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# Bearín's The Book

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Twenty Years of Bulkhead Wisdom,  
Quiet Smiles, Belly Laughs, and  
Good Ol' Salty Tears

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# Sterno: Maalox, Music, and Mystery

*Ah, yes . . . the cooks. Every one of them was special. Sterno was, like, special with extra hot sauce. (The “medicated balm” story is immortalized in the “Salt Of The Earth” movie that Stevie, Pa, and I were in. I still flinch at the smell of lanolin.)*

*By the way, any mention of “Snyder” in this book—or Viceroy—is a reference to Steve Snowden, a long-time shipmate and friend. They come no better than Snyder.*

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**H**is name was Sterno, and for a short time, he was our cook. He showed up with spring’s coming and left as the fall winds began to gust up.

I’d like to be able to say that knowing Sterno changed our lives or drove us to greater heights of achievement or something like that, but it didn’t.

Actually, he almost killed us with his cooking, insisted on smoking black, foul-smelling cigars in his bunk, and sometimes acted bad.

But, man, could he play the harmonica.

I can see Sterno now the day he applied for duty, looking sharp enough to scratch a match on. *I* thought he looked sharp, anyway. Snyder the engineer, being a good judge of character, thought he looked like trouble. My brother Stevie, the skipper, thought he looked like a cook, and that's all that counted.

Sterno was hired.

For the most part, Sterno's past remained a mystery while he sailed with us. Every now and then, he'd slip something out in the course of conversation, like the quality of bread in your average jail or how fast certain makes of cars would go in reverse.

Apparently, Sterno had lived for a while with a lady who was a roller derby pro. He'd get kind of choked up when he'd tell us about the night she crashed out through the wall of the arena and got hit by a passing bus.

Besides what he brought to the galley situation, Sterno was quick with his hands, making him pretty handy out on deck at stuff like unsnarling rope. He attributed this to years of handling live reptiles. We didn't ask why.

Sterno's cooking always had a distinct "south-of-the-border" bite to it. This not only stuck in my mind, but I'm sure there's big hunks of scar tissue still stuck to my insides as well.

Above all, he was truly one of the best harmonica players I've ever heard. Many a time, regardless of the weather, Sterno would come out on deck after supper and serenade us with "Stardust" or "Under the Double Eagle" while we all laid on the platform, doubled over with cramps.

It was a nice touch.

Truth be known, we spent a *lot* of time out on deck, as I remember, apart from the cramps. Sterno

kept the galley stove going wide-open most of the time, which made going below and staying for any length of time damn near impossible. On the other hand, we didn't have much trouble with dampness in the fo'c'sle while Sterno was aboard.

He stayed with us through the spring and most of the summer. It was sometime in August, I think, when the end came. We left the boat (and Sterno) down in Portsmouth, NH and chartered a small plane home to Stonington, ME. He had insisted on staying down to keep an eye on the boat, plus he was thinking about buying a car.

Our return flight a few days later ended up being cut short. A rainy, foggy mess caught us about halfway down and we had to land in Portland.

We took a chance and called the Pier II, where the boat was berthed. Why yes, they told us, Mr. Sterno was right there, and sure, he'd drive right up to Portland and pick us up.

Thirty minutes later the roar of an unmuffled engine could be heard approaching, coupled with a steady WHACKOWHACKOWHACKO WHACKO that sounded just like somebody beating on an empty 55-gallon drum with a sledge hammer.

We ran to the front door of the terminal just in time to witness Sterno's arrival. A large black car, some sort of Chrysler, I think, was headed right for the building on two wheels. At the last second, the car ran aground on the curb and slammed back down on all fours, lurching to a halt.

As the smoke and dust settled, there was Sterno at the wheel, flashing us a "thumbs up" sign.

Reluctantly, we climbed in with our seabags. Nobody spoke as we roared off. Actually, talking was quite a chore, as the drive shaft seemed to have a bad bend in it. With every revolution, it would beat up

against the floorboards, making that loud WHACK-OWHACKOWHACKO sound, and jolting everybody up out of their seats.

"Little loud, but it keeps ya from fallin' asleep at the wheel!" Sterno bellowed as we weaved our way down the interstate.

"Honest—don't you think there's something wrong with him?" Snyder hollered in my ear.

"Former trophy winner at Daytona!" Sterno informed us as he concentrated on a controlled skid out around a line of tractor trailers.

"We're takin' the boat home from now on," said my brother after we got done kissing the ground upon our arrival in Portsmouth.

The next trip was Sterno's last. He seemed sort of disillusioned with shipboard cooking. Things took a turn for the worse when we caught him dipping into an institutional size jar of medicated balm we kept on hand. Sterno was using it for cooking grease. We knew something was up.

Things finally came to a head on his last watch on the way in. I came up topsides and found him sipping on a bottle of after-shave at the wheel.

"Sterno," I said, "what's wrong? You, uh, don't seem like yourself."

