

A Vision of Battlements

—What year would that be about? Mr Bloom interpolated. Can you recall the boats?

Our *soi-disant* sailor munched heavily awhile, hungrily, before answering.

—I'm tired of all them rocks in the sea, he said, and boats and ships. Salt junk all the time.

Tired, seemingly, he ceased.

— *Ulysses*, James Joyce

‘... Warning of an attack may be given by tingling sensations in the limbs, impairment of vision, flashing lights, a vision of battlements, noises in the ears, mental depression or other phenomena.’

— *The Illustrated Family Doctor*

Prologue

‘A.V.C.C.’, said the big blonde Wren. ‘I don’t think I’ve ever seen them letters before.’ Her huge feet firm against the rolling deck, she marched round Ennis, examining curiously his left shoulder, then his right shoulder, then his left shoulder again.

‘The Army calls these numerals,’ said Ennis.

‘Then the Army’s daft,’ said the Wren. ‘Numerals is numbers. Letters is what these are. Come on, tell us what they mean.’

‘Arma Virumque Cano Corps,’ said Ennis, teasing. And then, seeing her look blank, ‘Army Vocational and Cultural Corps.’ But she looked no less blank. She said:

‘Aw, come on, tell us in plain words.’ She began to wriggle her upper body gently and seductively at him. Ennis said:

‘Well, it’s to prepare for the future, you see. It’s to get the men ready for when this lot’s all over. To teach them how to build a new world.’

‘Aw, teaching,’ she said, disappointed. ‘You mean you’re like a teacher?’

‘I,’ said Ennis, erect, ‘am a musician. If I’m a teacher, I’m a teacher *malgré moi*. Just as I’m a soldier *malgré moi*.’

‘You do talk funny,’ giggled the Wren. ‘But it’s nice, really. Educated. And you don’t look like a soldier, somehow. My sister got engaged to a fellow who looked a bit like you. He was a piano player and had long hair. He was allowed to have the long hair because he was in munitions.’

‘Well,’ said Ennis, a little angrily, ‘even though I don’t look like a

soldier – Ah, never mind. What I was going to say was that I’ve done my share of fighting.’

‘I’m sure you have, love,’ she soothed.

‘Dunkirk,’ said Ennis, ‘and then Crete. They wouldn’t let me carry on in a combatant outfit. That’s why they transferred me to –’

‘That’s all right, dear,’ she said. She was a very pink girl with a Roman nose but very little teeth.

‘As long as we’re absolutely clear about that,’ said Ennis. ‘We had a terrible time at Crete.’

‘Yes, yes, that’s all right.’ And then she said, with unexpected viciousness, ‘But you’re alive, aren’t you? Not like my cousin Ron.’

‘If you can call it being alive.’

‘Blown up at sea, Ron was. Fighting on dry land’s one thing. You ought to try it at sea, fighting and spewing up and then there’s U-boats and mines. Ron was in the Merchant Navy, Ron was, bringing food and fags from Yankland for the likes of you.’

‘We’ve all got to take our chance.’

‘Do you good, it would,’ she said, ‘to have all that lot to cope with. U-boats and thunder and lightning and right big waves a couple of miles high.’

‘Don’t tempt Providence,’ said Ennis.

‘Do you all the good in the world it would. You’re just like that piano player my sister got engaged to, you are. You’ve got just his eyes. He upped and left her and took the money she’d saved up and all. Some men are just like beasts. Beasts is all you can call them. Men,’ she said, big, blonde, nastily.

‘Are you readah?’ called the epicene captain of artillery. He was the producer. They were rehearsing for the ship’s concert. ‘Very well, then. On stage, all who should be. Now, Judy,’ he said, putting his arms round the big blonde Wren, ‘let’s have no fluffing this time, hm? And try to make it a bit more, you know, refined.’

‘June my name is,’ said the Wren. ‘Judy’s more the name for a lady dog.’

‘Yes, yes.’

‘I reckon I can talk refined. I can talk as high society as what he can.’ She glared at Ennis. She had taken, for some reason, a really

strong dislike to him, hardly explicable in terms of drowned Ron and the absconding piano player. In her billowy curtain robes she bounced up the steps to the stage.

