Steve McQueen Would Be Proud

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Moist heat fogged Phillips’ glasses as he stepped into the steamy washroom. He searched for an empty sink but each one had a man standing before it, squinting into a smeary mirror, combing his hair or brushing his teeth. Phillips clutched the white towel around his thin waist and walked over to the row of metal shower stalls...
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"Sorry bub, but momma's waitin' and I'm late."

Phillips turned to see Bronson, a bear of a man, hairy, wet and still naked except for a tattoo on his upper arm, a faded red heart pierced by the inscription "I love you no shit". He pushed past Phillips to the sink.

"Gotta make myself pretty for my woman," Bronson said, teeth flashing, as he began to comb his jet black hair.

"Get your butt in gear, Phillips, or else you'll miss liberty call," he said, pointing to an empty sink next to him. Phillips laid his kit on the edge of the sink and carefully rubbed the mirror clean. He took out his toothbrush, toothpaste, and dental floss, then looked in the mirror. He didn't need a shave yet, maybe tomorrow. He brushed his teeth and began to use the dental floss.

"Going into town tonight, boy?" Bronson questioned, still combing his hair, "or are you going to write another letter to your sweety?" He laughed and slapped shaving cream on his face.

Phillips' neck reddened but he continued to use the dental floss on his teeth. Right rear upper molar.

"My woman's got a friend," Bronson said, spitting shaving cream as he spoke, "Hear she needs a hot-blooded man tonight."
Phillips continued to work on his teeth. Right rear lower molar. His hands were shaking now and there was a sinking feeling in his gut. Leave me alone!

"When you going to go out and get yourself bred, boy?" He grinned through his shaving cream. "Go too long without it and you swell up and die."

Phillips grabbed his things and rushed from the washroom, tears welling in his eyes. He wiped them with his towel as he walked down the stairs to the living compartment. He'd get his shower later when the washroom was empty. It was always crowded before liberty in Subic Bay, he should know that. He sat on his bunk and opened his locker. He pulled out a thin pack of letters bound with a thick rubber band. She hadn't written him for over a month now. He read the most recent letter again and the emptiness of it hurt him.

"Hey Phil, want to go out and get a beer?"

Phillips glanced up with a start to see Radway standing over him. Heitkamp stood at his elbow.

"Uh, no thanks. Think I'll write a few letters and go to bed."

"Okay, sure. See ya then," Radway said and they turned and walked toward the ladder. Phillips looked at the letter, now a crumpled ball in his hand, then at the backs of Radway and Heitkamp.

"Could you give me five minutes? Just give me a few minutes." Radway and Heitkamp turned and watched Phillips struggle with his pants.

The three walked through the shipyard to the main gate. It was dark now and streams of men poured toward the gate like moths drawn to a light.

"The Enterprise is in tonight you know," Radway said. "They spent forty days off the coast of 'Nam. Boy, are they gonna be rowdy."

Heitkamp looked at him and grinned. "A few sailors off a birdfarm aren't going to ruin my liberty. Stacy will stay true to me."

"Yeah, she'll stay true to you as long as your pockets are lined with green," Radway said, and they both laughed. Phillips walked along with the two in silence. Two beers would be good for him, then back to the ship for a good night's rest.
They showed their identification at the gate and walked quickly toward town. Both sides of the main street were lined with brightly lit bars, seedy hotels and cheap souvenir shops.

"Let's get a beer here," Radway said, motioning to a doorway labeled in faded block letters THE EMPIRE BAR. An armed Filipino guard in a tight-fitting gray uniform motioned eagerly to the men. His two gold front teeth glinted in a smile as they walked into the bar.

Once inside the dimly lit bar Phillips was grabbed firmly by a small girl in a red mini-skirt. He instinctively began to pull away but saw that Radway and Heitkamp also had instant companions on their arms. He looked at the girl hanging on his elbow and she looked up at him, blinking her almond eyes and smiling. Her long black hair was parted down the middle and fell over her shoulders to the middle of her back.

"Beer for you?" she asked Phillips expectantly.

Phillips could not take his eyes off her. She was the most beautiful girl he had ever seen. Her brown skin looked so smooth and her teeth were white and perfect.

"Want coke?" she asked with a confused look on her face.

"Get him a beer!" Radway shouted and she hurried behind the bar, her face smiling again.

"Jesus, Phil, sit down!" Radway laughed. "Don't let those bedroom eyes get to you." Both Radway and Heitkamp were sitting alone now, methodically drinking their San Miguel beer. The girl brought the beer back to Phillips and sat down next to him.

