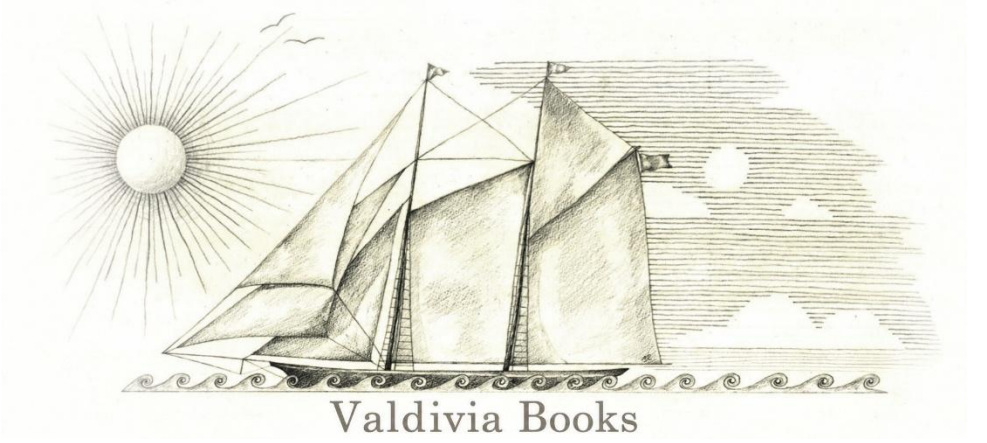


Memoirs of a 20th Century Gentleman

Reading Sample —

Part Three: In No Sense

by

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This sample presents the prose.
Typography and page layout may differ in the published edition.

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Mid-December 1992 – Leaving Social Services

Anthea led Cynthia, Lumpy Den and me into the main office; it was the big room for important meetings. Square grey Sandra, Anthea's immediate superior, was already seated on a square grey chair, clipboard ready.

"Ah, James." She smiled. "And Cynthia, thanks for bringing him along to this important meeting. Please take a seat. Ah yes, you can pop Den and his wheelchair over there."

In the corner of the room was a plastic child-sized table, complete with plastic child-sized chairs. They had laid out plain paper and a pot of crayons, along with some spent felt tips, for any restless child visitors to be otherwise occupied while the grown-ups talked, or just for anyone who felt the need to express their feelings through pictures rather than words.

A sad but sardonic-looking pink teddy bear with one eye was sitting on a chair in one corner of the table. He seemed to survey the room with a wry, knowing gaze.

"In you go, Dad." Cynthia parked Den's wheelchair next to the table with the teddy bear on it.

Lumpy Den looked at the bear and winked.

“You and me both, chap,” he laughed, slapping his knee with his frail old hand. He reached out to Cynthia’s handbag. “Bickies.”

“Alright, Dad, I’ll give you some biscuits in a minute. Just don’t go rummaging through my handbag; there are lady things in there. You remember what happened last time?”

I shuddered to recall. Last time, Lumpy Den nearly choked on a tampon after having mistaken it for a boiled sweet. Now that was a trip to A&E narrowly avoided.

Sandra smiled as Cynthia fussed over Den; it looked a bit forced.

“We’ve got biscuits in the staff room. Anthea, would you please go and fetch the bickies and bring us out some tea and coffee? Milk with no sugar, isn’t it, Cyn? And some of the kids’ squash for James, please. Thanks.”

Anthea bustled out in an annoying and excessively inefficient fashion that only Anthea seemed to be able to manage. She was all clicks and flutters and unnecessary jingles, her blond curly hair swaying and bouncing, appearing to amplify her movements, her bead necklace clattering noisily against her ID pass.

She shouldn't have been allowed to wear that bead necklace, really; it would give too much to grab hold of should someone have tried to strangle her with it.

"So, James," said Sandra. "Good to see you again; you're looking well. Cynthia told us she was very pleased with your progress, that you've been doing well at school, settled down, and that you're having fewer and fewer tantrums."

Tantrums?

"I suppose so," I said, trying to be tactful. "The Hunts have been looking after me well, and I'm really grateful to Cyn especially."

"That's good to hear. But I've heard you spoke with Anthea, and I was a bit concerned to find out you're thinking of leaving us, saying farewell to Social Services?" She spoke deliberately, slowly, as if I would struggle to understand her.

"Yes, I'm moving on to bigger things."

"'Bigger things', yes… of course. Yes, I'd like to address that."

"You've been doing well at sixth form, studying for a BTEC in engineering. All your teachers have been saying you've been doing brilliantly on your course. But now you've said you don't want to carry on with that?" Her condescending smile switched

to a frown. “You want to quit college and leave us to do ‘bigger things’…” She paused for me to catch the cynicism. “Tell me, what bigger things would they be?”

