

By *Sanners Gow*

THE BADGE

School Lane in Macduff is a gye eerie bit o the aal toon. A lot o fowk hiv seen strange ongyans there throwe the years an mony's the story his been tellt about them at the front o a bleazin fire tae keep the shadas o lang syne fae comin oot o the darkness an touchin the back o a budy's neck garrin them loup. If ye dinna believe ma hud ye doon there some dark winter's nicht especially if it's rainin an there's a stiff wasterly ween blawin an ye'll see then fit I mean. This story comes fae the last war tellt tae me by the woman this happened tae.

Annie sat in front o the fire ficherin wi an aal ganzey unravelin the oo fae it. She planned tae use the oo tae knit a balaclava an michtbe a pair o mitts if there wiz enough oo. It wiz tae be for her man Ackie faa wiz on the Russian convoys. This wid be the syventh Russian convoy he'd been on. Annie reflected though on his words last time he'd been hame. He'd been affa sweert tae gang this time sayin that the shippin companies were pittin their aalest shippies on the runs hopin the Jerrie U-boats or coorse weather wid pit them tae the bottom so they could claim the cost o biggin anither yin fae the government. O the men lost in the roost buckets they jist didna gie a dam. Siller wiz faar mair important tae them than the lives o the crewmen. Ackie hid tellt her angrily that if the shippie ye happened tae be on wiz sunk an somehow ye survived the very moment ye wint intae the water yer pey stopped fae the company. He'd added ruefully though that eence in the waater ye'd faar mair important things tae think aboot than yer pey bein stoppit. She'd saw but for an instant a look o horror cross his face at his ain words.

Annie kent weel enough it wiz bad on this convoys she only needed tae look at Ackie fin he came hame tae see that. The drawn features and the haunted look in his een wiz bad enough but there wiz also the scars on his body wi the freezin conditions and his haans worst o aa jist butchered wi the freests that far tae the North. At nearly sixty he wiz faar too aal for the horrific conditions o the Russian convoys.

Annie saiched at the thocht as she rowed up the oo intae baas in readiness for wyvin. By the time she'd feenished rowin the oo she thocht there'd be mair than enuech for mitts and a balaclava tae send on for him. That's if he got them this time? She muttered tae herself. The last parcel she'd sent teen months tae reach him and even then mair norr haaf o the stuff hid been missin.

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Pittin the oo intae her shewin pyoke she rose an put the kettle abeen the coals. She'd a wee suppy sugar left fae her ration so she decided tae hae a tayspoonfae as a treat. She switched on her wireless tae get the nine o'clock news as usual but cursed fin she mind it wiz needin a chairge. She'd tak it tae Wilkinson's neist day for a recharge. She liked tae listen tae the news ilka nicht but wi trepidation in her hert because they sometimes mentioned shippies lost and she always dreaded hearin the name o Ackie's shippie the SS Bennachie. Wi an irritated saich at her ain thochts she put anither wee puckle coal ontae the fire tae garr the kettle bile.

She could feel the caal drucht comin in throwe the attic windae at her as the punchin wasterly weens came in aff the Moray Firth. Annie checkit the blackout blinds hidna come unshipped allowin licht tae peek oot. That thoct brocht her richt back tae Ackie eence mair. Fit kind o seas wiz he facin in a blacked oot shippy crashin its wye throwe the freezin caal ice strewn waters at the tap o the warld? As if tae mock her thochts she heard heavy rain lashin against her rattlin attic windae an shuddered.

Aifter she'd heen her cuppy o tay wi the guilty speenfae o sugar Annie dampit doon the fire and turned aff the gas licht fin a knock sounded on the street door. Annie grimaced speirin the empty room "Faa could this be at this time o nicht?" She lookit at the clock on the waa and saw it wiz a quarter past nine. Lichtin the wee paraffin lamy Annie made her wye doon the creaky rotten stairs. The chappin got mair insistent and Annie takin care on the dark stairs shouted "I'm comin, I'm comin!" The stairs were in a really poor state as this hid eence been a wee warehouse for huddin fishin gear an riggin. She bade in fit hid eence been the owner's hoosie abeen the warehouse but it like the stair wiz the waar o the weer.

Orr the time she reached the length o the door the knockin wiz getting affa insistent so angry kind she shouted "Aaricht, aaricht hud yer horses!" She fichered wi the big aal bolt ahin the street door and as it slid back the door blew open allooin the ween an rain tae wun in. "Oh Michty be here!" cried she fin she saw Ackie staanin there soakin o weet. She wiz awa tae say mair but a stronger gust o ween blew the lamy oot leavin them in pick-mirk. She dimly saw him walk past her. Strugglin sair she pushed tee the door taakin aa her strength anent the ween an rain. Surprised that Ackie hidna helped her she made her wye cannily up the dark eerie stairs taakin care nae tae staan on the rotten bitties. By the time she wun intae the hoose Ackie wiz sittin on his ain cheer at the chick o the fire. Oh me he wiz soakin o weet so she quickly relighted the gas lamp an rummled up the coals an put the kettle on the fire. Aa the while speirin at him faan he'd gotten hame? He nivver said a wurd but jist sat there lookin up at her wi a confused look ontae his white drawn face. "Michty ye'll hiv tae get that weet clyse aff or ye'll taak yer death o caal!" So sayin she wun throwe the hoose tae get a chynge o clyse for him. She came back a minty later wi clyse an a tool for tae dry himsel wi but fin she wun back he wisna there. Shoutin his name she searched the hoose but nae signs o him did she find ava. Thinkin that he'd

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maybe wint oot the backie tae the lavy she lichted her lampy and made her wye oot tae the heed o the stairs. Richt awa she felt the ween blawin up at her and heard the street door bangin back an forrith wi the ween.

Orr the time Annie got tae the street door she could jist maak oot Ackie turnin doon the wye o the hairbour so she ran ahin him shoutin oot his name but her words were lost in the ween an drivin rain- - - but nae one sign o him could she see. Aifter a fair fylie searchin about she made her wye hame in a state o collapse thinkin aa the while she'd imagined the whole thing.

Dryin herself aff in front o the fire wi anxious thochts rinnin throwe her mind she lookit ower at Ackie's seat as if expectin tae see him sittin there. That's fin she saw something glintin on the airm o the cheer. Gan ower she saw richt awa it wiz his wee Merchant Navy lapel badge that he always wore wi sic pride. Pickin it up Annie wiz overwhelmed wi the deepest despair she'd ivver felt in her life and wint tae her knees pressin the wee badge tae her breest an graat like a bairn.

A couple o wikks aifter that nicht a letter arrived fae Ackie's company tellin her that the SS Bennachie hid been sunk on the fifth o January 1943 aside the Klola Inlet and there'd been nae survivours. Tearfully Annie realised that wiz the date he'd been at the hoose. The company also enclosed a money order for pey earned and unbelievably she saw his pey hid stoppit at a quarter past nine on the fifth o January. Probably the very meenit he'd hit the freezing waater?