'Tabs,' called the captain of artillery. 'She's awful really,' he confided to Ennis, 'but she looks right, you know. All that pink flesh.' Ennis, piano player, sat down at the piano. He waited for green floats to glow sickly on the closed curtains, then flung himself into a storm of diminished sevenths. The curtains jerked open and the big blonde Wren was disclosed on an empty stage. She yelled coarsely above the music:

'Ocean, be calm! Storm-winds, do not affright!
For we have got this concert on tonight.'

'Watch those vowels, dear!' called the captain.

'Æolus, we require a steady stage,
So shut your mouth and cool your senseless rage—'

Ennis and his keyboard went down, down, down, like a cinema organ and organist. Then came back up again, to no applause. A scream rang offstage. The big blonde Wren fell, cursing. 'Oh, dear,' wailed the captain. The storm-god had heard; the storm-god was going to let fly.

The rehearsal was abandoned. The world burst noisily asunder. The North Atlantic's black back cracked. Howling sea-ghosts scabbled at the rigging. Soldiers lurched along the troopdecks, howling also, slopping tempestuous mess-tins of tea. Over the decks salty knouts of broken sea lunged and slobbered. Acres of frothing marble leered monstrously, as though Rome had melted. Riding the bitter uncertain ranges, the troopship soared and plunged in agony. A dry ship (haha, dry!) with nightly lemon squash drunk, like a ghastly parody of drinking, in pint mugs, and now the decks struck at one, unprovoked. Men tottered and spewed and were heaved into their bunks and hammocks without the satisfaction of knowing they had brought it all on themselves. It was not fair. Sweating and groaning

in his bunk, the Nonconformist chaplain (more of a Unitarian really) felt his nausea churn in him like a sermon (terrible aboriginal calamity; sin grows wild, as God-made as an apple).

Ennis, Sergeant Richard Ennis, A.V.C.C., lay in his hammock on the sergeants' troopdeck, shaping in his mind, behind his closed eyes, against the creaks and groans of the heaving ship, a sonata for violoncello and piano. He listened to the sinuous tune of the first movement with its percussive accompaniment, every note clear. It was strange to think that this, which had never been heard except in his imagination, never even been committed to paper, should be more real than the pounding sea, than the war which might now suddenly come to particular life in a U-boat attack, more real than himself, than his wife. It was a pattern that time could not touch, it was stronger than love.

No! That was heresy, He remembered the last days of embarkation leave in London. They had clung together at night in the narrow bed of her tiny room, while the sky shook with the rhythm of aerial express trains, the approaching sickening thuds set the walls quivering. The two of them had seemed stronger than death. The sinister lights of distant burning illuminated her face ghastly, but there was no fear there. Death did not seem all that terrible, their love seemed a Troy that a ten-thousand-year siege could not shatter. This separation was incidental, something they tried to see already as a past thing to be joked about.

Think of *Nazi* lipsticks,
Gestapo cigarettes,
 And children cuddling toy
 S.S. men in their beds.

But on the last night, when it was time to report to the transit depot at Marylebone, the flood mounted and broke. Twice before he had had to report to transit depots before going overseas, but not then as a man in love and married. They stood in the bombed-out Soho street and he cursed, screamed, shook childish impotent fists at his enemies. He cursed the whole pantheon in a foul stream of obscenity

that frightened even the steel-helmeted special constable who came to see what the trouble was. Ennis, in his ecstasy of execration, could not tell who the enemies were, but a number of faces had coalesced into a single image – the destroyer, the anti-builder, a Proteus capable of being time, the sea, the state, war, or all at once. It wanted cities down, love broken, music scrambled. Ennis the builder cursed and wept in the ruins.

But was love the same as music? Already adjustment was beginning, adjustment to something even so transitory as a voyage. He thought uneasily of Troilus and Cressida, classical lovers remade by the Middle Ages, eternal symbols of the war-sundered grown unfaithful. Was love less important than the urge to build cities?

