

At The End Of The Pier

a monologue

by Rob Davis

Scene : any sunny June afternoon, at the end of the pier. Waves are heard gently against the pier's legs, and from the distance comes the very quiet sound of happy holidaymakers, shouting children, ice cream vans, etc. Ted, an elderly gentleman, is leaning against the end rail, looking out to sea. He is dressed in worn but clean clothes, a military badge evident; and he has a walking-stick to hand. Throughout the play, whilst talking to the audience, he addresses them directly, taking them into his confidence; but addresses his unseen friends more abstractly, and in the style of a soliloquy.

Ted (*Sitting on the bench C, and waving a hand as if to return a greeting to someone out of sight below*) Yes, mate, fine, thanks, fine ... (*nodding at the unseen figure; turns more towards the audience*) ... fine, I s'pose as well as can be expected, that's not bad at my kind of age, is it? Not bad at all. Can't grumble. Mustn't complain.

(He looks down the beach)

We were never allowed up here. In fact (*chuckling*) there was a dirty great big section of the old pier missing, slap bang in the middle. They said it was taken away to stop an invasion. God knows where they put it all, all those ironworks bits and pieces, hundreds of 'em, there must have been, like a huge iron jigsaw. Not the kind of thing you'd just turn up with and stash in someone's shed or backyard, was it? But afterwards, they put it back again, and you can't even see the joins where they did it.

Ha ha ha! Can you imagine it, some bloke in a bowler hat from the Ministry of Works, turning up at Millshaw's Scrapyard in 1946, and saying, all officious-like (*officious voice*) "Excuse me, we've come for that section of the pier, that what was taken away in 1940." And the foreman at the yard leaning on his shovel, scratching his head, looking round and saying (*very working-class voice*) "Cor blimey mate, it was here a while ago, but strike me pink if I can remember where we put it." (*Officious voice*) "Do you mean to tell me that you've lorrst it?" (*very working-class again*) "Well, not lost it exactly. Maybe we melted it down."

And the Ministry of Works bloke saying, (*officious*) "Melted it down? **Melted it down?** What do you mean, you melted down the old pier?" And the foreman saying, (*working-class*) "No, mate, I seem to remember that your lot came and took it away and melted it down afterwards, you know, so that they could make Spitfires out of it, like they did with the bollards what were outside the Town Hall, and me Aunt Bessie's railings, them outside her house, what she was so proud of, and black-leaded every week."

(Normal voice) Ha ha ha! But that's not what happened, although if it had have done, it would have been a funny one. So we got the old pier back – even if Aunt Bessie never did see her railings again.

(Pointing along the beach) But right there it was, right down there, looking at it now, you'd never guess.

(Shaking his head sorrowfully)

I can still see it, even today, even all these years on. We just waited there and cracked jokes like you would if you'd come to the beach for a seaside holiday, stayed in a shabby kind of a guest house and eaten ice cream every day, and gone down to the bandstand in the park, or taken the kids to paddle in the pool or in the sea.

But at the time, it were nothing like that. Just coils of barbed wire, signs saying there were mines – which there weren't, because some of the locals used to slip through, and swim in the sea - tents, tanks and guns **everywhere**. Sergeants shouting like they always did – you see those old black-and-white films with the sergeant-major shouting, and that's just how it was – and all the rest of us all keyed up and ready for the off. We all knew it was the off. Nobody said nothing, the officers were all schtum, but we knew all right. Tomorrow would be it. Today was June 5th, 1944.

Blimey, but we were scared. I was scared anyway, I don't mind telling you. Everyone was scared. Even if you didn't have two brain cells to rub together, and there was one or two of those sort of lads right enough, you were scared. France, here we come. Jerry, watch out, the Allies are coming.

(He cocks his head to one side, as if listening to a comment which nobody else can hear)

(Aside) Yes, I'm coming to that.

(Resuming) My mate –

(Aside) - see, I told you I was coming to it –

(Resuming) – this bloke I'd been with since we found ourselves behind one another in the queue to sign up down the barracks, he was a strapping Irishman from Belfast, Sonny they called him, but I knew his real name was –

(Aside) Shall I tell them? *(Listens briefly, nods)* All right, then.