"Ah, Byrum," he replied, eyes wet with emotion and Aqua Velva, "it's time for these feet to be movin' on. I'm sorry, but old Sterno's gotta fly. I'm a ramblin' man, Byrum, a ramblin' man."

That was all that was said. After unloading, when we got ready to leave Portsmouth, Sterno stayed behind with his car.

I can see him now, sitting on the wharf and waving us goodbye while softly playing "On the Wings of a Snow White Dove" on the harmonica. We all felt

kind of choked up until Snyder came topsides and announced that his after-shave was missing.

Ah, Sterno, wherever you are, old dog, God bless ya. Maybe you did act up a little bit now and then—but your breath always smelled good.

Take care.

# Shirley V. Robbins 1923–2003

*Stevie and I had the greatest parents in the world.*

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*There's a part of me that doesn't much care if I write this column or not. I will, of course, because I've promised that I would. But there's an awful emptiness inside me as I sit here in front of this screen.*

*For the first time in my life, I know that my mother isn't going to be reading these words. She won't be calling my brother Stevie to share a laugh over one of these foolish stories, or giving one of us a mock scolding over some retold memory of our years fishing (and acting up) together.*

*And no matter how many times a day I go to dial her number . . . or how many times my brother reaches for the microphone aboard the boat to call her . . . she's not going to be there to answer.*

*Our mother and friend, Shirley Robbins, is gone.*

I don't know how Pa knew all the things that he knew; he just knew them.

He could handle a feeler stick and work it through a body of herring in the middle of a summer night, making it talk to him just as easily as a fiddle would sing in those same hands on a wintry afternoon by the woodstove.

He knew the best recipe for mixing up pine tar to coat a deck and he believed in starting just about any recipe atop the stove with an onion.

And he knew just how many turns of wire it took around a riding sail mast at such-and-such height to make a radio antenna that would send out a signal capable of blowing a CB base set right off the kitchen table.

For much of my childhood, that's how my folks conversed with each other for a good percentage of the time—over the airwaves. Pa wasn't a trip fisherman, but during the herring seining season, he'd be up all night looking for fish. By morning, unless they had a shutoff, Pa'd be headed down the bay to haul his lobster gear. And then when the winter months came, there'd be long days scalloping.

Don't get me wrong—there were some quiet times at home, too. But the radio was an important part of Marm and Pa's relationship.

When I was little, Pa's lobster boat was painted Newport Green with a white house and trunk. Her name was the *Fireball*—in total contrast to Pa's measured and patient approach to all things. Later on, the old *Fireball's* hull took on a coat of Bead Yellow and people began to call it the "Banana Boat" on the CB. The home set, however, remained "Fireball base."

If Pa and my brother Stevie were the captains in the family, then I guess Marm was the shore engineer.

My earliest memory is of a big shortwave radio on the kitchen table; that was replaced by a much smaller CB; and then a VHF was added. Our mother didn't

get out much, and she never held a driver's license—but her voice was known by many people up and down the coast. Anyone within range of the signal put out by one of Pa's homemade antennas knew Shirley Robbins.

When Stevie and I first went offshore back in the 70's, you could just say the words "Fireball base" over the microphone—any hour of the night—and, if you were close enough to land to get a signal through, one of them would answer. If it was a technical issue, Marm might have Pa come to the set. And if there was any message to be taken, Pa'd usually have Marm do the writing.

When Pa passed away in 1995, Marm kept it all going. She went from being a fisherman's wife to a fisherman's mother to a fisherman's grandmother when my nephew Steve III teamed up with my brother.

Marm was the contact point when there was a mechanical or electrical problem; she might have to help line up a trucker or ask a lobster dealer to unlock the car in the middle of the night; bait, fuel, grub and crew were all rounded up by Marm; and over the years, she was responsible for the first news of who won the presidential election, the World Series, or the state basketball finals.

No, Marm didn't get out much, but she brought the world to the rest of us so we could keep on doing what we were doing. She never had much, but she gave us everything we could ever want. That's what she was all about.

*This morning I counted three times before the tea water boiled that I was going to reach for the phone to call Marm. Every time I do it, it's like something inside me comes undone and I have to coil it back up.*

*Life has changed—it's as simple as that.*

*As I sit here with the wind ripping out of the northwest, I can see the sun's reflection on the water through the trees. Those aren't choppy bay waters, though; it's a fresh-water lake.*

*This is home. Life has changed.*

*So Stevie and I can't pick up the phone or the microphone and talk to either Marm or Pa anymore. I think we're both awful lucky to be able to know that there was nothing left unsaid; nothing we wish we'd shared with them before it was too late.*

*And when the Northern Lights set the sky afire a few nights ago, I couldn't help but think that Pa'd somehow taken a few extra twists of copper wire around a mast up there to let us know that he and Marm were together and everything's all right.*

*When it comes right down to it, that's all that matters.*

*Fireball base out.*