

## Coming out of the Tunnel

After Ensign Art Anthony dropped out of the Navy flight program, he was assigned to a ship in Virginia Beach, with a stop-off first to Damage Control school in Philadelphia, to learn how to save a ship in an emergency. The Navy gave him enough time to stop by Madison, Wisconsin to see with an old girlfriend from college, Nancy Schneider. They'd met in a class on "Poe, Emerson, and Whitman." Art Anthony took her to dinner in a nicer restaurant than he'd been able to afford as a student and they continued their relationship as before, half brother and sister and half lovers.

His orders required that he be in Philadelphia by midnight on Saturday, so he set his alarm for eight AM in Madison, which would give him time for the fourteen-hour drive. The problem was, in the parking lot behind Nancy's apartment, someone had parked behind him so he couldn't get out. Nancy didn't

recognize the car, so there was nothing he could do but wait. He didn't get going until 10:50, Even if he didn't stop, he had time to make up.

He would need to exceed the speed limit, and used a technique he'd used before. He'd drive lawfully until some serious speeder would pass him. Thirty miles into Indiana, he pulled in behind just such a speeder, and sped with him, half a mile behind. The technique worked. Halfway across the next state, he passed a jackbooted Ohio Trooper writing up the other driver.

Three months earlier, while in a Pensacola automotive store to buy squeegees and soap to wash his car, something made him buy a simple chrome-colored two-D-battery flashlight with a red magnet that allowed him to attach it to the glove box of his car. It was an impulse buy—he simply saw it, thought it might come in handy one day, bought it and slapped it on his dashboard next to the glove box.

Past Pittsburgh, he had the road almost to himself. It was pitch dark at quarter to nine when he passed a few trucks. He'd made up a lot of time. No cars were around as he approached three tunnels. He was two-and-a-half hours from Philadelphia, so he was going to arrive in time.

As he entered the last tunnel, he obeyed the sign 'Please Turn Off Headlamps by pushing in the switch that turned them on. The tunnel was a mile long, very well lit. At the tube's exit he pulled the light switch back out, but, instead of turning the lights on, the chrome switch came out in his hand. He braked to a complete stop in the pitch black. Was he on a shoulder? The pavement?

He fumbled for his flashlight. He shined it on the roadway only to find out he'd parked across the two freeway lanes. The trucks he'd passed would come soon, with no way to avoid him. Working to ignore the glow of an oncoming truck in his mirror, Art maneuvered his car onto the shoulder just before a fourteen wheeler whizzed by.

Not long later a trucker, an ex-Marine, stopped and fiddled with the headlight switch and got Art's lights going again, and soon he arrived in Philadelphia, where a sleepy sailor stamped his orders on time.

Art still wonders what led him to buy that flashlight and affix it to his dashboard. It wasn't something he would do. The more he thought about the flashlight, the more hope he had there was a God, one who felt he was worth saving. If Art had left Madison on time, he probably would have hit those tunnels in daylight, so, if some higher power prompted Art to buy the flashlight, God would have to know that would happen too—that he'd be parked in.

## 2—The Fall of Seaman Shimko

Ensign Art Anthony didn't think much about Shimko, one of the men assigned to him, until he'd been aboard the cruiser for four months, when the ship sailed out of Virginia Beach on a shakedown cruise. He was in charge of twenty-seven men. One, the division's Warrant Officer, had more years in the Navy than Art Anthony had on earth. He wanted to run the division by himself, but Art Anthony insisted on being involved. Art was influenced by the phrase "not on my watch," which officers used when they weren't allowing something to

happen under their supervision, and Art Anthony didn't want to shirk his responsibilities as division officer.

The second day out, the cruiser held a change of command ceremony that everyone had to attend. Art donned his dress whites with its shiny gold ribbon on the epaulet. Before the ceremony, as requested by the Captain, he went below decks to his men's quarters to make sure they were all participating. His men slept together tightly, in a dorm-like room with rows of three-high racks that were like bunk beds except they were on hinges so they could be pulled up and out of the way ("triced up") during the day. The division compartment was empty except for a seaman apprentice, a sailor not long out of boot camp, who nervously jumped to attention and saluted him. "Good morning, Sir."

