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# VOICE BOX

THE DRAWER IN WHICH THE ODDMENTS WERE STORED had its own signature aroma. It's perhaps because of this—the fact that they were all bathed in the same enveloping smell—that I came to associate one thing with another, thought of them as a group, to the extent that some almost lost their individuality. This meant that, for years, the butterfly-wing cigarette box scarcely existed for me as a separate entity. I saw it merely as an integral part of this ragtag collection of things my father no longer had a use for but evidently still wished to keep. It was a long while before the box came into focus as the one unique object that speaks to me now.

I can summon the collection's special odour back to mind pitch-perfect, but of course it's impossible to convey in words the exact heft and swirl of its olfactory contours. All I can do is provide the flat matter-of-factness of a list. The main ingredients were: soap powder, wool, leather, rubber, cork soaked in whisky, charcoal, antiseptic, and tobacco.

The drawers underneath the one that held the collection were filled with clothes, thus the notes of wool and soap powder. The oddments themselves accounted for the rest. Throughout my childhood, the scent that was released each time the drawer was opened spoke to me in a gruff adult voice that seemed at once to beckon yet warn of trespass, as if saying: "Look, here's an intriguing world—but you have no business in it. Keep Out!"

What was in the collection? A leather holster for a service revolver; a gas mask, its rubber perishing, the filter cracked open to reveal the charcoal lining; a field dressing, still in its original packaging with "THIS SIDE NEXT TO WOUND" in faded block letters; a regimental cap badge; three spent bullet casings; and a tin water bottle swathed in khaki felt and fitted with canvas carrying straps. Alongside these obviously military items were two sturdy flasks for spirits, their glass sheathed in metal and leather, their shiny screw caps lined with cork. A faint suggestion of whisky was detectable if you put them right up to your nose, though I'm not sure whether this was

Picture of the T. S. S. Vandyck on the lid of the butterfly-wing cigarette box

an actual remnant of the liquor they once contained or an imagined ghost scent. There was also a black bow tie, a pair of elegant grey suede gloves, an assortment of cufflinks, a dented metal cigarette lighter, and finally the butterfly-wing cigarette box. It was empty, but its wooden lining still retained a breath of tobacco sweetness whenever it was opened.

This trove of aromatic oddments had been expelled from my father's personal territory—his desk, the drawers below the wardrobe in his room, his metal deed box. Instead, it languished in a kind of exile, marooned in the no man's land of a tallboy on the landing. It was as if he'd set aside this period of his life (pre-marriage and pre-children) and placed it under a kind of house arrest or quarantine—a temporal apartheid that ensured the segregation of past and present.

As a boy, it was the accoutrements of war that made the most impression on me—particularly the leather holster and the gas mask. If you'd asked me then to describe the cigarette box, my response would have been sketchy at best. I'd probably have said it was a small silver-coloured metal box with wooden lining, a rectangle of glass set into the lid, and behind the glass the rich blue iridescence of butterfly wings. That the blue is background sea and sky for a picture of a ship is something I feel sure I must have noticed—how could I not have? But if I did, this crucial detail slipped my mind. This meant that I was taken aback when—for the first time in years—I looked at the box again the other day and saw a ship in what I'd remembered as unbroken blue. Against what was held in my memory, the ship seemed like an intruder—an alien craft that had somehow slipped without permission into the territorial waters of my recollection and dropped anchor there, disrupting the image I'd misremembered for so long.

I like to think I saw the ship and then forgot about it. To have missed it altogether would suggest a worrying blind spot. But the way our gaze falls upon the world is far from straightforward. We select—and omit—as well as see. Our observation is quite different from any simple camera-like capture of what's there. Unlike the ship, though, I think I did simply fail to notice throughout my boyhood a feature of the box I spotted when I looked at it anew. I could have sworn there was no writing on it, but looking at it now I see a name faintly printed just below the picture: "T. S. S. VANDYCK."