“I’d like to be a deck officer. I’ve got a contract with one of the biggest maritime oil freight Companies in the World.” She looked unimpressed.

“I’ve researched this thoroughly; it’s what I want to do. As a deck officer, I’ll be amongst the highest earners in the country, especially for my age bracket – do you know that? That’s unheard of. I’ll get to see the world, develop new skills, meet new people. I don’t want to stay here. I have the opportunity to leave now, at 16.”

“There are plenty of career prospects for Engineers. You’ve got a bright future ahead of you if you continue. We usually wait until young people who have been in our care, like you, are at least 17 before we even consider putting them out into the big wide world to fend for themselves. You wouldn’t believe it, but that extra year to adjust to the adult world can make all the difference. If you stay on, you’ll have Jim & Cyn as a base, and you’ll have Anthea to support you as your Case Worker.”

Before I could reply, Anthea returned with a tray of tea and coffee, then had to make two more trips when she realised she

had forgotten the biscuits and my squash, which I wasn't really bothered about anyway.

Cynthia handed Lumpy Den the plate of Garibaldis.

"Here you are, Dad, squashed fly biscuits, courtesy of Social Services."

He began munching through them hungrily.

"James." Sandra smiled. "To leave at 16, I don't think it will be helpful for you. You need to think about it properly before you rush off headlong into some job going goodness knows where."

My eyes met Cynthia's; we were both exasperated.

That's when Cynthia waded into the discussion. "Sandra, you know this is a fantastic opportunity for James to make an excellent start to his career, and after the problems he's been through so far in his life…"

"We would need to establish certain points to guarantee your safety and wellbeing before we can even think of approving your release."

"We have to feel that you're leaving us for the right reason, that where you're going, you'll be able to provide for yourself, look after yourself and have somewhere safe to live. These questions must be answered to our complete satisfaction before

we can approve you to leave. There is a process, and it does take time. Personally, I don't think it's advisable for you."

I was annoyed but not surprised. Everything in Social Services seemed to be unnecessarily difficult. They appeared to enjoy over-complicating even the simplest of tasks, tangling everything up with red tape.

Their well-intentioned interventions were often held back by such and such a document not being submitted correctly to the proper department, and this could sometimes cause real harm.

Maybe they felt the more paperwork they did, the more they would be able to protect children in danger, but we all know bureaucracy isn't caring; it's a facsimile of real, effective action, often as flimsy as the paper it's written on.

I looked at her, irritated.

"I have a signed Contract; I could be called up at any time to start work. If you're not willing to process the paperwork for my early release, I'll just go anyway, with or without being signed off. This process needs to be completed before then; otherwise, I'll just have to go, and the paperwork will have to wait."

“James, you cannot go without approval to leave Social Care.” Her face was stern. “You shouldn’t try to mess with the paper trail!”

“And how exactly do you propose to stop me? I’ve left before. It took you forever to find me in Daventry, and even then, it was only because the police called you. Just let me go.”

Sandra sighed with the feigned patience of one who is used to dealing with unreasonable outbursts.

“Alright, I can see I’m not going to convince you, but I want you to know I’m not happy about this. We’ll process the paperwork for you to leave at 16, but even so, I’m not convinced it should be approved.”

“OK, Anthea, have you got the exit paperwork?” Anthea handed her a bundle of papers from the cabinet. “Thanks.”

“I’ve got a questionnaire and other bits and bobs for you here that we’ll have to go through to apply for early release. There’ll be quite a few questions, so I hope you’re ready.” She shuffled her clipboard, clicked her ballpoint pen, and commenced.

“Reason for leaving Social Care: you’re hoping to go into the Navy, aren’t you?”

"The MERCHANT Navy, yes." I waved my job contract and acceptance letter as proof.

"And you want to leave your foster family, Jim & Cyn, as well as Social Services in order to achieve this?"

"Correct."

"OK, so where will you live when you're setting out on your new career? It's quite a big thing starting a job, you know. I bet you didn't think of that."

God, that woman was patronising.

"Well, I'll be quartered aboard the ships I'm assigned to when at sea, and in various Company-sponsored hotels and lodgings when on shore leave."

"Quartered aboard ship," muttered Sandra, taking notes. "So, no fixed abode, then?" she said, shaking her head critically.

"And how will you get to and from the ship?"

How do you think? Fucking pogo stick, space hopper?

"Motorbike!" said Lumpy Den, still chomping through his Garibaldis, miming with his hands. "Vroom Vroom!"

