brother,” the Captain interrupts, arching his brows to mirror his dangerous, devilish grin. “Mayhap, he caused me bother. Asked too many questions, wriggled like a squid, tried to get to the bottom of his situation, and perhaps,” the Captain pokes his head dramatically out of the window and the music cuts a plummeting glissando, “that’s what he did.”

Is he really suggesting...?

No, Roger decides, the Captain is making fun. Angelo must have been pulling his leg too. There never was another boy.

The music draws out sigh of strings. Does Roger imagine a mocking tone to it? “Am I the butt of some joke,” he sings, feeling stung.

“The *butt?*” The Captain roars with laughter. “The *butt*, my piggy in a poke? Well, p’raps it’s true at that. Old Angelo can’t resist a stoke when we take aboard a rat.”

“Rat?”

“Shipmate, son, shipmate. Now indulge my curiosity, pray. What else did that old shyster say?” When the Captain smiles again, there is a slash of sabre cymbal that warns Roger against any temptation to fib.

“Treasure,” he peeps like a piccolo.

The Captain’s eyes widen. “Treasure?” he whispers. “Well there’s a word, by any measure, and,” he winks again, “p’raps it’s even true. But heed this warning young’un, a word like ‘treasure’ is torch to powder if spoke among the crew. So, keep it down, say it no louder lest it filter through. In fact– ” the Captain places his finger on Roger’s lips. The skin is scoured raw, but there is still the thinnest trace of red circling the nailbed. “If you’d keep your skin intact, keep ‘treasure’ locked away for good.” His next utterance is *sotto voce*. “And that goes for the old man too.”

“But now,” the Captain’s finger leaves Roger’s lips and rejoins its siblings to execute a snare-tight slap on his cheek, “we’ve had our meetings, and we’ve gotten past our greetings, and there’ll be no beatings, not unless you’re very rotten.” The Captain circles Roger as he sings. Roger opens his mouth to protest, but the Captain’s hand grips his shoulder and he murmurs close to his ear, “and we’ll be having no more bleatings if you please. The light is fleeting, and I’ll not have it defeating me so let’s...”

Roger feels the Captain’s hand on his belt.

“...get...”

The sound of steel. The real thing this time, not just the music.

“...to...”

There’s an alarmingly deft movement that Roger can’t quite see, and then his britches are at his ankles. The breeze freezes his exposed arse.

“...the bottom!” the Captain finishes in triumph.

The Pirate’s Life!

When Roger creeps from the Captain’s cabin, the sun has climbed high over the yard. The attempt at stealth, however, is pointless. Even if the cabin door were not in plain sight of most of the ship, even if he were able to walk in any other manner than this stuttering impersonation of an arthritic pigeon, there is his waiting audience. The second Roger appears the crowd of sailors erupts in laughter and jeers, catcalls and sarcastic applause.

Roger wishes he could die. He knows what they think is the reason for his crabbed stance and permanent wince – living in the roughest tavern in Montegrosso he has heard all the stories of what could become of cabin boys, even on the crisp, spruce ships of the King’s Navy – but what really happened to him was worse.

The rags, which were neither cotton, nor linen, nor cloth of any kind, hadn’t been fully dry. They had left a smear of gore on the map table, and Roger had been made to stare at the one rough-flensed, pink scrap with its inked island coastline and its neighbour with its black-blue nautical coordinates. But he had not really seen the island or the writing, he had seen the freckles and soft hairs and could not put from his mind the fate of the other boy. The one who had caused the Captain trouble.

Even as the inkwell rocked.

Even as the needle glinted in the sun.

Even as the Captain mumbled and trumbled to himself about *insurance*, and even as the music skittered a jolly accompaniment to the greatest amount of pain Roger had ever felt in his life.

It seems that the music is leading him on a more complicated journey than expected. But all stories have their twists and turns, don't they?

“Ho!” The sailors now shout in unison.

A bearded bear of a man, arms swarthy with black hair and – Roger squirms – *tattoos* steps forward. “Always said the Captain’s a generous man.” He dribbles as he sings. “There’s seconds, long as the boy can stand. We’ll teach him the pirates’ life!”

“Ho! Ho!” The sailors shout and clap.

“You’ll needs to be quick to dip your wick.” This is a half-sized man with half a nose and fewer than half his teeth. “This greeny’s likely to be sick on his first taste of pirates’ strife.”

“Ho! Ho! Ho!” The sailors shout, clap and stamp. The deck resounds.

