Inbound

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by Bruce Tester

NO LIGHT passed through the dense clouds. On the sea all was black. To our starboard lay many ships enveloped by the silent darkness. Our own ship plowed quietly through the calm seas. The wake of our transport exuded a puffy fluorescence as I watched from my position on the fantail. I was aware of someone approaching, a dark form feeling its way along the lifeline.

"Who's there?" I hoped it was someone I knew.

"Byers. That you, Charlie?"

"Yah."

Byers was an old salt compared to most of us. Seven years in the Marine Corps and still only a PFC. Or rather, a private for about the fourth time. He got busted occasionally.

"What're ya doin' up here, kid?"

"Thinking of the riotous and tumultuous welcome they'll give us in San Diego after two weeks of sitting on our cans out here protecting our country."

"Welcome, hell. I ain't seen no welcome in seven years. Them people couldn't care less if you an' me got our guts shot out."

That was typically Byers.

"Oh, I think someone someplace would care, Byers."
"Well, go right ahead an' think that, buddy, but I know different. Them people don't even know yer out here much less care, and the only ones that give a damn if you come back are the cops and the Broadway shysters, an' all they want's yer check."

"Come now, Byers," I joked. "A man of your reputation must have a girl who'd shed a tear or two."

"Well, I was engaged once to some broad from La Mesa."

"What happened?"

"Same thing as happens to everyone else. I caught her in bed with some 4-F."

He paused and stared moodily into the night. Byers personified the attitude of nearly all the men. Men? Most of them were just boys with beards. Little guys trying to show how tough they were and how much they didn't give a damn for soft things. "I don't need no one," they'd say. But they all did. Everyone does. Byers was not to be denied.

"Hell, man, look at you. You got a 'Dear John Letter'. You expect she's sittin' at home tonight while you're out in the middle of the goddamn ocean? Sure as hell she's out playin' around with some guy!"

Why did he have to bring that up? I felt my chest tighten; my eyes watered. I struggled to look unperturbed. Byers continued his attack.

"Do you realize we could be landin' on some damn beach in China in a couple weeks. You could get yer head blown off and no one would give a damn. Sure, I know, everybody at home would weep and moan for a week and then you'd never know somethin' happened. And over on that damn beach they'd pick your pieces up in a plastic bag and put a little white cross on your grave. And that's the end of you. Bang!"

He waited for me to argue back, but how do you argue back when you know a man is right?

We steamed on into the inky darkness bound for San Diego where we'd slip silently past Point Loma while the civilians still slept in their warm beds; and that night we'd hit the bars and look for a good "pickup," hoping in vain to find one who cared.