I tried not to laugh.

"747 to the designated port," I said, "then from port they take us via helicopter to the ship."

"And they make your travel arrangements with you beforehand?"

No, they expect us to guess where and when.

I nodded.

"To be clear, you will not be expected to fly a helicopter?"

"No." I was used to the 'namby-pamby' Social Care bullshit, but this was taking the proverbial Garibaldi.

"And they land safely?"

"Yes, the pilots are experienced. They have fully equipped helipads on board the ship, with a skilled team trained to deal with helicopter operations."

"I see." Her eyes narrowed. She paused a moment again to take notes. "Doesn't sound safe to me."

"And when you're aboard, how will you feed yourself?"

"All our meals are provided on board – they have cooks in the Mess Hall."

"A what hall?" Mess was the wrong word, clearly.

“So, what about at…” She shuffled the papers on her lap. “…Warsash, hmmm?”

“What about at Warsash?”

“Yes, you said on the phone to Anthea that you would be going there for training. Do they feed you there?”

“They have kitchenettes with each of the rooms.”

“So, you will have to shop at supermarkets yourself for food.” She tutted, shaking her head, as if I could not possibly be expected to do such a complicated task after 16 years on this planet.

“And where does the money for the food come from?”

“From the Company.”

“You will be paid during training?” She looked at me doubtfully, eyebrows knitting into a frown.

I nodded, waving the Contract once more.

“What about safety? Working at sea, there’s an inherent risk of drowning.”

“Generally, sailors tend to stay on board their boats. Apart from that, we’ll have lifeboat training and firefighting skills.”

“Fire too!” She puffed out her cheeks incredulously.

It was not going well, and Lumpy Den was beginning to get bored. I didn't blame him, personally. He'd long finished eating all the biscuits and was now playing with teddy and dolly, enacting a Punch and Judy puppet show. "That's the way to do it, Mr Punch!"

"OK, Dad, that's enough; put teddy down." Cyn carefully prised the half-crazed teddy from Lumpy Den's mischievous fingers. "That's it, give poor dolly a break."

The questions continued and I answered them as calmly as I could. Sandra carried on tutting and sighing at various intervals, shaking her head with disapproval now and then. It all seemed ludicrous to me.

Then, after what seemed like an age, Sandra retracted the tip of her ballpoint pen and shuffled her papers, notes complete.

"James, you know my feelings on what I think would be best for you, but if that's not what you want, at the end of the day, it is your choice. I will submit the information you've given us today, and then it's up to management to approve your early release or not. If we get the go-ahead from above, you can get the go-ahead in your career."

"Well, that's it. I'll submit my report; then we just have to wait and see if it gets the rubber stamp."

"Do you think they'll let me go early?"

Sandra remained tight-lipped. "We'll have to see."

She stood up to see us out of the room. "Anthea, could you get the door for Cyn, please?"

Cynthia pushed Lumpy Den's wheelchair towards the door. "Come on, Dad, off we go – before you cause any more trouble."

But Lumpy Den wasn't finished yet. He aimed his walking stick at a free-standing notice board, like a knight jousting in the lists. Glittery, shiny letters and bits of paper flew off in all directions. He cackled gleefully. Den 1, Notice Board 0. Cynthia stifled a smirk.

"Oh, Dad, you need to watch what you're doing with your stick. Sorry, Sand."

"Never mind, we can clean that up."

He could barely contain his mirth.

The notice board, instead of proclaiming the strapline "Do something special: Help us give needy children back a family.

Foster through your local Social Care Teams", now told people to: "Suck my farts."

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Less than three months later…

Early March 1993 – Lightering

The Chevron Edinburgh (a supertanker built by Mitsubishi Heavy Industries in Nagasaki, Japan) was completed on October 2, 1974; she was finally sailed into a Chinese breakers' yard in April 2002.
Very Large Crude Carriers, or VLCCs, are very large indeed; Chevron Edinburgh was no exception. At approx. 330,000 tonnes fully loaded, she measured 338m long and 53m wide. Her enormous deck was big enough to land a couple of Sikorsky helicopters at once with one on each side and still have plenty of room for several football pitches.

A five-floor habitation block dominated the stern, with a tiny swimming pool near the top for those days too hot to think, although the water was all too often akin to that of a warm bath.

As with most Crude Carriers, the bridge was aft, above the officers' quarters, and further surmounted by an array of communications towers, aerials and rails topping it up another four storeys or so (making it around nine storeys high from the deck, and around eighteen storeys from the keel to our safe-clearance height).