That name immediately recalled a series of pictures in one of my father's photo albums. In a section headed "Cruising 1938, T. S. S. Vandyck" there are ten pages holding nearly fifty black-and-white photographs. Finding the

ship's name on the butterfly-wing cigarette box made me look at the album again and study this cluster of images more closely than I'd done before. A few names are written under photographs of the places visited: "Madeira," "Casablanca," "Rabat," and "Lisbon," each spelled out in my father's careful hand. But more interesting to me than any of these ports of call are the unlabelled photos taken on the Vandyck itself. The pages that they're on are simply captioned "On Board," with no further indication of who any of the people pictured are. The only one I recognize is my father, who looks tanned, relaxed, and younger than I know he must have been when the camera caught his smile in 1938 (at the age of thirty-three). He's almost always in the company of a strikingly attractive young woman. She's in so many of the "On Board" photos, and in most of those taken on sightseeing trips ashore, that it's clear she was his main interest on that cruise.

Who was she? What was their relationship? At this remove in time I can only hazard tantalizingly uncertain answers. If these were contemporary pictures, the way they are in each other's company would suggest that they were lovers. One photo shows them sitting snuggled up on two sun loungers drawn close together on the deck, my father leaning against her, his head nestled closely into her neck and shoulder. In another they're sitting on a rug spread out in a secluded corner of the deck. They're pulling each other into a tight embrace. She's in a sun top, my father's wearing only shorts and white canvas shoes with the tops of oddly patterned socks visible at his ankles. Her arm is draped easily around his naked shoulders, her hand reaching down to cup around a bicep. He clasps her just above the waist so that the warmth and weight of her right breast must have been evident against his hand. There is also a picture of them sitting together in a corner of the ship's swimming pool, legs entwined, and one where they're sunbathing on deck, my father leaning his bare back against her swimsuit-clad torso.

Two photographs of them taken singly are, to me, as suggestive of their togetherness as those where they're touching. Each of them in turn sits on the railings of the deck and smiles to the camera as the other—it seems reasonable to assume—takes the photo. They sit in exactly the same place and adopt the selfsame position and pose, resulting in his and hers portraits that you could imagine enlarged, framed, and hanging side-by-side on the wall of a room in a family home—familiar domestic icons to the children growing up there. There's something relaxed and companionable in their expressions, yet complicit too. The way they gaze into the lens makes it hard

to dismiss these or the other photos as evidence only of some passing flirtation.

But this is 1938—not 2019. I don't know what the sexual mores were back then. It's obvious they're attracted to each other. But eighty years ago would that attraction have been allowed the same expression it would find today? Was it just an innocent onboard liaison—a holiday infatuation—that meant little and led nowhere? Perhaps their poses of intimacy were really a kind of theatricality or play-acting for the camera—a socially-sanctioned expression of mutual attraction rather than an indication that anything of any consequence took place. Looking back over such a long period, it's hard not to smuggle into the perspective elements of a present-day point of view, and that may import currents of interpretation that don't correspond at all with the flow of what actually transpired aboard the Vandyck eight decades ago.

I've come to think of her as Zelma, though I've no idea if this was who she really was. Nor do I know much about Zelma in any case; so even if my naming of her is accurate, it doesn't get me much further. Every year at Christmas, without fail, a card arrived addressed to my father alone. The handwriting, fluent, almost bold, with an eye-catchingly well-balanced angularity, was always in the same blue-black ink. It was instantly recognizable, exuding an individuality that set it apart—an exotic foreigner amidst the run-of-the-mill cards from friends, family, and neighbours. Inside the card, beneath the printed "SEASON'S GREETINGS," was written "with my love, Zelma," followed by the X of a single kiss. If I asked who Zelma was, my mother always replied, "an old girlfriend of your father's." She spoke with a mixture of admonishment, mockery, and resignation. Her tone did not invite further inquiry, nor for many years was I particularly interested in my father's life pre-me. (The idea of parents having their own independent existence as individuals is an alien concept in childhood.) By the time I was older, I suppose the cards from Zelma had become such an accustomed part of Christmas that I didn't think to question them. Zelma remains as mysterious and unknown as the young woman on the Vandyck, whom she may or may not have been.

