



TCN/FRASER SHORT STORY COMPETITION 2020: 1st Prize

CAPTAIN STEPHEN WILKINS: WAVE SPLASHES TO ASHES, WIND GUSTS TO DUST

I walked back along the pontoon dock, it was getting late, and the docks were calm and quiet. A small black dog came as to greet me as I headed towards Xplore.

The night had no wind and as I looked forward along the dock with this small dog closely following me, I could see moored behind Xplore a small yacht that had arrived earlier in the day. On the dock stood a man and by his feet were two burner pots with a gentle flame flickering in each, giving a surreal glow to his boat and gentle shadows that moved and changed with the flames.

I came to pass him, and we said good evening, I could easily tell he wasn't French, but from where, I couldn't say quickly enough. I commented at the robustness of his little yacht, it was a very smart and a well-found boat. Our discussion on the dock, as with most sailors, turned to the design of our boats, where we had come from and where we were going.

He looked along the docked and asked about Xplore, and I mentioned that it was designed in the UK by David Thomas. The old man went quiet, I wondered if I had offended him in some way, but he quickly continued with smiling glee to explain that his yacht, just 24 feet long, was also designed by David Thomas - small world.

Even though late, I invited him on board, as he was impressed with Xplore's stature, and we continued talking. I asked him why he was burning the two portable cookers on the dock and he explained that the stove fuel that he had bought in the UK was not good. It was alcohol fuel commonly used on small sailing boats, but the fuel he had contained additives so that people on shore wouldn't drink it, and for him it was impossible to use for cooking as it filled his boat with strange fumes, so he was burning it off outside to get rid of it.

As a lover of dogs I had suggested that his small puppy visit Xplore as well, so as we talked and I gave him a brief tour of the boat, I remembered that I had bought a quantity of alcohol in South America before we departed - we use it a lot when we are cleaning and doing maintenance. As a gesture, I offered him a spare bottle for his stove. He quickly removed the top and sniffed the contents. "*Dass is sehr gut,*" he promptly said, giving away his German background.



We joked and shared a few sailing stories. As it came out that I had been sailing in Antarctica and the south for the last 11 years, I said to him that I had always jokingly said that when I get tired of sailing I would become a dog farmer, to breed boat dogs, ones that are suitable and smart enough for a life at sea. His ears pricked up at this, and he explained that his wonderful old little dog was just that, a breed of dog designed for boats, dating back many years so as to be small and fast enough to be able to catch rats onboard ships. A "Schipperke", they are called, originally from Belgium/Flanders.

I could tell that he was tired, and his burners on the dock were getting lower, but he insisted that I have a brief look at his boat. How could I resist? Such an interesting boat, a junk rigged sloop and oh so small compared to Xplore, but you could tell that it was so well-maintained and strongly built that it had, in so many ways, a similar feel to my boat.

We parted after exchanging names and addresses, but he asked me to visit the next day so he could write some details down to email to David Thomas in the UK - he knew the designer quite well as client and as a friend. Back on board, I wondered about this dear older man as I had a nightcap of wine. Where was he sailing to I didn't know, but you could tell from our talks that he had done quite a lot of miles, sometimes from sailor to sailor you just know that.

Daylight streamed through my porthole window and another day commenced, time here in Brest seemed to have become so busy in these last few weeks that I often felt it was more relaxing and easier to be out at sea. But by the end of the day I walked down the dock with a cold can of beer to see him and to look at three of the Pen Duick yachts that had tied up in the marina.

He asked me to come on board his boat, named Golden Wind, from a Japanese saying that matches very well with his colourful Junk sail, which he has hand painted. He opened his journal book and asked me to write a note about Xplore, he had already glued my card in place and I wrote a short note. As I wrote he rummaged through a locker and explained that he had a small gift for me, I said that I didn't need anything but he handed me a bottle of liqueur and explained that he was pleased to give me the gift as thanks for the bottle I had given to him the night before. I smiled and thought how the two bottles had contents the same colour, clear fluid, one to drink and one to cook with, it was cherry schnapps.

I stepped out into the cockpit, and as we shook hands, he was explaining that he was sailing over to the United States as there was a foundation there that had been set up as a sail training base for delinquent youths and that he was going to donate his boat to them. I was surprised, but the words from his mouth flowed out to me without further ado to explain that he was dying, and he didn't even know if he would reach there. The cancer he had, he knew would bring him soon to an end, and he hated the smell of hospitals and nursing homes, so



he had transferred all his wealth to his wife in Germany, and with her blessing, he was setting off for his last voyage.

My eyes became watery, but the atmosphere between us was strong, I couldn't argue with his logic, it actually made a lot of sense to me, one sailor to another, not much needed to be said. I woke early, earlier than normal, the light from outside was barely visible as I heated the kettle for a nice cup of tea. I stepped out on deck, it was 5.30am and I strolled up onto the break water. There were a few people fishing, and a few youths weaving along the concrete, still saying bonsoir as I was saying bonjour, and there just outside the break water was Golden Wind. Hans was on deck making ready for sea, the light was soft with some clearing clouds. I called out loud his name and waved a farewell. Bon voyage my friend.