(Resuming) – James William Campbell. Great big chap, worked down the Belfast docks. I liked the look of him, and we hit it off from the start, and we said that we'd watch out for one another, and that's just what we did. Now old Sonny was the kind of bloke that no matter how bad things were, and believe you me we'd seen some bad things, 'cause we'd been out in North Africa, and done the desert scene –

(Listens) What'd'ya mean, music, what music? *(Listens again, then half-annoyed)* I said the desert scene, not the Desert Song, you daft ha'p'orth!

(Resuming) Like I was saying, North Africa hadn't been no picnic.

You what? *(Listens)* Yes, the beach **was** a long way from the sea.

(Resuming) And still no matter how much sand you had in your tea, no matter how turned up at the edges your bully beef sandwiches were, no matter how bad it looked, no matter that Rommel was such a bloody good soldier that he gave us the run around, you could always rely on Sonny to make a joke and find something to take your mind off it all.

Like the saluting trap, blimey that was a good one. He'd wait until there was some brand

new Lieutenant arrived, some kid straight from Blighty with a bright shiny new set of pips on his shoulders and fuzz on his face, and when he saw the new bloke coming along, we'd all set off one after the other at ten second intervals, and throw up a salute so that the poor blighter had to return maybe thirty or forty salutes between the Officers' Mess and the lavs! Ha ha ha! Not one of 'em ever caught on, but mind you, you didn't dare do it twice to the same chap.

(Doing a double-take, and then peering carefully at some point in the audience; appreciatively) Love a duck, that's nice, that is. There's one thing about the summer, it brings out the good lookers. *(His gaze tracks across the audience, as if following a walking figure at a fairly short distance)* Lovely, lovely. All suntan and cleavage, blimey, it was worth the walk down here.

(Listens; defensively) All right, all right, she was just a good looking girl, that's all. *(He sneaks a last look)* Blimey, do they do tattoos **all** the way down there these days? *(He looks surprised, and then waves back at the girl)* Hello, darlin', yes, hot isn't it? *(Appreciatively, as she is lost to sight)* Lovely, lovely. That'll make some lucky chap very happy.

(Listens) Yes, well, looking never did no harm now did it? Where was I?

(Listens) Oh ar. Getting ready – and feeling scared. *(Looking out at the beach scene, and shaking his head)* See them happy kids playing football down there *(pointing)*. Right down there it was, right where Sonny and me was having a smoke after guard duty.

I says to him, 'cause I knew he knew I was frit about what was coming, "Sonny, what do you reckon to all this, then?"

He thinks for a moment, and I'm expecting some daft joke like he always used to come out with. But he thinks – and you can see like the wheels going round in his mind – and he says to me, "Ted, you and me and the lads have been training for this for how long now?"

And I says, "Near enough four months now, what with one thing and another."

He nods, and he says, "Four months, that's right. And if you stop and think about it, Jerry's had near enough four years, what with one thing and another."

(Changing his stance against the pier head)

So what Sonny was saying was, no matter how ready **we** was, **they** was going to be twelve times as ready as what we were.

(There is a sudden increased noise from the beach)

(Calling) Down there, lad! Right there underneath the pier, behind that rusty old pillar! *(Beckoning and pointing earnestly)* No, no, no, go a bit further along – that's it – got it?

(Still calling) All right, lad? That's it. *(Watching as if the unseen figures are now retreating)*

(Taken aback a little; aside) Well, "thank you, grandad" wouldn't have come amiss, would it? *(Calling, sarcastically)* No, that's all right, you're welcome!

(Taking out a handkerchief and mopping his face) And what Sonny said, well, it was right wasn't it? Fortress Europe, Hitler called it, and me and Sonny and the rest of us lads was

going to take it off him and give it back to the French.

Not that they've been very bloody grateful since then, mind. Me and the missis went to France on holiday once, touring about for a couple of weeks in the car, and staying wherever the fancy took us. We stayed at some place called Albert, down on the Somme, 'cause my dad had been fighting down there in 1916, and I wanted to see it, so we just stopped off and went into this hotel like, just off the market square.