The storm died down, and there was already in the clearer air the smell of a warmer climate. The rolling English drunkard had come to the Mediterranean by way of the Viking whale roads. The ship woke to life again, the decks were busy with arms drill, P.T., a succulent drawled lecture on venereal disease. Wrens, dapper in flapping bellbottoms, provocative with Sloane Square vowels and wagging haunches, minced up and down. But the big blonde hater of Ennis was, it was said, in the sick-bay with a wrenched hip.

‘Now,’ said Lance-Corporal Cheney, the historian, ‘we approach, in effect, our home, our mother, the middle sea of Noah’s flood and Deucalion’s. Our voyage in itself is a symbol of the course that English history took, rejecting the dark world of the northern brine and the crude heavy gods. Here are wine, logic, the city-state, Aphrodite’s frank smile, the Arabs discussing Aristotle on the colonnade of an Iberian university, and, above all, the sun, our indulgent father.’

Only a few bodies still lay prone and supine, rejecting the hard-boiled breakfast eggs and the lyrical call of life. As to some faun-fife or Triton-horn, the colleagues of Sergeant Ennis rose from their beds, back to perpetual games of solo, and their harsh vowels cut the mellow cultured flutings of the Intelligence Corps contingent. Though the vowels of Sergeant Agate, ballet-dancer, one-time Petrouchka praised by Stravinsky and patted by Diaghilev, were far from harsh. Agate had made friends with an infantry lance-corporal

of good family. Ennis, looking eastward over the taffrail, heard them pass on their circular morning stroll.

‘But everybody said he would be unfaithful. Reggie was quite distraught with the worry of it all. Coming back at all hours with the most disgusting little sluts.’

‘He should be happier now, though, dear. If what I hear is true, this little Cypriot should be very very good for him. A bit brainless, I know, but that’s sometimes all to the good. Makes them most accommodating –’

Agate was, Ennis had to admit, a cut above the other A.V.C.C. sergeants. Williams and Evans, fluent at scolding each other in thick Northern Welsh, were slow at English. Welsh Nationalists, haters of the *Saes*, would they, in their civics lectures, be able to flush matters of local government with the *hwyl*? Williams looked like an egg perched on a loosely stuffed battledress, Evans was red-haired, wiry, truculent. And then there was Bayley the craftsman, tall, big-nosed, lugubrious, worried about his wife, who was expecting in a month’s time. Ennis was aware of this gestation as of another ship, pounding forward with a quiet throb of engines. Lastly, there was Tomlinson. He, with respirator spectacles glinting above bad teeth, found time to create a myth. The ship was carrying dockyard mates and dark colonial civilians back from visiting their evacuated wives. Among these, alleged Tomlinson, were saboteurs, enemy agents, home-rulers. He had seen, he said, some of them hanging round the engine-room.

‘You noticed, boy,’ he said, ‘the other night, the ship stopped dead, without warning. They know all about it, but they can’t do a thing. You mark my words, there’s something queer happening, something brewing. It won’t be long now. Just before we left London I saw a swaddy salute an officer just by Marylebone Station. He clenched his fist just as he brought his hand up to his head. And, by God, the officer returned it!’

Things were going to happen, he said. This was no time for committing oneself to opinions. Back home he had stuck to facts in his talks to the lonely gunsites. ‘Gentlemen,’ he had said, ‘it is a fact that there is a House of Lords. It is a fact that there is a House of

Commons. Beyond that I will not go. Now I ask for your views on the matter.'

Someone had said, 'I think the House of Lords is a bloody anachronism.' Tomlinson had said, 'That's a point.' Someone else had said, 'Why do the Yanks get more pay than what we do?' Tomlinson had replied, 'That's a point, too.' On one occasion a bold bombardier had ventured, 'I think you're a bloody fool, Sergeant.' Tomlinson had said, 'That also is a point.'

With some pride he stated that he had been known as That's-a-point Tomlinson. 'By Christ, it's coming,' he asserted. 'The long knives. You'll remember what I told you, you mark my words.'