The T. S. S. (Twin-Screw Steamship) Vandyck was built in Belfast by Workman, Clark and Company and launched on February 21, 1921. At that point my father would have been sixteen and on the point of moving from his family home in Londonderry to Belfast, where he would work for the

rest of his life (apart from the war). He would certainly have read about the ship's completion in the local newspaper, and perhaps he even attended the public spectacle of the launch—an event that always drew the crowds.

The shipbuilders who made the Vandyck were known locally as "the wee yard." Though less well-known than Harland and Wolff, Belfast's famous industrial giant, the nickname is misleading. Only fifteen years after its establishment in 1880, Workman, Clark and Company had become the UK's fourth largest shipbuilder. In addition to building relatively modest ships, such as the Vandyck, they also built transatlantic liners for customers like Cunard. World War I brought considerable expansion, as they took on naval contracts. In 1918 the company was taken over by Northumberland Shipbuilding. When that company went into receivership in 1927, Workman, Clark and Company briefly resurfaced, only to cease trading in 1935.

The Vandyck was originally brought into service with the Liverpool, Brazil & River Plate Steam Navigation Company—a subsidiary of the well-known Lamport & Holt shipping line. She sailed on the New York to River Plate route with ports of call in the West Indies and Brazil. As well as this usual plying between North and South America, the ship made one voyage in 1922 for the Royal Mail Steam Packet Company, sailing from New York to Hamburg. Sometimes I try to picture the tracery of lines that her various sailings would have left upon the oceans, but of course there's no such indelible tattoo of her presence—no permanent visible record of the miles covered or the routes taken.

The sinking of her sister ship, the Ventris, with the loss of over a hundred passengers, coupled with the Wall Street Crash and the subsequent worldwide depression, led to the Vandyck being taken out of service and laid up in the River Blackwater in Essex. This English waterway was dominated by laid-up shipping, particularly in times of economic downturn, with sometimes as many as forty vessels clustered together in a kind of commercial hibernation, temporarily mothballed, roosting until the economy summoned them to life again. When trading conditions began to improve in 1932, Lamport & Holt decided to refit the Vandyck for cruising. For her new role, the Vandyck's hull was painted white, with a blue band running her full length just above the waterline and a funnel banded in blue, white, and black. This is the livery in which she's shown in the picture on the butterfly-wing cigarette box. It's clear she was a sleekly handsome vessel, and pictures of the ship's dining saloon and lounges suggest considerable elegance.

Requisitioned by the Admiralty in 1939, the Vandyck was converted into an armed merchant cruiser. H. M. S. Vandyck, as she was then renamed, was involved in the evacuation of allied personnel from Norway. During this operation she was bombed by enemy aircraft and sank in the Norwegian Sea off Andenes on June 10, 1940. Seven crew members perished. The remainder—around one hundred and sixty men—abandoned ship and made it safely ashore, where they were captured by German forces.

Did my father or Zelma know what happened to the Vandyck? It would surely not have surprised them to discover that it was claimed for military use, but I wonder if news of its sinking ever reached them. At the end of June 1940 the Registrar General of Shipping and Seamen in London wrote to the next of kin of those serving on the Vandyck. The letter informed them about what had happened and requested them to keep this information to themselves. One section of the letter reads:

> The circumstances in which the ship was lost do not permit of any public announcement being made at present and I have to ask that you will be good enough not to make known the fact that H. M. S. Vandyck has been sunk outside the circle of your immediate relatives, as it is not in the public interest that this information should be disclosed to the enemy.

The letter reassures recipients about the "very small" number of casualties, relatives of whom had been notified separately. For most, "there is no reason to suppose" that the husband, son, or brother in question "is not alive and well" since the majority of the crew "succeeded in landing in Norway." But the letter also warns of a less happy outcome, saying that "the possibility that they may have become prisoners of war cannot be overlooked."