Anyways, we goes in, and I knew enough French to ask for a room, and to begin with it were all smiles, but after a few seconds the landlady realises that we're English, and like the missis said afterwards, well you could see the shutters come down. We got the room, but the service – well – it were pretty terrible.

Funny thing was, later that night we fancied a beer, and we went downstairs to see what was what. And down in the bar, there all over the walls you could see framed pictures of British Tommies, even some of our lads –

(Listens, nodding) - yes, yes, it **could** even have been me dad –

(Resuming) – some of our lads who were leading enemy soldiers away as prisoners of war. With the ruins of the town in the background, even that famous Tottering Virgin statue thing on top of the church. And I said to the missis, right there in the bar, although in English and in a bit of an undertone, just in case some local bloke might just understand, well the ungrateful sods! Here we are and we chucked the Jerries out not once, mark you, but twice, and this is the way they treat us!

(Shaking a finger at the audience) But you might well say, wait on, that was just one hotel and one landlady who'd had a bad day, but I can tell you straight, and so would the missis if she was here to say it, it were the same all over, with one or two exceptions, like. Where they was taking money off you for a hotel room, or petrol, or at a restaurant, it was just a kind of hollow smile thing they gave you, but you could sense the real feeling. And when they weren't taking money off you for nothing, some of them was plain hostile. Not friendly at all.

The missis says, once we've left the place the following morning and got back in the car, "I s'pose if you think about it, we've fought the Germans only a couple of times, but we've been fighting the French for a thousand years, chucked the Germans out of their country twice, and that's why they hate us so much, 'cause when we fought 'em, we nearly always beat 'em!"

(Laughing) And we laughed and laughed, 'cause it was dead true! Agincourt, Crecy, Waterloo, Trafalgar, you know.

(Listens) Yes, all right. Sorry, I was a bit off track.

(Resuming) So there we are on the beach – right down there, right under where I'm standing right now – having a smoke. And old Sonny, he goes on, "Ted, I reckon that we're in for a thin time, us." I never seen him looking so serious, but when I thought about what he'd said, he was just as scared as what I was. In the barracks that night, all you could hear was the scratching of pens as the lads wrote letters, and mostly every one of us having to go off to the bogs about five times as often as usual. We was all shit scared, the whole bloody lot of us, pardon my French.

(Listens) You what? *(Realising)* Oh, pardon my **French**, yes, that's a good one!

I was in some pub in 1966, the day England won the World Cup. As it happened, I was sat next to this German bloke, a dead funny roly-poly jovial kind of a bloke who was just passing through on a coach trip, and like the rest of the country he'd come in to watch the football. I never cared much for football, I just wanted a pint, but there we are sat next to one another, and we have a chat like, and he buys me a pint and I buys him a pint.

So then the game is starting up, and he looks at me dead serious, his jolly face in a heap on the floor, slaps down his pint, and he pauses a moment and then he says to me, "Tonight, my friend, we are enemies again." Then just for a moment I think he means it, but then he roars with laughter and wraps his arm round my shoulders.

(Listening; defensively) No, no, he was all right, that bloke. "We are enemies again" – ha ha ha! But we beat **them**, and all! Ha ha ha!

(Resuming) And down on that *(pointing)* beach that night ... do you know what the worst bloody thing was? Right at the moment when we was all keyed up, the weather's so bad that we have to wait another day! And what's going through my mind is, maybe one extra day doesn't help Fortress Europe be a bit more of a Fortress, but on the other hand, how many bullets can you carry up to a pill box in 24 hours? As far as we knew, they were expecting us.

(Sweeping gesture along the beach) The whole of the south coast was sinking under the weight of tanks and soldiers. They said that the only reason it didn't sink was because of all the barrage balloons holding it up! And that was right enough, everywhere you looked there was those huge great balloons floating up above.

(Nodding at a passer-by just offstage) All right, mate? Right enough. See you down the Legion, Saturday? *(Aside)* No if I see you first, you won't.