Life went on. The concert at last was given to a large audience robust with purgation, tickled by approaching warmth. And the big blonde Wren, arisen for her prologue perceptibly pinker and plumper, did not hate Ennis any more. After the show, on an empty stage in a property armchair, she said:

'I think you're quite nice really. I don't know what got into me that time. If we was both going to the same place I could be your girl. But I'm going on to Cyprus.'

'You're returning home in a way.'

'How do you mean?'

'Venus came from Cyprus.'

'Oh, that's an awfully nice thing to say,' she said, after a few minutes. 'That's like a real compliment.' And so, hopelessly, his bridges burnt, Ennis was made free of her warm pinkness. It happened at the right time, for, the next afternoon, Africa lay basking on the starboard side, lavish in the sun. There lay her northern portals, there her woods and mountains and, behind, a whole hinterland of tawny lions. Open-mouthed, the troops gawked over the rails. But Ennis had passed this way before. He smiled when Sergeant West, an instructor on his circuitous way to the Falklands, said:

'Down here on the messdeck it's still England, still Avonmouth, and hence still the past. Up there it's Africa and the future. On trains, you remember, when one asked what time lunch was served, one was told, "Just after Reading". Time is really space after all.'

So now, with the approach of the new life, many clung to their

past, they snuggled into the dark of their bunks, they feared the new big daylight in which the ship rode calmly. And, as this age of transition from the known to the unknown assumed the quality of a real memorable past, the other past, the past beyond (wives, familiar pubs and chairs, children) became very remote, like somebody else's past – in a word, history. But Ennis pushed his wife farther back, beyond history, to myth. It was the best thing to do; it would ensure a kind of fidelity.

Christmas Eve. They awoke with a shock to find their future was upon them. It had appeared suddenly in the night, the giant threatening rock, the vast crouching granite dragon, the towering sky-high sphinx, its forehead bathed in the mild sun. It brooded, an incubus, but also their bride and mother. In Ennis's head the winding line of his sonata lost sonority, faded to a bat-squeak, and the heavy brass, the horns, the skirling flutes and fiddles took over. Like Andromeda, he thought, chained to this rockface till time should send the deliverer, they now had to learn the great gift of patience. No ill-wind Germans would dislodge them from here.

Patience. The waiting for orders, the helplessness as, static in straps and packs and haversacks and respirators-at-the-alert, they stood around, their throats parched, their palates foul with many cigarettes. They were lumpishly stuck, arms and men, among milling officials with orders in triplicate, majors with Movement Control brassards, worried platoon commanders. Like a disenchantment was the raising of that backcloth of sea and sky, the sight of reality in the gantries, the grey dockyard, the slow coming-on of a land evening. Slowly the drafts moved down the gangways, heavy-booted, stumbling, to the waiting tumbrels. Finally it was the turn of the A.V.C.C. draft, the smallest. The six minced clodhoppingly down to the unfamiliar feel of stone underfoot. The Rock was twinkling to life, lights in tier after tier. The distant haze of the town hummed in the violet evening.

'This is it, then,' said Evans. Nobody said anything. There seemed to be nothing to say. They waited, with something like the apprehension of children who fear they are lost, but also with a quite irrational half-formed hope. Perhaps nobody wanted them, perhaps

they could go home? Arriving in a theatre of fighting had not been like this: fighting was different, fighting got you somewhere, even if only kicked out and home. At length a truck arrived, and from its cabin emerged a cadaverous hatchet-faced warrant officer. There was no welcome. He merely said, 'Two of you for the Engineers' Mess, two for the Pay Corps, two for the Second Wessex. Sort yourselves out into pairs. Remember, you're here for the duration. This isn't a two-year station any more, so you'd better choose someone you can stand the sight of. But don't take all night over it.' They eyed each other shyly. From the promenade deck of the troopship came a call.

'Yoo-hoo!' The big blonde Wren was waving. Ennis waved back. She blew a kiss. 'Look after yourself! Don't do anything naughty!' Ennis blew a kiss back then climbed aboard. The truck moved into the future that was now the present. The past lay well behind them, a sheer hulk stripped of its freight of human society. And behind that? None of them wanted to think.