It seems probable, in view of this effort to curtail dissemination of information, that few people at the time, apart from those directly affected, learned of the Vandyck's fate. In any case, quite apart from the official decision to try to limit knowledge of what had happened, even if news of it had leaked out it's unlikely that the sinking of one unimportant vessel, with relatively little loss of life, would have claimed much airtime or column space in those terrible years of conflict. By the time of the Vandyck's sinking my father had enlisted and was serving with an artillery unit in North Africa. Amidst the sand and heat and gunfire in the desert, did he sometimes think

of Zelma and their cruise? Did he ever discover that the railing they'd sat on to pose for photographs ended up fathoms below the surface of the icy waters off Norway?

If the lid of the butterfly-wing cigarette box is angled one way, the background looks dark and unexceptional. But tilt it slightly and the blue iridescence catches the light and glints magically, transformed into a striking azure sheen. The way the shimmer of the blue can be so easily made to come and go, as if switched on and off, provides a ready symbol for how the box can be read in different registers—how it appears according to two different ways of seeing. In one it seems dull, quotidian, and easily contained within a routine description. In the other it becomes veined with the pulse and throb of voices telling a cluster of life stories.

It's easy to list the raw factual details of the Vandyck, such as its tonnage (13,233 tons), length (510.6 feet), width (64.3 feet), depth (39.3 feet), number of cargo holds (5), number of masts (2), capacity for passengers (300 first class, 150 second, and 230 third), and maximum speed (14 knots). In the same way, on a miniature scale, I could draw up a specification for the butterfly-wing cigarette box that presents it for scrutiny within a kind of descriptive scaffolding—a cage that holds it in place, confining details to the bare essentials:

> Metal alloy box lined with cedar. 100 cm long, 90 cm wide, 53 cm deep. Hinged lid—now broken—with glass panel, behind which a ship is pictured, backed with the blue of butterfly wings. "T. S. S. VANDYCK" written in plain font capitals in black along lower edge of picture. "MADE IN ENGLAND" stamped on base. Twentieth-century souvenir cigarette box from a Lamport & Holt cruise ship. Likely date of manufacture: 1930s.

Such a succinct, focused description may seem to bolt things down to the stark, unaccompanied barebones of their particularities, thereby giving us something clear-cut to hold onto. It acts almost like a lifebelt that can be thrown into the sea of complexities in which we swim, offering the buoyancy of easy labelling without which we would flounder. This kind of commonsense approach stops things from overflowing the channels laid down by our ordinary diction; it blots out the shimmer of the wings' blue mirror so that nothing is reflected back except a handful of mundane details. But al-

though it may possess a kind of superficial accuracy, this kind of description leaves out so much that it also seems misleading.

Often, when I look at the butterfly-wing cigarette box now, it seems like the entrance to a maze—a portal giving access to a network of routes that beckon me towards multiple unfoldings. Instead of it being something mute, it seems replete with voices; instead of being empty, it seems to contain a dense tangle of threads, as if countless Theseus-like figures had unravelled their guiding lines through this small section of history's labyrinth. One thread leads back to my father's life and another to Zelma's, their 1938 cruise, and whatever passed between them, including the reason they went their separate ways and what happened to them after they parted.

But their two threads soon branch, interconnect, and tangle with adjacent ones, becoming enmeshed in a plethora of other stories. Take a few steps in this direction and you'll find yourself in the Workman, Clark and Company shipyard in Belfast, maybe looking at the Vandyck being planned out on paper or watching sections of the hull being riveted together. Take a few steps in that direction and you'll be in Casablanca on one of the ship's Mediterranean cruises. Follow this thread and it will take you to the offices of the Lamport & Holt shipping line with all the administrative mechanisms for organizing cargo and passengers. One thread takes you to Brazil and the West Indies, and another takes you to a warplane, its crew poised to bomb a ship off Norway. Spin the compass of possibilities that's invisibly contained in this little box and the needle may indicate the captain's story or that of the grieving family of one of the crew members who died when the ship was bombed. Spin it again and it may point to the suffering of an engineer held prisoner for years or to whomever caught the South American butterflies whose wings still sheen the box's lid with blue.

