

close

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/21907984) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/21907984>.

Rating:	General Audiences
Archive Warning:	Major Character Death
Category:	Gen
Fandom:	The Terror (TV 2018)
Relationship:	Captain Francis Crozier & Lt Edward Little
Characters:	Captain Francis Crozier , Lt Edward Little
Additional Tags:	Canonical Character Death , Alcohol Abuse/Alcoholism
Language:	English
Collections:	12 Days of Carnivale ~ 2018
Stats:	Published: 2018-12-24 Words: 2,231 Chapters: 1/1

close

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Summary

Close is nothing. It's worse than nothing. Francis and Edward, through to the end.

Notes

This was written & posted on Tumblr for 12 Days of Carnivale 2018. It was written as a gift for tumblr user [thotsimulator](#).

1.

As always, and against every ounce of Francis's being, it's a question of who knows whom and how closely.

He had wanted Graham, of course. An ideal choice and a favour to a friend as well. Had sent the letters, even. But Fitzjames, handed responsibility for such things over Francis's head, had poached him for the flag, and with Sir John feeling paternal and put-upon already, there was no hope for it at all.

Look, Fitzjames says, somewhere between schoolboy contrition and schoolmaster contempt, *give me a name and I'll see if I can't get him*.

Graham bloody Gore, Francis wants to say, but he bites his tongue: a talent he suspects he will need to refine in the coming years.

At least he is spared the unsettling feeling of Admiralty interest breathing down his neck, and the assortment of compromises to keep them happy: yes to John Irving, no to Sydney Dacres, and I'll take one useless mate in exchange for a good purser *and* a good clerk, on and on and on. He is nevertheless pressingly aware that if he doesn't have a name to give Fitzjames by February he is going to end up with some chinless cousin of the Honourable Member for Bury St Edmonds with a year's real sailing experience to the ten on his record, selected by the Affectionate Friends and delivered unto him swaddled and squalling. George Hodgson, one of Fitzjames's parade of China acquaintances, is for second: he may turn out an excellent officer, but Francis doesn't mean to gamble on it. He must have a first with authority.

He tries for McMurdo. He tries for Kay. No and no, and sensibly so: commissions in the works, prior commitments ashore and at sea. Bird has bloody gone and got himself promoted. Ommanney, over port, takes pity: "I might have a man for you," he says, glass in hand, elbow on table. "If he hasn't got something else."

"Arctic?" Francis asks. Always the essential question.

"No," Ommanney says.

Francis sighs.

"But a good officer," Ommanney says. "Your cut of man, I should think. Straightforward. At sea since '25. Don't like to be ashore much."

"Who," Francis asks.

"Little, late of *Vindictive*. Came back carrying despatches, which I gather went down like a drop in the well at midnight. Currently out of employ. What are your people like?" He cuts himself a piece of stilton in the pause.

"On *Terror*? I hardly know." Francis refills his glass. "A careerist second and a bluelight third. Nothing unmanageable, I should think. Why?"

“His father was a purser,” Ommanney says. “Of the old guard. Messed in the gunroom. Might rub the gentlemen wrong.”

Francis has no further questions.

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He writes: *Erasmus Ommanney gave me your name.* (Always this necessary statement of connection: never enough to say, simply, *I’ve heard of you.*) He writes: *Opportunity for service with distinction. Promotion certain on successful return.* Then he reads it over, sets it aside as scrap and writes:

Position, 1st Lt, Terror, Arctic service. Certain danger, failure likely.

See what the man makes of that.

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Two weeks later he writes Fitzjames: *Edward Little, somewhere in Plymouth.* Let him have the joy of working it out.

2.

Crozier is what he was promised and he isn’t.

A good captain: yes, Ommanney had told him as much. Fair, strict, honest with the men, yes. He hadn’t known about the drink, though looking back, perhaps he should have: *he has his vices, but show me a man who doesn’t*, Ommanney had said, looking at the glass in his own hand.

And you trust him? he’d asked.

Of course, Erasmus had replied, smiling at him. *Would I hand you over to him if I didn’t?*

So he’d had some feeling for the shape of it, even before Commander Fitzjames had come down in his spotless coat and his impeccable bullion, looking distinctly out of place amid the peeling paint and blackened brasswork of the shabby old *Kitty Andrews*. Edward had been watching her three months, then, while her owners sorted out their legal; unglamorous work, but he’d done worse for the navy, and it was somewhere to sleep, a few shillings under the table. That or the house in Stoke full of sisters: and he loves them dearly but he’d rather sleep under the pier.

“Well,” Fitzjames had said, somewhat taken aback. “A fine little ship. You’ve kept her wonderfully neat.” In the dim light of the main hatch all his guilt had looked false.

“Thank you,” Edward had said. He’d had a broken cup in his hand, he remembers: Fitzjames’s eyes kept settling on it.

“Well,” Fitzjames had said again. “I suppose Captain Crozier’s spoken to you already.”

“Yes,” Edward had said. Had thought: *does the man not like ships? Only he seems terribly ill at ease.*

“All in order, then,” Fitzjames had said, with a smile probably meant to be reassuring. “You’ll report to the Admiralty directly to receive your commission: then straight on to *Terror*.” He’d turned: taken a step: turned somewhat awkwardly back. “A pleasure,” he’d said, “I’m sure.”

Now, in the captain’s cabin on *Terror*, Edward has a better sense of things.

“Bloody posturing self-important *pricks*,” Crozier is saying. “Melodrama indeed.” He stumbles a little, brings his thigh hard against the corner of table, jostling it: doesn’t seem to notice. *I wonder*, Edward thinks, *what will happen when we run out of spirits.*

“You might have made an appearance,” Crozier cuts at him, and Edward breathes through his nose.