“An orderly queue, lads. Ready your pricks.” This third sailor is a negro with raised patterns of scars on his cheeks and arms. His voice is deep as a gravel pit. “We’ll all have a pop at the Captain’s chick. We’ll make him a pirate’s wife!”

The music roils like turbulent water as they advance, and Roger knows he’s in trouble. Not only for what these men are about to do to him, but because the last thing the Captain said to him with a light, but painful, tap on the bottom was, “*Now son. Beware. If you value your hide out there. Keep your britches up at any price, and let no-one clap eyes on that decorated derriere.*”

Roger edges back towards the Captain's cabin, but the door remains firmly shut. The sailors close in. They're smiling, but that just makes it worse.

"Belay!"

Roger has never been more relieved to see a face than he is when Angelo's beetrooting fizzog pops out of the crowd like one of Ma Hutton's piles.

"Belay!" the old man bellows again. "And stand ye fast. Lest ye wants to feel the lash. The Captain's put his mark on this one, so hear me. *Stand. Ye. Fast.*"

Roger doesn't know how much authority old Angelo carries with the other sailors, but his words, while giving rise to a great deal of grumbling and swearing, appear to have done little to douse the hunger in the sailors' eyes or stop their encroachment. For a moment it looks as though the only change Angelo's incursion has made will be to give the men something to vent their frustrated fists on while they wait for their turn of Roger's arse.

Then the music intercedes, a soaring flourish of strings and horns and a clamour of watchman's bell, and clear above it all, a Nordic accent singing.

"Ship ahoy! Ship ahoy!"

"Ship ahoy?" echo the men. "Ship ahoy?"

"Be she riding high or low?" the negro shouts up to the crow's nest.

"Low as a pregnant horse in snow," comes the reply. "Fat with booty, and pond'rous slow. She's for the taking, but the wind's ashift so if we're to take her now is the time to go."

"Then what are you standing around for?" The Captain has emerged. He's wearing a braided jacket and a battered tricorn, and there's a manic glow sheening his face. "If the man says, go – then go!"

And Roger is forgotten as the men leap to their assigned positions and the Ship erupts in activity. Sheets are hauled, booms are swung, sails trimmed and

shanties sung as the vessel slews to the starboard, picks up speed and homes in on its prey.

Roger watches, impressed by the orchestrated intricacy of it all. The pain and danger are all but forgotten as the music blares into a glorious, majestic stomp. Sailors swarm the rigging in symmetrical conjunctions, singing, “Hey, boys, feel the wind in your face. A-giving the pirates life. Carries us on with the scent of the chase. We’re living the pirates’ life. This is the *pi-rates’* life.”

Roger turns to Angelo. “You’re pirates!” he whispers.

The old man dissembles, despite the overwhelming evidence. “Nay, lad, buccaneers...”

“You’re pirates!” Roger persists.

Angelo’s old face is reddening again. “No, son, *privateers...*”

The bear and the negro have thrown open the hold, and the ugly half-pint is dishing out burlap sacks to his colleagues. All eyes are on the other ship. It’s close enough now to see the urgency in the scurrying white uniforms as it tacks once, and then again. But any attempt to escape the music is futile.

Avarice shines in the eyes of the pursuers like the anticipation of a holy miracle. “Hey, lads, hear the chink of the coin. Ye’ll be counting afore it’s night. A flash of a skirt and a bump in yer loin? These’ll be ours by right. This is the *pi-rates’* life.”

The refrain is infectious. Roger’s fingers tick to its leery sway. The Ship’s quarry, the music tells him, is more than likely laden with goods that will sell at port for ten times their value just to make some wiggy merchant even richer than he already is. He’ll collect on his insurance from Lloyds of London and grumble at the inconvenience, but really he deserves his loss.

“We’re *pirates!*” Roger climbs up on a barrel. “Living fast and free!”

Angelo goggles at him.

“We’re pirates. Monarchs of the sea!”

Angelo places his hand on his arm. “Lad, when you say *we*...?”

Roger grins. “I mean *me*! For now it’s clear to see that I was born for piracy. It’s what I’m meant to be.” He sees it all now. A shift, a gift, just as the music promised. His course is set now. The Captain has marked him and he’s bound to fortunes of the Ship.

The other ship is close enough to see the occupants’ faces. It tacks once again, a clumsy manoeuvre intended to keep its flank out of reach, but it won’t work. The waiting pirates check their pistols, their powder and their piteous blades. A great rumble passes underfoot. Roger jumps down from his barrel, rushes to the side, looks down to see the black snouts of cannons emerging from the side of the vessel.