The thread of the Vandyck's history is interwoven with the lives of those who designed and built her, the stories of each crew member, all those who sailed in her, and the dockworkers who loaded and unloaded cargo. Somewhere in this tapestry is the thread of a lazy summer day, the ship at anchor on the Blackwater, a dragonfly streaking across the oil-stained water, the sound of cuckoos calling and Essex children playing within sight of the river's load of laid-up vessels. Somewhere there are all the nights at sea as the Vandyck steamed along whatever itinerary it was following, filled with its various cargoes and the passions and secrets of its sleeping passengers, their dreaming bodies lulled by the rhythm of the waves. Somewhere there

is the exact moment the burnt-out hull touched the seabed when the ship sank off the Norwegian coast. The box seems less like something empty than a kind of conduit through which surges a rich mix of narrative—the blood of circumstance as it flows around the particularities that constitute what happens. Like any object, the butterfly-wing cigarette box is part of history's circulatory system—a capillary through which time is channelled.

This souvenir, emblazoned with its picture of the Vandyck, once sat brand new with others on a display shelf in a shipboard shop, periodically lifted and examined for possible purchase by various now long-dead passengers. How many weeks did it sit there before my father bought it? Or did Zelma buy it for him as a gift? For how many nautical miles did it sail before it went ashore with him? And what routes did it take on land before it ended up in that tallboy drawer? How many hands have held it? What conversations has it witnessed? What spectrum of thoughts has it prompted?

Although the box bears on it the picture of only one vessel, it sometimes seems to constitute a kind of harbour thronged with craft that offers the imaginative possibility of embarking on any of them. Some go miles out to sea, across unfathomable depths, while others scarcely travel beyond sight of land. Each voyage represents one of the numerous lives that have been touched by this little trinket—a meteorite from 1938 now fallen into my keeping.

Like the Vandyck, laid up in the River Blackwater and then brought into service again, the butterfly-wing cigarette box was also laid up for years in that tallboy drawer and then, after my father's death, in the backwaters of my own house until a chance discovery when I was clearing out the attic made me reconsider it. Now this little box means more to me than I ever thought it would. Given its newfound significance, I find myself unsure quite what to do with it. Should I clean it up and display it somewhere as an ornament or curio—a conversation piece? Or should I just put it back in the dusty box in the attic beside the spirit flasks and cufflinks—my collection of oddments that no longer have any use? Perhaps I should make a pilgrimage to Norway, sail out from Narvik into the sea off Nordland County, and drop it into the icy waters beneath which lie the remnants of the vessel that it pictures. I imagine it sinking through the fathoms to settle on the deck where my father and Zelma once basked in the Mediterranean sunshine. But such a gesture, however much it might promise something not unlike resolution, also seems a bit too melodramatic.

Instead, the line of symbolic harmony I've taken, at least for the moment, has been to place the box on a table on which are standing two now framed photographs—one of my father, one of Zelma, as they sit on the railings of the Vandyck's deck smiling for each other and the camera. And the box is no longer empty. In it there's a memory stick. Its files hold the text of this essay and scans of all my father's photos from that 1938 cruise. Filling the box with this cargo and placing it between these two images feels appropriate, apt, and perhaps even meaningful. But it could also be dismissed as merely ritualistic—a foolish sentimental gesture that's obedient to the thirst for the kind of human symmetries the world has little place for, something shamanic, superstitious, without any respectable connection to rationality. I readily confess that I don't know how to determine whether the sonar of such actions pings back a sounding suggestive of significance or whether its haunting, searching note fingering through the fathoms of history that surround us locates nothing but simply registers the echo of what we want to find rather than the solidity of something that's there independently of the desires and fears that shape us.