"You from the carrier Enterprise?" she questioned.

"No, just a destroyer, the USS Stoddard," Phillips said, staring at the girl.

"How long you stay?"

"About ten days."

The girl's face brightened and she snuggled close. She put her head on his chest then reached up and gave him a light kiss on the cheek.

"My name is Lisa. Do you want me to be your girlfriend?" She looked at him with wide unblinking eyes.

"O-Okay I guess," Phillips said, flustered.

"Buy me drink, please?"

He peeled off the bills without thinking and the girl
snatched them out of his hand, laughed, and wiggled toward the bar.

"C'mon Phil, time to blow this joint," Radway said, finishing his beer and emitting a low belch.

"I'm staying," Phillips said resolutely.

"What? This is a shit place, Phil. No band, ugly chicks, c'mon, let's go."

"I'm staying." Phillips watched the girl return with her drink.

"Shit, Phil . . .," Radway began, but Heitkamp motioned for them to go. Radway shook his head as they both walked out to the street.

The bar was almost deserted now even though it was near eight o'clock. Phillips and Lisa sat alone together at the table. She leaned over, nibbled on his ear and whispered, "I love you no shit." He bought her another drink. And another. They moved to a booth near the back of the bar and the hours slipped by easily as the two snuggled close, listening to the scratchy Janis Joplin records on the jukebox. About eleven o'clock the bar began filling up with noisy, drunken sailors. All of the bargirls were busy now, sitting, drinking and laughing with the free-spending sailors. Lisa squirmed in Phillips' arms and squeezed his thigh.

"You stay with me tonight?" she said bluntly. Phillips lost his breath as a tingly hot rush enveloped his body. His mind was a jumble and he could not react. The girl moved impatiently at his indecision then sat back abruptly, crossed her arms and curled her lips into an exaggerated pout.

"You no like me?" she said, staring off into the smoky air of the bar.

"Oh yes, yes I do," he said earnestly. She moved closer and laid her arm on his thigh.

"Get hotel room. We make love all night," she cooed. She escorted the dazed sailor to the door and pointed vaguely down the busy street.

"Get hotel room at KENNEDY HOTEL. I meet you there later," she said. Phillips nodded dumbly and walked alone down the crowded street. The girl looked at him a moment then rushed back into the noisy bar.
The room was quiet except for an occasional horn or backfire that intruded from the street below. Phillips opened his eyes again and stared at the circular fan revolving slowly above his head. The giant blades created an eerie movable pattern of shadows on the far wall. Yeah, just like those Humphrey Bogart flicks, Phillips said to himself. All he needed was a smouldering cigarette, Lauren Bacall and a bottle of good rye whiskey. He certainly could use a drink to get to sleep. He had tried to sleep, closing his eyes and thinking of the soft featherbed at home or even of his cozy cot on the ship, but when he opened his eyes the shadows moved unmercifully.

Phillips shifted uncomfortably on the cheap mattress and the springs awoke, groaning. What time was it? Radway warned him to leave his watch on the ship because the thieves in town were very good. He got up and walked over to the window and leaned against the sill, looking at the dark deserted streets below. The twelve o'clock curfew had been in effect for hours now and he was sure that she was not coming. Damn it, but she promised. He walked slowly to the edge of the sunken bed and sat down with a sigh. Suddenly he heard footsteps! They were faint at first, then stronger as they approached the brown-paint-peeled door that he was staring at. He held his breath, listening to the squeak of the floorboards, but they did not stop and soon they faded down the hall. All he could hear now was the muffled sound of a girl giggling in the next room and then a man laughing. But even that died out and he was sitting in the quiet, alone. No girl had ever held him like that, and now she wasn't here. Who was she with now?

He forced the thought out of his mind and got up quickly and walked toward the mirror on the wall, staring at himself as he got bigger in the cracked glass. The crack severed his sandy hair from his wide blue eyes and pug nose. Pug nose. His mother always said he had a pug nose. Did Steve McQueen ever have a pug nose? He squinted his eyes, sucked in his cheeks and walked away from the mirror with a practiced swagger, all the time looking over his shoulder at his slender image in the mirror. He turned rapidly, eyes flashing and
scowling, and stared at the man in the mirror. Then he relaxed, grinning widely. Steve McQueen would be proud.

The sky was beginning to brighten and the streets were alive with jeepney drivers waiting outside the hotels to take the men back to their ships. Time to go. Phillips mussed the bed, combed his hair and ran down the hotel steps to the street. Waiting at the door was a bright yellow, red, orange, purple jeep with silver chrome, shiny rearview mirrors and red tassles, custom, made to carry from one to ten passengers.