Vent shafts as tall as a full-storey building projected from the deck, along the pipe manifold and central pipeline. Each tank was easily able to fit an 8-storey building inside – each one.

If you sat on the deck with your back to the accommodation block, as I occasionally did to watch the sunset while sailing east – as we mainly did on that circumnavigation – and kept your eye on the forecastle, you were made to feel extremely small & insignificant as the mid-section of the ship moved up and down by 5 m or so on the sea swell…

… an exaggeration perhaps; however, it would have taken an extremely rough sea for a game of pool or snooker (not that we had such a table) to have been a problem onboard!
Edinburgh was, to put it bluntly, a big girl.

The sheer scale of Edinburgh made her the perfect vessel to transport large quantities of oil from A to B in as few trips as possible.
However, despite being expertly engineered to carry some 250K Tonnes of oil across deep blue seas, expansive oceans and other boundless stretches of water, she was not best designed to make it close in to land; rather, her immense size meant achieving proximity to any port was incredibly difficult.
Her extreme length and girth made negotiating passage through the smaller waterways tricky to say the least; her depth at ballast would prohibit travelling down any shallower stretches lest she get caught on the bed below, and any low-lying bridges, ducts or lines traversing her route could be taken out by her towering stacks and other

various vertiginous structures that stood proudly from the deck.

As a result, when Edinburgh arrived at her destination to offload her cargo of oil, she would have to drop anchor at sufficient distance from port, and a smaller vessel would then be required to come and meet her and transport the oil to land. Back and forth, back and forth, in multiple trips.

I say smaller vessel, but this was only small relative to Edinburgh; at 75-80k tonnage the transporter was still actually quite large, albeit a quarter of the size of my VLCC. We called these transporter vessels, elephants, because they had a thick hose, like a trunk, housed in a large metal crane.

When I joined the ship in March 1993, we were anchored off the coast of Mobile, Alabama (not too far from New Orleans) in the Gulf of Mexico.

Offloading the cargo was quite a complicated procedure; everything had to be carried out with precision, co-ordinating every stage of the operation between 2-3 teams on each vessel, along the length of the deck. There

was no room for error, however small, not when dealing with quantities of oil of that size.

The first step in the procedure was mooring. After Edinburgh was anchored, an elephant would have to come up alongside, drop anchor and moor up to the larger vessel. As part of the Mooring operation, we then would have to create a network of ropes, connecting one ship to the other at points along the deck. The ships would have to be perfectly aligned at the right distance, for any offloading to start.

Along the sides of the hull of any Crude Carrier, you may have noticed that there are several different markings, all points of reference for different procedures; we would match up the markings, marry up the vessels and then moor.

As you can imagine, mooring ships of that size required strong rope, and a lot of it; in fact, it needed rope so thick that it could not physically be launched even the 20 ft distance between the 2 vessels when they were lined up side by side.

Mooring, therefore, had to be phased, using 3 thicknesses of rope: small, medium and large. The smallest, most workable rope, was launched from one ship to the other, making snakes on the opposing deck.
In order to secure these ropes, they would be looped to form an eye, then passed over a contraption called an old man, a small squat structure made of cast iron, with a round, thick-lipped base, sloping upwards to a concave rim, and topped by a large dome.

The metal old men stood sentinel at intervals along the deck. They had several functions: besides receiving and holding the mooring rope, they marked out set distances along the deck; and helped to line up the cords ready to be fed into the rope drums. No matter where the mooring rope was launched from, the old men were used to receive the cord, holding it fast, so it could be lined up precisely. This task was never easy; the metal old men, like their living human counterparts, often had patches of rust and age in places which could cause the rope to become misaligned.

As the rope was wound around, any skewed cord would have to be corrected by hand by the watchful crew; this alone could be quite dangerous, as the ropes would constantly be in motion, sawing as they were pulled taut, swaying with the waves, and subject to enormous strains and stresses from the goliath sized ships; it wasn't uncommon for people to lose fingers, hands, limbs.

From the old men, the rope was fed into the rope drums, huge steel reels set into large boxy, steam-powered units that turned and pulled in the rope, bit by bit by bit. A handle, about 1m in length could also be used to help crank the drum by hand at times.

The entire drum mechanism, axle, box and all, was made of metal so thick that even the dinks in the scarified surface looked as if they had been made by impossible monstrous teeth. The gusts of steam and whirrs and snarls emitted by the drum's machinery added to the effect that it was some sort of beast that was drawing in these lines.

