

Chapter 1

Attitudes and Platitudes

Monday 17th February 1975

Londonderry

Northern Ireland

When I arrived back on Sunday evening, I answered the usual queries by saying I had a great time. I didn't see the point in trying to explain how things had gone. I'd missed the return games night against the Kings Regiment, and although the infantry guys won the games overall, we had won the darts tournament, which was important to me.

I heard we had a games night organised in the coming weeks against the Royal Military Police. Unlike our Corps, there would be no soldiers of Private rank, and therefore the RMP bar would be recognised as an NCO's Mess—which meant people of my level were specially invited. I didn't see a problem since I got on well with Pamela, Harriet and a couple of the bodyguards. I did, however, know there were a couple of assholes in our local RMP unit.

It went without saying—they were Monkeys.

To occupy myself I acquired a 2ft x 2ft wooden panel and acrylic paints. Before going on leave, I had shown my ideas around, and I'd done more work on my personal favourite. When I produced the design as a coloured drawing, it became the favourite of the lads.

I sanded the wood to ensure the surface was clean and keyed for paint. I wanted the sign to be bright, but not garish, eye-catching but subtle. I'd ask opinions when I thought I had the composition right. The job took four nights to complete.

The largest item was an enormous open oyster shell with a large shining pearl set in the base. I worked hard to produce light blues, pinks and white in a pearlescent effect. Seated inside the oyster, leaning casually with one arm on the pearl was a mermaid. She had long, flowing, blonde hair, and was naked—being a mermaid. Her body was flesh-coloured down to the waist, and she had a detailed, green, scaly lower half with large tail fin.

I used artistic license with my layout of the name. Across the top, I wrote in bright two-dimensional letters 'The Oyster Club'. Above the word Oyster, I painted 'Pearl and', but in smaller print. I used two coats of clear varnish to weather-proof the painting.

Being good at handiwork, Mac made a suitable frame, and he helped me mount the sign outside the door of the bar. We fitted an overhead light. The sign was more of an ornament because it would

be a long time before the place was known by anybody as, *The Oyster Club*. It would never be referred to as *The Pearl and Oyster Club*, or anything similar.

I had done my bit and received kind comments from the regulars. It was nice to be noted for something other than being a young man with a drinking problem.

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Friday 21st March 1975

It was my mum and dad's 23rd wedding anniversary. I told them when I left home in February I would have a drink on their anniversary to celebrate. I didn't know why I would want to congratulate them on a partnership which was rockier than the Himalayas.

I hadn't told them the details of my most recent failed romance, having merely said Diane had a family issue she was helping to fix—which in essence was true. I was full of self-pity and didn't need my parents pretending to care, and commiserating.

I'd promised myself I wouldn't get too attached to a girl again, but I knew it would take a long time to get over Diane. We had chemistry, but she'd already had an in-depth biology lesson with somebody else. I had no intention of becoming close to another man's small child. It wouldn't be fair on any of us in the end—because I wouldn't have a paternal bond, and I'd eventually move on.

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On my return to Londonderry, I had initially concentrated on improving my darts and my social life, but my drinking consumption increased rapidly. One night after the bar closed I strolled to the brigade compound and went in to visit my mate Terry who was on Radio Room shift.

Like me, he was a bit crazy in the head at times, and a side-effect of our affliction was the ability to cheer somebody up if they were in the doldrums.

"Hi, Terry." I leant on the outside of the window sill of the Radio Room.

"Hi, Jim. What brings you down here mate?"

"I had a few beers and knew I wouldn't sleep. I remembered you were on shift so I thought I'd come and disturb you for a while."

"Are there many wandering around camp?"

"Terry, are you joking mate? It's eleven o'clock at night."

"What's the weather like?"

I stepped away from the window. "It's dark obviously, but clear and no rain or wind."

"Tonight might be the night to measure the monster the way we said."

"The monster?"

"The one behind you."

“Ah, the aerial mast—and have you come up with a cunning plan yet?”

He reached down and produced a piece of wood with a string wound around it and a loop tied on the loose end.