Phillips hopped into the front seat and gasped, "To the front gate please." Before he could catch a second breath the driver popped the clutch and slammed the jeep into gear, and weaved down the narrow alley past a vegetable stand with uncontrolled skill. Phillips grabbed his seat and held his breath as the driver maneuvered the jeep at blinding speed through a crowded intersection, cutting off a blue, green and gold jeepney with yellow tassles. Laughing, the driver whipped the jeep around a tight corner and narrowly missed a sailor walking with his girl. They turned and cursed him in two languages but he only smiled and shifted down as the jeep approached a logjam of vehicles lined up to let sailors off in front of the gate. The driver ran his fingers through his greasy hair and watched Phillips loosen his tight grip on the seat.

"You like Filipino girls?" the driver grinned, revealing yellow teeth.

"Uh, I guess they're all right," Phillips said, shifting uncomfortably in the red vinyl seat. He stared at a picture of the madonna glued to the dashboard with yellowing tape.

"I didn't see girl leave hotel," the driver said.

"She left earlier," Phillips lied.

"Ah yes, girls do that." The driver pulled the jeep close to the gate.

"The fare?" Phillips questioned.

"You decide, give me fair price."

"Uh sure, let me get my money." Phillips shoved his hand in his left pocket and found only lint. My God! He'd given most of his money to the girl and the rest he spent to buy a room at the hotel. His face flushed as he checked his right pocket. He found only his military ID card. The driver noticed this, his
anger rising, and with a vicious brown fist, he lashed at the red tassel hanging from the rearview mirror.

"Two piso fair price! Give me now!" His eyes bulged and his wrinkled brown face contorted in rage. Phillips looked at the man in shock for a moment then leaped from the seat and dashed down the crowded dirt walk, brushing past and almost upsetting a small old lady carrying vegetables. Trailing him, as if on his heels, was the cursing of the jeep driver.

"Stop, thief, goddamn thief, goddamn sailor, goddamn American, cheap American, goddamn American!!" The sailors and Filipino shipyard workers turned to stare at him as he ran to the gate, ID card clutched in his hand. Chest heaving, he showed his card to the guard and walked quickly through the shipyard toward the pier where his ship was tied up. The clock at the gate said he had plenty of time before quarters. Maybe enough time to sneak aboard unnoticed.

Sailors were busy sweeping the deck and polishing the brasswork around the quarterdeck when he saluted the officer of the deck and rushed inside to the living compartment. The compartment was dark and Phillips could hear the snores of the sailors still sleeping. He carefully opened his locker but he accidently brushed against the door and sent it slamming into the bunk next to his. A form with tousled hair and white underwear growled and slowly turned over, his sleepy eyes opening to slits. It was Bronson, goddamn.

"What th...?" The his eyes opened wide, "Whooeee! Lookee here, Phillips coming back from liberty in THE MORNING!"

"Hi ya Bronson," Phillips said half-heartedly.

"Have a good time with the little ladies?" Bronson said with a leer.

"Pretty good I guess, yes, pretty good," Phillips said, pulling on his dungarees.

"What was she like? Brown skin, black hair, slanted eyes and a wide smile when you bought her a drink?"

"Yeah, something like that," Phillips said. "Hey, I thought you had liberty last night too. What are you doing on the ship?"

Bronson motioned Phillips to come closer, then said
confidentially in his ear, “Now don’t let this out, I don’t want to ruin my image, but my woman fell in love with the wallet of a sailor off the Enterprise, that two-timing bitch. So I spent my money on barbecue and beer and came home early.”

“Really?” Phillips was astounded. “It really happened to you?”

“Tonight I’m out sniffin’ for something new,” Bronson said. “So let me sleep, I’ll need the energy.” Bronson rolled over in his bunk and pulled the pillow over his head.

Phillips sat on his bunk and began to tie his shoes. If it can happen to Bronson, it can happen to anyone. Why maybe even Steve McQueen. Shit, I betcha it DID happen to Steve McQueen. He got up and looked at himself in the mirror, scowled, squinted his eyes and ruffled his hair. Tonight would be different. He jammed his white hat on his head and took the stairs two at a time on his way to quarters. Yeah, Steve McQueen would be proud.

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Mrs. Barrett

by

Mary Almquist

Journalism 2

I sat behind a lady oh so stately
in the pew ahead of
me at church today.

She had an eye
on the backside of her head
in the hair
peeping out unblinking at
me from a pincur, barely visible
sly eye — a regular ball.

It knew what I did
during the sermon.

Art by
Fred Rixe