The drums fed the lines through into a series of angled springs and fenders, exchanging the smaller rope for

medium rope, and then medium rope for large. Ultimately, the thickness of the rope required would be about 3-4 inches in diameter. It had to be thick, because it needed to be strong and above all safe.
As with any procedure at sea, mooring must be carried out safely and efficiently. As deck cadet, I would oversee a team of crew and would lead the cargo operation, relaying messages to the bridge at each stage.

"Edinburgh, this is Cadet Hansom on deck."

"Cadet Hansom, this is Edinburgh bridge receiving you."

"The elephant is now lined up along the starboard side."

"Elephant lined up to starboard received and understood."

"We are ready to commence mooring procedure. Do we have approval?"

"Mooring approved."

"Commencing mooring procedure as instructed."

There would be three teams; each would have to communicate to the next, and the next. It all had to run like clockwork. There was no room for error or for miscommunication.

Once successfully moored up and aligned, the ships would commence the coupling procedure, connecting the elephant's trunk to the oil manifold. Aboard Edinburgh, great pipes of wrought iron ran in parallel together across the deck, culminating in a massive quadruplet interface, a four-ported manifold, which connected the outside world to the cargo holds below.

As with all VLCCs the cargo was kept in specially designed chambers below deck, all interconnected via a network of pipes, and calibrated to pre-established pressures in an inert gas atmosphere.

Each of the ports on the manifold was sealed with a great iron lid, twice as thick as a manhole cover, and fixed shut with a score or more of large nuts and bolts, as chunky as a child's wrist.

We'd monitor the gauges, check the pressure behind the lid before even attempting to remove that vital seal. One of us would be on deck, monitoring the manifold; Pumpy would be in the pump room ready to turn the great metal wheels and adjust pressure accordingly.

After over 30 years absorbing all things oil, Pumpy had come to know all the sounds and susurrations of the chambers below deck; he knew by smell, by touch, by instinct almost, how to settle the pressures in that precious sweet spot. He had a feel for the rhythm; he knew the exhalations and inhalations of the right gases, almost as unthinkingly as his own breathing.

"Edinburgh, this is Cadet Hansom on deck."

"Cadet Hansom, this is Edinburgh bridge receiving you."

"Pressure to manifold port 1 checked and at acceptable levels for opening."

“Pressure levels to manifold port 1 acceptable, noted and received.”

“Do I have approval to commence seal removal procedure to manifold port 1?”

“Approval given to remove seal to manifold port 1.”

I would order my team to remove the bolts one by one by one, using an industrial-sized pneumatic drill and setting each aside carefully ready for re-seal later.

The whizz and whirr of the drill would sound like the ship was hissing and snarling at this rude intrusion. A crew member would be on hand, setting down tarps to collect any seepage of cargo which might spill onto the deck.

Other crew members would be holding the port plate steady to lower or raise as needed, while still more maintained a watchful eye on the pressure gauges in case of a sudden unexpected spike or pitch.

The welder would be there too; his job was to ensure that the port covers were in good condition, to remove and report any sign of corrosion or disrepair immediately. That's how important these ports were.

Before the port plate was completely removed, spikes would be threaded into the holes where the bolts used to be and the great trunk from the elephant would be lowered into position. The spikes would thread into holes around the aperture to the trunk, helping to line it up and create an effective seal.

One, two, three… engaged, secured, locked.

"Edinburgh, this is Cadet Hansom."

"Cadet Hansom, this is Edinburgh bridge receiving you."

"Elephant trunk successfully engaged to manifold port 1."

"Elephant trunk engaged to manifold port 1 received and understood."

"Commencing offload of cargo from Manifold port 1 as per offloading procedure."

“Offloading procedure commencing from Manifold port 1.”

Once hooked up, the Elephant would be primed and ready to guzzle and gulp the glutinous gloop into its bowels below.

When it had its fill the elephant’s trunk would be uncoupled from the manifold, the seal replaced, bolts reset.

From springs to fenders, back to the drum the unmooring would commence, winding back, undoing, resetting. The ropes over the old men would be uncoiled, loops lifted and launched back again. On the opposite deck the mooring ropes would be slithered back into concentric loops like sleeping snakes, ready to be used again.

After we reversed the procedure and unmoored, we watched the ship sail towards the shore. A day or so later, they returned for the next load. Three times we repeated this operation.

And then off again to find our next cargo … this time in Kuwait.

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Later, in July 1993, filled up from our Kuwaiti jaunt, we were the largest ship to ever sail under the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco (Chevron's worldwide headquarters); I was at the helm and we all involuntarily (along with a LOT of very important people on the Bridge that day) ducked a little as we went under…

… an 'experiment' to decide what size of ships to build next …

… the decision was (unsurprisingly): 'smaller ones!'