I took the bundle and stuffed it inside my sweater. “Have you got a torch handy?”

“Here we are.” He flicked the light on and off a few times. “Ready?”

“I’ll keep the end hooked around my thumb and drop the main length. When I see two flashes it confirms you’ve got the end with the wood. Three flashes from you and, I’ll let go the other end.”

“Take your time mate, and be fucking careful.” He squinted. “Are you sure there isn’t a safety harness around here?”

“If I start pissing around with a safety harness I’ll fucking fall.”

Terry laughed and repeated his concern. “Be careful mate.”

“Give me about ten or fifteen minutes before you come out to check.”

“I’ll see the string dangling there—between the mast supports if I keep the main lights on in here.”

I climbed the outside of the huge mast slowly, using the short, peg-like steps. For the first fifty feet, I was conscious of being seen by somebody on duty in Brigade HQ. When I went beyond the height of the HQ building I occasionally stopped to appreciate the view.

When I reached the section I deemed to be the half-way point I wrapped an arm and leg around the framework and rested. The view of Ebrington Barracks was great, and I could see the whole of Londonderry across the darkness of the river. Craigavon Bridge looked excellent.

I set off again but took it slower because the mast became narrower towards the top. I was conscious of the breeze growing stronger as I went higher. I reached the big red light at the head of the mast and at this point I wrapped one arm and leg around a support on the mast.

I lifted out the bundle of string on its wooden anchor, hooked the end around my thumb, and dropped the line down the centre of the metal tower between the girders. I heard it bounce several times as it hit the crossbars. I rested with an arm and leg securing me as I looked down, waiting for the light. I saw two flashes and waited to give Terry time to mark the string where it reached the ground. Three more flashes came, and I let go the looped end.

For a few minutes, I looked out around the area, taking in the site of Londonderry and surrounding countryside at night. I’d seen much further of course from higher up when in a helicopter, but it was different seeing it from the top of the mast.

I climbed down slowly, resting three times on the descent. I made it to the base safely and went into the Radio Room for a coffee and smoke. Happy to have completed the crazy mission and not

been caught. For me, there was probably more thrill in doing something outrageous than the task of climbing the mast.

“What was it like up there?” Terry was like an excited child.

“It’s an incredible view if you consider I wasn’t airborne.” I gulped coffee. “What’s the plan with the string?”

“After I’ve made the next hourly call, I’ll lay the string out on the floor to keep it from getting tangled, and I’ll measure it and mark it at each one-foot length. It’ll take a while, but I’ve got all night.”

We laughed about the whole idea. I finished my coffee and cigarette and left Terry.

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Drinking to excess is easy, and the person who doesn’t see it is the person affected. It was one evening enjoying a few games of darts when my eyes were opened.

“Would you take a walk with me when the bar closes Jim?” Linda whispered.

“Did I just hear right?” I whispered. At twenty-five, Linda was a couple of years older than me. She had beautiful features and a fuller figure. It was common knowledge she didn’t wish to date any of the guys, and according to the girls who’d been asked, she wasn’t a lesbian. Apart from me, I knew people on both sides of the gender fence who’d have been delighted to get to know her better.

“Don’t read too much into it.” Linda grinned. “I want a chat, okay?”

“Sure thing.” I grinned. “I’ll wait till you leave and I’ll follow you out.”

Strangely, the one person who occasionally strolled across to the girls’ block for a chat with Linda was Mowgli. She didn’t want a relationship, and he wasn’t considered a serious contender for her charms, or for anybody else’s for that matter. He liked people to know he was her confidante, and he’d apparently helped her through a bad patch in her early days in the unit.

Mowgli’s rasping voice interrupted our secret conversation. “You’re throwing Jim—when you two are finished talking tactics.”

Pamela giggled. “They’re making secret plans to run off together.” Pamela was one of the RMP girls, and appropriately she was an arresting sight.

“Linda and me?” I said. “I should be so bloody lucky—I may as well try to get off with you Pamela.”

All four of us laughed.

