

The Over Night Train

By Bill Stock

On my discharge from the Vindicatrix Sea School on the 26th March 1954 I was told to report immediately to the Dock Street Pool, London in full uniform and no going home first. Some of the boys at the Vindi reckoned I could join a ship the day I reported and could be gone for two years. That news did not make me feel very happy because the most thing I desired was going home and getting some of mum's meals into me. I arrived at the Dock Street Pool in due course, what a shock to find this old, not so clean office in an old building just down the road from Algate East full of the toughest, roughest looking men I ever saw in my life. You can imagine the comments I got with me being decked out in my uniform, I felt a real dick head.

Eventually I got to see somebody from behind the counter who looked like the rest of the seamen there, not at all polite. I was given a railway warrant and told "to go home and wait until they sent me a telegram to report back to the Pool. No going away on holiday." I was lucky and had a week at home and I think put on two stone in weight during that time, I sure stuffed myself rotten. In due course the telegram arrived saying "to report at the Dock Street Pool at 9:00am the next day," which I did minus the uniform that was dumped the day I got home. The only part of it that was kept was the jersey and that I kept for another 20 years, it was the warmest jersey that I ever had, in the end it just wore out.

At Dock Street I was told to get the over night train to Falmouth to join a tanker, the STS Caprinus, gross tonnage of 17,897 tons, Port of registration Panama. I boarded the train at Waterloo Station about 10:00pm it was one of those trains that did not have a carriage running the length of the train, no getting to stretch the legs etc. In the same compartment were a woman and a small boy who was five or six years old, the woman I thought was quite old, thinking back now she was around 23 or 24 years old. I being only being sixteen it seemed that way and I was a very shy sixteen year old, still a bit in some ways. I had hardly spoken to the opposite sex, girl wise that is. Where I come from in Romford, it was considered sissy to have anything to do with girls. Though I must admit there were always those sly glances when none of my mates was looking, I'm sure they did the same thing.

On the train I sat in the corner of one seat and the woman and boy sat in the corner seat opposite me. We got under away so I started to read the evening paper, but every time I looked up she would smiling at me. This I thought was a bit strange, which also made me very embarrassed. After a while she started talking to me, most of what she told me I don't remember, but I do remember her telling me that the boy with her was not hers, but her sisters and that she was taking him to her parents for some reason. I could not think why she told me this, it was some time in the future that I woke up as to why she told me this. My tongue did not seem to work very well, but I did manage to tell her that I was on my way to join my first ship and that was about all. I do know that I had a flushed face from London to Falmouth, she was always smiling at me and there was this look, which I never picked up on.

As the night wore on I got a little sleepy so I put the newspaper down on the seat next to me, after some time sleep did not come to me so I thought I'd have another read of the paper. Without opening my eyes for some reason, I reached down for the paper, I could not feel the paper, but these legs beside me. I must have been groping for a few seconds before I realized what I was doing. I opened my eyes with such a shock, my face was like a beetroot. I sputtered and stammered trying to say how sorry I was, but she just sat stretched there in her seat with her legs still by my side and still she did not move only smiled. That smile told me not to worry everything was all right. The boy was fast asleep at the other end of the compartment on her side, but she still did not move just kept on giving me those sweet smiles. For the rest of the trip I just sat up straight and did not move a muscle.

We arrived at Truro early morning, the train was there for quite awhile, so we got some breakfast, she paid for mine, which I thought was great as I did not have much money.

We finally arrived in Falmouth where she bid me farewell and wished me luck and departed with the smile and look that I wondered about for quite a long time, until I found out about the birds and the bees, my parents never told me, I wonder if it would have made any difference. I spent the next ten years traveling on trains going to join ships or going home, but never ever to experience that situation again, but I kept on dreaming and hoping. I think I would know how to fill in time on an over night train with just the compartment with no corridor running the length of the train, going some where just me and you know who, I never did get her name!.