S'funny when you stand still for a moment, or even just walk round the place, and you look at the old-timers, sitting there or walking by in the opposite direction. I mean, you look at a bloke about your age and you think, well, he must have been in the Army or something like that, just like me, I wonder what mob he was with? And you look for some kind of badge *(points to a regimental badge on his own lapel)* to give you clue, and nine times out of ten there's nothing there, nothing at all. As if they did their time in the Army or the Navy or the Air Force and then just moved on back into civvy street and thought no more of it.

But just sometimes you can catch a bloke's eye and see it, you can see that he's been through it, see that he's got a story to tell about what he did, about what he said, and about what happened to him. Sometimes you can see it as plain as if it's written on his forehead.

But try to get him talking about it, I dunno – *(listening)* – no, I dunno why not, either.

(Looking down the beach; resuming) All those blokes, queuing up down there, to get off the Blighty shore and into the landing craft, like it was an excursion, 'cept that it was night, and pitch black. And the sergeant yelling at you for making a noise, as if Jerry could hear a Tommy-gun banged against the side of the ship.

Me and Sonny, we stuck together. We'd done Africa with some of the other lads, and I quite liked it down there, I liked the heat, although not so much that I wasn't glad we wasn't in the jungle. Rommel hadn't managed to kill us, and we'd even give him a bloody nose. I liked to look around, and see places like Alexandria and Cairo and all that, though most of the natives just wanted to rip off any soldier who strayed into one of their shops. Bloomin'

A-rabs! The beer was good, and we must have drunk half a dozen bars as dry as a bone.

Me and Sonny never had a scratch. People used to touch us for luck. Do you know, some daft berk once dropped a live grenade right at Sonny's feet? We were in a concrete bunker, about twelve of us during an air raid, and plonk, there it lay, with sweet fanny adams of a hope of any of us getting out, and a four second fuse. Sonny reaches down and smooth as you like, he chucks the grenade straight up the ventilation shaft, six feet I might tell you, and plonk, it lands outside and goes off. The lads all thought we was goners, and Sonny just says "Bit close, that was" and goes on as if nothing had happened ... mind you, some of the rest of us had to rush off a bit sharpish for a quick change of underpants ... followed through a bit too strong, if you get my meaning.

(Peering into the audience, with interest) Ah, go on lad, enjoy it. Nothing wrong with a hot day, a smooth lawn, a cracking looking girl, and a snog, is there? Bloody good luck to you.
(Nods appreciatively)

(Resuming) Christ, but I was seasick. I was just the same whether I was on a millpond or a cruise liner. When we got to France they could have shot me stone dead and I've have thanked them for it.

(Indignantly) But did they have to go and shoot **him** instead? We were out of the landing craft in a trice, just dandy, just like we'd done it twenty times on some Welsh beach, and Sonny as usual trying to make a joke out of it all. "First one to the bathing huts gets an ice cream".

But this time, it was real, bullets was flying about and so we ran like billy-ho, trying to keep a low profile, when I suddenly realises Sonny wasn't next to me, so I looks left and right and there he was, gone. So I turns right round and looks behind, and I see him lying on his back, on the sand. I shouts to him to get a move on or he'd lose the race, and then I just kind of knew he was dead. One single bullet from a Mauser rifle, straight through the heart, clean as a whistle and twice as deadly.

I can never hear that tune without thinking of him. "When Irish Eyes Are Smiling". I knelt beside him and he had such a happy smile on his face ... afterwards, do you know, the Officers said the landing had been a piece of cake. Maybe it was for them. They only had to write one letter. Dear Mr and Mrs Campbell. I regret to have to inform you ... a piece of cake! That's no epitaph for a man is it? Not for your best mate.

All just down there all those years ago. *(Very reflectively)* What's *time* then? Just a few years. It's just time passing, isn't it? *(Sighs)* The places stay the same and the people move on.

(A pause, and then as if tapped on the shoulder; listening, then very brightly) Ar yes, d'you know, I almost forgot all about that!

(Shuffling off, animatedly) I lost half a crown down there ... I wonder if that tattooed girl'd help me find it ... *(a deep theatrical wink, and he is gone).*