I stepped up to the mat, but before throwing a dart, I glanced at the sweet auburn-haired Pamela. She winked at me and ran the tip of her tongue over her lips and grinned.

After my agreement to meet Linda later, I concentrated on keeping my tally of drinks down. When I'd first arrived in Londonderry, I stayed to four or five pints a night. On returning from my leave in February, all my good intentions fell by the wayside. I reached the point where I was regularly downing nine or ten pints a night.

Linda caught my eye several times as the evening moved on. I was treated to an enigmatic smile, and I wondered what she could possibly want to discuss with me. She was a sexy lady, and it would take no effort to listen to her.

The barman called for last orders, although the last customers were the usual diehard regulars.

"I'll walk over with you if you like Linda." Mowgli liked people to know they were good friends.

"No, thanks, mate," Linda replied. "I have things to ponder tonight."

I was removing the flights from my darts and absently looked up when I heard the short exchange. I caught Pamela gazing at me with the ghost of a smile on her lips. Pamela winked. Nothing escaped her, and I wondered if it was her training as a policewoman, or she naturally saw and heard everything.

Linda said her farewells and headed out of the club.

Pamela met my gaze, raised her eyebrows and gave an imperceptible nod towards the door. She was aware of the chat, I was sure.

I finished my drink. "Thanks for the games guys."

"Goodnight mate." Mowgli lifted his last pint and gulped from it, before he lit another cigarette.

"See you later Jim." Pamela smiled at me.

"Promises, promises." I told myself I'd meet her in my dreams, restrain her with her own handcuffs, and enjoy her charms.

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Ebrington Barracks was situated high on the east bank of the River Foyle facing the main body of Londonderry across the river. The hockey pitch was part of a larger tarmac area in the middle ground. Apart from the lines forming the pitch, the area was used as a parade ground, a helipad, and had a narrow roadway along one side, from the compound across to the female accommodation.

In its earlier days, before being taken over by the Army, the barracks had been a stone frigate, HMS Sea Eagle. The main buildings along the east side of the parade square were white, and the centrepiece was RHQ with its clock tower.

At the southern end of the tarmac area were the Brigade HQ and Signal Squadron compound. At the northern end was the females' accommodation block, which I'd used for practise with my camera when on Heli-Tele.

I left the club, passed my accommodation block and strolled around the hundred metres to the compound. The only lighting were the security lights. I reached the corner of the compound and walked along the fence toward the dark area at the edge of the hockey pitch. I paused in the darkness and looked across at the city.

"Jim," a female voice whispered. I peered into the darkness to see Linda was a few metres away. I glanced over my shoulder before walking to her. She led me around the fence until we were out of sight.

We were on a high embankment which was within the camp boundary. I joined Linda sitting on a long concrete step, and for a minute we both looked across at Londonderry, bathed in the strange glow of the street lights and those sets of traffic lights which could be seen. I found it easy to work out the main roads and estates by focusing on the light configuration.

I pulled out my cigarettes and offered one, but Linda declined. She was one of those lucky few who occasionally smoked when drinking, but she wasn't addicted like most of us. I lit up and took a long pull on my smoke.

"Okay, you've got me here, what are you going to do with me?"

Linda stifled a laugh with a hand over her mouth.

I was pleased with the response. Humour helped in this sort of situation.

Linda turned to speak, but hesitated and looked away for a moment. "A couple of us were discussing you the other night, and I wanted to tell you."

My lips parted, but a hand raised to silence me.

"You might tell me to piss off and mind my own business, but please hear me out first."

It was a pleasant, clear night and I was sitting with one of the best-looking girls in the camp. I listened and occasionally gazed into her dark eyes in the dim light. I lost the urge to say something humorous, and I changed my position to meet her gaze. At some point, I lit another cigarette. I needed something, and I didn't have a drink.

Linda voiced her concerns. She said when I had first arrived there were a lot of nice things said about me. To my credit, I came to the unit and treated the girls as friends and colleagues, rather than sex objects. Linda said that for a few of the girls, it made a refreshing change to have a guy who sat in mixed company and enjoyed a few drinks, conversation, and a laugh.