The music executes a military pause, like the stretched seconds that precede a gallows drop. The tension rolls out on a side drum, with a precise piccolo hornpipe lark-high above it as the pirates sing, “Hey, gents, feel the whet of the fight, sharpening the pirate’s knife. Watch ‘em run, the cowardly shites. Ain’t it a marvellous sight? This is the *pi-rates*’ life.”

Then the cannons fire and the other ship is cloaked in smoke and falling debris, and the music is God’s own riot. Roger’s head rings with the noise of it, the thrill of it.

When the smoke clears the decks of the other ship are so close you could spit on them. It’s complete chaos. Roger sees sailors frantically organising to repel boarders. Their efforts are hampered by the flock of panicked sheep that have been released by the cannon fire, likewise the flustering chickens and worst of all the demands of the outraged passengers.

The mood on the ship is not helped when the line-up of pirates begin to sing a lilting barcarolle in close harmony. “Stab, slash, burn and shoot. This is

the pirates' life! Rake, rape, plunder, loot. This is the pirates' life!" As they repeat the refrain they begin a sinister dance that involves much baring of teeth and brandishing of steel. Over this, the pirates in the rigging, readying their boarding ropes, carry on the original theme.

"Hey, men, see the fear in those eyes? Wild and wide and white. Cut 'em down to size. Not a one left alive. This is the pirates' life. This is the *pi-rates'* life."

"Stab, slash, burn and shoot," chorus Roger and Angelo.

"This is the pirates' life...all right!" sings the Captain as he launches himself, the apex of a delta of swinging sailors that cross the narrowing water like a flock of avenging geese. The second this vanguard lands on the opposite deck the ring of clashing steel rings out, and this is the signal for the employment of grapples and gaffs to bind the two ships together, for boarding planks to slam down and – "Rake, rape, plunder, loot!" – the rest of the pirates to swarm across.

The fight does not last long. The music helter-skelters to a climax that sees the Captain, acrobatically balanced on the foc'sle rail, a grin on his face, a cutlass in each hand, fencing with the skipper of the other vessel and three of his men. With a swing and a leap, two of the charging lackeys tumble over the side. With a casual flick of his off-hand, the Captain opens up the gut of the remaining sailor, and as the other captain attempts to flee there's a rush of strings followed by an orchestral thump that sees the man pinned to his own mast by the Captain's dead-eyed throw.

There is a pause, during which everyone turns to see the quivering sword, the bloodstained whites, the Captain, hands on cocked hips, laughing. The sailors throw down their weapons and the pirates cheer their victory. Roger too.

It doesn't take long for the conquerors to go about the serious business of stripping the vanquished ship and making their return. The mood is buoyant. One of the passing pirates ruffles Roger's hair. All are focused on the sacks being lined up beside the hold, and no attention is paid to the other ship, drifting away now, trailing black smoke into the blue sky and dripping flaming wreckage and the last remaining sailors into the sea.

"What's the haul?" The Captain's voice recaptures Roger's attention once more.

"What's the haul?" Someone else cries, and the shout is repeated by all the returning pirates. "What's the haul?" And one by one they open their sacks, show them off to their shipmates before dumping into the hold.

"Doubloons" Coins spill from a chest. "Spoons!" A silver cutlery service follows them.

"Huzzah for the pirate's life!" cheer the pirates.

"Shiny!" The contents of jewellery box sparkle in the sun like jellied candies. "Winy!" A crate of booze is handled with considerably more care.

"Huzzah for the pirate's life!"

"Meats!" A violently squirming sack clucks as it is chucked down the hole, followed by three live sheep. "Treats!" A tray of pastries from the galley does not make it as far as the hold.

"Huzzah for the pirate's life!" This is mumbled through mouthfuls of flaky crumbs.

"A bit of slap." Two terrified women, girls really, not much older than Roger are the last to go down the hold. "A dose of clap!" someone suggests wryly, gaining a round of laughter.

And Roger, caught up in the music, wants to contribute too. "A treasure map!" His voice is so clean and clear that it cuts through everything.

Everyone looks at him.

The sailors stare, curious, hungry, nowhere near yet sated by their haul. Angelo has vanished, and beneath the tricorn the Captain's grin is gone. His face is sickly pale, his eyes burn into Roger, willing him to say not a word more, but the music compels him to finish. "Tucked inside the Captain's cap!"

The music then does something sleek and difficult to describe. It inverts itself, as if the order of the world has been turned upside down. And Roger realises too late – as the still-bloody cutlasses are drawn once more – that this is exactly what has happened. The pirates' faces are alive now with cunning as they round on their leader.