Reading the name off his uniform, Art said, "Good Morning, Shimko." They were both the same height, five foot nine, and thin. But the sailor's cheeks sunk deep into a gaunt face; his smile seemed to hide sadness. "How do you like being out at sea?" Art asked. "Where are you from?"

They stood between two rows of triced-up bunks. "Pretty Prairie, Kansas, Sir. I'm fine, Sir. Mom's still holding on to the farm, Sir."

Art Anthony, who wasn't used to one-on-one interactions with young enlisted men, was surprised by the completeness of Shimko's answer. He asked a question he'd seen other officers use to put sailors at ease. "Do you have any brothers or sisters, Shimko?"

"Yes, Mr. Anthony, eight," he said, almost as if he'd been thinking about this. "Five brothers and three sisters. I'm the youngest. They call me Caboose."

He couldn't understand why Shimko said that, either. "Do you have any reason to miss the change of command ceremony on the fantail?"

Shimko stared back vacantly. "Not really," he whispered. He looked down past his crisp white jumper and stared at his black shoes, which were not spit-shined, as they should have been with dress whites. In full voice, Shimko said, "No, Sir."

Art worried that the sailor might cry. "Are you not feeling well?"

"I'm not sick, Sir." He looked across at the Ensign. "I'm okay."

"Anyone not actually on watch should be on the fantail. Understand?"

Shimko shut his eyes but then quickly opened them. "Yes, Sir."

Using a shrill voice drill instructors had used to yell at him in training, Art Anthony barked out, "Fall in on the fantail, Seaman Shimko."

The sailor positioned his white hat low over one eyebrow, looked in a mirror, adjusted the tilt, gave a perfunctory salute, and climbed up the compartment ladder.



Hours later, Art looked forward to his watch on the bridge, the command post from which the ship was steered, eight levels above the water. He might get to give commands to the helmsman, to steer, for the first time. While waiting, he read Joseph Heller's *Catch 22*, filled with stories about Yossarian and his cronies.

A deafening alarm sounded. "Man Overboard. This is not a drill. Man your stations for the Special Sea and Anchor Detail. Man Overboard."

Art wasn't part of the Sea and Anchor Detail. He wondered who'd gone overboard but worked to concentrate on the novel, —Maj. Major Major Major and

Milo Minderbinder and other pilots in *Catch 22* who were forced to keep flying missions against their will. How lucky Art was not to be training to fly bombing missions in Vietnam! He put on the uniform for his watch and started toward the bridge, working to get Shimko's vacant stare off his mind. When he passed a Lieutenant in the passageway he asked him what had happened.

"Some sailor took a suicide dive off the sixth deck. The officer of the deck turned this ship around on a dime and snatched him out of the drink. He fell well over six stories; he's lucky to be alive."

"You didn't catch his name, did you?"

"No. I heard he was just off the farm."

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Ensign Anthony did get to take the helm for about fifteen minutes, double-checking with the navigator before barking out "Now come four degrees left," to which the helmsman replied, "Four degrees left to one six two, aye aye, Sir." After the watch, he found out Shimko was in medical and headed straight to him.

The beds in Sick Bay were more substantial than the bunks in quarters, with full mattresses and air ducts next to every pillow. Shimko, drawn up into a fetal position under the covers, was groggy but looked at Ensign Anthony when he called his name. "They're mad at me. The guy who pulled me out of the water called me . . . he called me an asshole, Sir." He seemed sleepy and giddy at the same time.

Art Anthony assumed Shimko had been medicated.

Shimko nodded toward the air conditioning vent. "Smell over here."

Ensign Anthony leaned that way and couldn't smell anything unusual.

“See? They’re working to poison me.”

Art Anthony whispered, “You’re imagining things,” but Shimko had fallen back asleep. The Ensign stood over him, anguished that he’d played such a tough guy with him.

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Later, Art Anthony dragged himself to the officer’s dining room, the wardroom, for dinner. Among the forty officers of the ship seated at long tables with tablecloths, being served by Philippine stewards, Art sat next to the ship’s doctor. A lifer on his last assignment, Doc told Ensign Anthony that Shimko would be helicoptered to an aircraft carrier the next day.

“And then?”