I put my right forefinger up to my lips while Linda was in full flow.

She stopped talking.

I held my cigarette down to hide the glow. I concentrated on listening for the noise I was sure I'd heard. I stared at Linda's striking features and her hair which was bathed in the light from the city. I didn't care if some of the guys thought she was a lesbian. If she was, it was her business, and if she opted for a female lover—her girlfriend was one lucky lady.

I'd been aware of slow, deliberate steps near the fence behind us. Whoever it was had stopped moving. I nodded to Linda and used a thumb to indicate behind us. We sat still, listening.

"Goodnight, you two." It was whispered in a cheerful tone by a female voice.

"See you later Pamela." Linda grinned and shook her head.

"Goodnight Pamela." I smiled and took a pull on my cigarette.

Pamela giggled as she set off to the accommodation. For a while we didn't speak, listening instead to Pamela's steps retreating across the edge of the parade ground.

I was gazing straight at Linda's face before she got underway again. "In case I forget to tell you later Linda—you're beautiful."

"Jesus, Jim." Linda shook her head slowly. "Don't make this harder for me. I don't know how to get to my point as it is."

"Say the words. It's how you got started."

"Sod it, Jim. You're a really great bloke, but over the last few weeks, you've been drinking yourself into a bloody stupor most nights. Nobody talks about it anymore, but a few months before you arrived here, a young guy like you got pissed and choked on his own vomit. He was found the next morning lying in the grass at the back of the club."

I turned away from her and looked out across the Foyle as I sucked on my cigarette again. I drew the poisons deep into my lungs before exhaling slowly. I watched the smoke drift away.

"Jim, a few of us really like you." She placed a hand on my arm. "We're worried about what you're doing to yourself. I've heard you laughing at the platonic friendship thing, but if you want to talk to somebody, I'll be there. I'm sure if one of the lads said you had a drinking problem you'd go bananas, but I'm hoping you'll listen to me."

"Thank you." I turned to her. I meant it sincerely because this was a peculiar set of circumstances for me.

During the week I'd been one of four guys who'd been in the bar a long time after it closed and we were all drinking heavily. We were quiet, but we'd overlooked the possibility of the dog-handler patrol which was used in barracks in the wee small hours. The bloody dog wouldn't stop barking until somebody opened the door, by which time the Regimental Orderly Sergeant was in attendance.

I went to work the following morning in the belief I'd avoided any major hassle, but the ROS had been in contact with the troops concerned. I was pulled in for a short, sharp, bollocking by Staff T, and I knew I'd screwed up—again.

The incident was playing over in my head when I became aware of Linda gripping my arm.

“Jim, I know it's probably a girlfriend thing, so I don't want to hear the details, not unless you want to talk about it. Whatever started you off, please don't let it change you into a drunken shit.”

I stood, instinctively wiping the seat of my trousers with my right hand. “Get up woman, and I'll escort you to your block.”

Linda stood but remained silent. We gazed into each other's eyes. I didn't know what she'd take away from the moment, but I had a new fantasy.

We strolled along the edge of the hockey pitch to the female accommodation and stopped.

“Will we see you in the Lemon Club tomorrow night?” Linda's expression was sober.

“I'm not sure, but thanks for putting me in the picture. I do appreciate it. Goodnight Linda.”

“Goodnight, Jim.” She embraced me, and I reciprocated. Her body felt wonderful.

I set off back along the edge of the tarmac parade ground. In the clear, quiet night I heard the door of the girls' block close. Halfway back to my accommodation, I stopped and looked out over the embankment and the river towards the city. “Faulkner, you are a pitiful arsehole.” I lit up a cigarette and absently looked back at the girls' accommodation.

On the top floor, I saw a light go on. Somebody with long hair came to the window and started to close the curtains. Before the curtains had been entirely drawn, I saw another figure approach the girl at the window. The shadows embraced before moving back into the room with the light on.

“Goodnight Linda, and goodnight to your lucky partner.” I grinned as I set off again.

Before sleeping, my fantasy would be that Linda's secret partner was Pamela.