"This," they sing, and the music now is full of menace. "Is the *pi-rates' life*."

Cast Adrift

After the longest, coldest night Roger has ever known, the sky at last begins to relax towards dawn. Roger hears it in the music before he is really certain that he sees it, a high stringed shimmer surfacing from the lazy churn of cellos and basses that has been meandering back and forth all through the night; aimless, tuneless and refusing to resolve into any kind of a melody as the leaky little boat bobbed through the darkness. The light on the horizon, intensifies, focuses into a red spot, an orange arc, and finally becomes the rising sun. Roger sighs with relief. The ethereal violins sweep into a familiar melody.

"I sense a gift," Roger sings along.

Sitting behind him, the Captain grunts.

“No, I see a shift.” Roger finds the Captain’s unwillingness to appreciate the potential of the music frustrating. After all that has happened, the music is all they have left to depend on. “I see the dawn, a new day of adventure. I see the compass just waiting to send us sailing free. I see. Something special for you and me.”

“*You see?*” The Captain’s words are salted with bitterness. “Are you taking the piss?”

Roger doesn’t turn round. The memory of what the pirates did to their Captain’s eyes to punish him for keeping secrets – the sunset glow of the hot iron and the screams – is bad enough. Such is the justice of the pirates’ life. Those who would seek treasure and not share and share alike as the Code demands are stripped of their map and robbed of their sight, and sent out to make their own way to find it if they can. If the pirates had known that boy who had blabbed the secret – who they had chucked in with the one who had hoarded it as an afterthought – had a copy of the map inked across his own arse cheeks they would have howled with laughter at the irony.

As the day stretches across the water, Roger spies a humped silhouette. The outline of an island. His breath catches. He knew the music would not let him down. The horns salute in acknowledgement, and Roger feels the current tug the boat compliantly in that direction.

“I feel a shift,” Roger repeats, forgetting the despair of the long night, ignoring the sting of salt on his dry lips. “I hear a joke that’ll have us in stitches. I sense a drift to an island of riches.”

He hears the Captain scrabble to attention. “An island, you say?”

Roger smiles, and although the Captain did not sing his line, attempts to fit a rhyme into the music. “Aye, Sir. And the current’s taking us that way.”

“Quick, boy, tell me.” The Captain fumbles the oars into the water. “Does it have a mountain with two crowns? Does it have a narrow-mouthed lagoon at the eastern end, surrounded by jungle?”

“I...” The morning is just beginning to reveal the details. There is certainly a lot of greenery, but no sign of a lagoon. And, true, there is a sort of lumpy hill, but it is impossible to tell from this angle whether it might have two peaks. “I don’t know,” Roger sings, but the line feels orphaned. *Out of the music.*

Roger is pushed roughly forward, and then for a second time his britches are cut from him. He feels the Captain’s fingers, dry as paper, tracing lightly the scabbed outline of the inky island on his arse.

“Describe it to me!” the blinded man demands.

And Roger does so as the dawn reveals more and more of this little chunk of rock in the sparkling blue. It has its hill, and its jungle. It has a long strand of white beach, and there’s a dazzling glitter that might be imagined to be a waterfall. There is no sign of habitation, and no sign of the Ship at anchor.

“We’re the first then!” The Captain roars, grasping the oars once more. “Now keep me straight and we’ll be rich before nightfall.”

As the Captain rows, and Roger directs him with shouts of *port* and *starboard*, the music provides a suitable accompaniment to the heave and draw, but there’s something desultory about it, half-hearted.

They make landfall within the hour, and find the place to be very pleasant. There is water spilling from the mountain, fish in the lagoon and shade among the trees.

What there is not, is treasure. It becomes clear, as the day dilates, and another follows it, and another still, that no amount of arse fumbling and guesswork and scrabbling in the earth will find any treasure here. Then the question is becomes academic anyway because a sour, yellow infection begins

to seep from the Captain's eyes, and it is only a matter of a few more days before he is dead.

Roger waits for the music to tell him what next, but there is nothing. Not even faintly. At some point the capricious soundtrack that has lifted him, shifted him from his awful existence has died too, or faded from his ability to hear, or perhaps gone to change someone else's life. He listens but there is only the surf and the cheek of gulls, the sounds of the jungle and the soft *shuff* of his breath. The adventure of his life is over, well before he was ready.

All there is now, is waiting to die.

But until that happens, he'll keep half an ear open. Just in case.

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