“I’ll bet he’s back in Iowa in a week. I wrote him up. Unfit to serve.”

Art spread his napkin on his lap. “Out of the Navy, just like that?”

“If he fights it, he’s entitled to a review board. But he ignored our mission and attempted suicide. It’s pretty cut-and-dried, especially since he’s exhibiting paranoid tendencies. Textbook.”

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The next day, indeed, a helicopter came from the carrier that was part of their task force and took Shimko away. Art Anthony decided, after all, to leave the running of the division to the Warrant Officer, and never again entered his department’s bunkroom. He made a change to his style of interacting with his subordinates, as well. Whenever he started to bark out an order like a drill sergeant, he’d think twice and find another way.

## 3—Valerie in Valletta I

Malta, located off the boot of Italy, is at the center of the Mediterranean Sea. Only recently had the island controlled its own destiny. The Greeks, Phoenicians, Romans, Arabs, Spanish, and French have ruled over Malta. A British protectorate since the 1800s, the island was bombed heavily in World War II by both Italy and Germany. The plucky Maltese people prevailed and in 1964 England granted Malta its independence. Its capital, Valletta, protected by rugged cliffs, the naval jewel over which many battles were fought, became a regular port of call for US Navy ships.

In July of 1968, at a café overlooking the Valletta harbor where his ship was anchored, Art Andrews first saw Valerie. He wore his dress summer uniform, complete with white bucks which he kept clean by dusting them with a bag of chalk. She wore a pink skirt and a navy blue blouse with a white lace shawl around her shoulders. When he entered the café and looked around, she was staring at him. He took a seat next to her. She said she worked in a travel agency and asked him what he did on the ship.

“I’m the ship’s legal officer but don’t get confused, I’m not really a lawyer.” He had said that many times before, but this time it seemed funny, so he chuckled and she joined in and they laughed so hard people in the café stared.

After they settled down she asked, “How many men, on the ship?”

“About a thousand.”

She nodded. “I work in a travel agency but don’t get confused, I’m not really a travel agent,” and their laughter started again.



Art tried to resist Valerie. He was in a lukewarm long-distance relationship with Nancy Schneider. She'd just moved to St. Louis to work at Washington University. Nancy regularly wrote Art long, typewritten letters. Although she lacked the spontaneous humor and head-turning beauty of Valerie, her girl-next-door Midwestern predictability appealed to Art. He liked that she came from a big successful Wisconsin family and that her letters sparkled with diversions and unexpected observations. She painted one scene vividly. She was studying in a carrel in the stacks of the big library in Madison with her feet up, wearing a skirt. She looked down to see a mirror strategically placed on the floor. She jumped up and chased "the perv" as she called him, down the block.



The second time Art's anchored in Valletta's vaunted harbor, he phoned her and she agreed to meet him at the café. He was surprised how good it felt to see her. "I have only an hour," she said. "We're all going to church. My family goes together on Good Friday."

"That's not much time. Is there anywhere we could be alone?"

"I don't think so. Well, maybe, but we'll have to hurry."

She led Art down a dirt path toward the port. After about a mile, she turned on the trail and said, "Here, there's a little ledge."

He could see the wide harbor where his ship was, a better view than from the café. But the ledge was too small and rocky to even sit. "I'm sorry we can't lie down." He embraced her and they kissed.

To kiss her felt familiar and exotic at the same time. "You're so damned attractive," he said.

She laughed abruptly and Art withdrew.

“Oh, I’m not laughing at you,” she said. “My last year of school, the head of our school, the principal said that to me. He’d finished morning announcements and I needed a hall pass. He said I was damned attractive, just like you. Then he grabbed for me. I backed away. ‘No, come closer,’ he said. We both heard his voice echo in the intercom system; his words had gone throughout the school. You should have seen the look on his face.”

Once again they were laughing together.

“You can touch me here, where he tried to grab.” She pointed to her breasts. “But nothing more, okay?” They kissed and held each other on the ledge overlooking the harbor until she sighed, saying, “I really have to get home now.”

“I know,” Art Anthony whispered in her ear before he loosened his arm from around her. “Here, let’s get going. This has been wonderful—you have been wonderful.” He led her off the ledge. “Thank you.”