“Sir,” he says, “In your absence, my place is with the ship unless ordered otherwise.”

“Oh, I see—” Crozier begins, sharp, with a gesture of his hand which pauses abruptly. He looks at it as if foreign: brings it to cover his eyes, instead. Rubs a sharp circle at his temple with his thumb. Breathes audibly. “Yes,” he says, quieter. “Of course. I fear I’m out of sorts, Edward; forgive me.”

“Nothing to forgive, sir,” Edward says, his hands still folded behind his back. Crozier flicks him a glance: self-aware, now, and too stiff to admit to shame. Rubs at his leg where it hit the table.

“All right,” Crozier says, sounding tired. “Dismiss.”

“Sir,” says Edward, and turns.

3.

There are moments when the pain is such that Francis is simply incapable of understanding it.

Lying on his back, too hot and too cold, in the low light, and the shudders passing through him as through a ship striking some submerged reef, dragging her keel, every seam leaking. An apt metaphor: poor Jopson.

Little calls on him, on occasion: perhaps on some sort of schedule—it would be like him—but Francis has no sense of time, now. Only wakes sometimes to see Edward standing there, stiff and uncertain: aware, no doubt, that should Francis die here, in this bunk, in this misery of his own making, command of this ship will fall to its first lieutenant: with Graham gone there’s no one else. He tells Jopson, one night when he is feeling morbid: *tell Edward that I can’t imagine a better man for it.*

A lie, but Ross is far away, and it will be Edward. In the end, it will be Edward.

He hears them talking, sometimes, Edward and Thomas: comfortably, he thinks, as brothers speak. As though they understand one another. Easier to slip into sleep when he can hear them there, through the door. Once even one of them laughing, though which he cannot say.

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“You have my pistol,” he asks, when he is clearheaded for a moment.

“Yes,” Edward says. No more and no less: no elaboration, no further discussion. *Straightforward*, Ommanney had said. Francis is glad of him.

“Good,” says Francis. “Keep it.” Hardly a silver pocket watch but it must do: must serve, as they all must. As some token of respect.

“Of course,” Edward says.

It is not only for Francis’s benefit. No greater gift, when the need arises, than that single shot.

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Others come: Fitzjames, uncomfortable beyond belief—Francis would laugh, if it didn’t hurt so much—making his little reports, so many tins moved from here to there, the state of sails they will never fill again. McDonald with the sick lists: hernias, crushed hands, fevers. News of how Tom Blanky fares.

But it is Edward who stays, after his reports are made. Keeps out of Jopson’s way; moves when he must: sits beside Francis in silence, reading sometimes or working at his logs by candlelight, eyes shining in the dark. Maintains his little vigil. Leans forward on occasion, his forearms on his knees: occasionally opens his mouth as if to speak. Shuts it.

He is, Francis thinks, a man with a tremendous capacity for waiting. Perhaps indeed he will be the last of them, out there on the ice.

Sometimes before he leaves he reaches out and lays his hand on Francis’s shoulder for a moment: just a spark of human warmth against the shadowed press of night.

4.

The marines will arm themselves: that much is now clear. It is a question only of whether the situation may be controlled.

Sedition, Francis had said, as though this were some carefully conceived plot, some engineered outcome, rather than mere—disintegration. A crew fraying the way cable frays, the snap of each strand conferring more pressure on the next.

When Edward was a boy someone had told him about Anson. His father still at sea in those days, so it must have been someone else: Eliza, perhaps, reading from one of her books. *A Voyage round the World*. That first passage of the horn, the Acapulco galleon, Canton: it would be false to say it hadn’t led him, when it came to choosing his ships. The loss of the *Wager* had merely been an unhappy aside, a lesson in the necessity of discipline. An

historical note about mutiny, stocked with characters from a two-penny stageplay: Cheap, the unbending captain; Baynes, the disloyal lieutenant; King, the mad boatswain. He had liked the story: had thought of it often, on the long warm morning watches in Valparaiso and Tahiti. What a wonder it must have been, to have lived in history.

In the armoury he and Tozer look one another in the eye and understand one another perfectly: step neatly into their roles. The cards already dealt, days ago, weeks. Take them as played or overturn the table.

It will do, as a story. Adjacent to truth.

“I want a record,” he tells Armitage, “of every issue taking place.” It will not matter, except perhaps in the question of how much they pay out to his mother.

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The worst kind of sorry, Edward says. Like a boy caught copying his letters from some other brighter hand.

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Sometimes when he sleeps he dreams of the ships: empty, now, always, even their last minders slipped away. Sometimes they lie in the ice as he recalls them and sometimes below, full of green water which he does not feel, strangely lit.

In the dreams he is alone and there are things to be done. Sails to be mended. Cable to be coiled. Blocks to oil and brass to polish. Ballast to be shifted. No men to worry for, no evils to evade: only the work, endless and unrewarded, like swinging a pickaxe into the limitless pack.

When he wakes it is always a misery.

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In the end he does as he is asked.

It is what he is for, as an officer and as a man: and never mind that LeVesconte is not his senior, though his name and his voice say he ought to be, and never mind that Francis expects rescue—Francis who is keeping them alive by sheer will and bile and quiet rage—and never mind Tom Jopson whose hand he had taken in his own lying there on the shales to wake alone among the corpses or to sleep forever, bleach and wither in the hard winter sun.

Never mind, never mind.

Perhaps some few of them will live.

5.

By the time they come to that place of the tents Francis has seen enough to know that none survive. Even if some live, none survive.

In that empty place among the dead, in that ruin of a place, he finds he is awaited.

And at the end of all things he pulls Edward's body to himself: barely there at all, under the layers of wool. A tumble of bones wrapped in a blanket like kindling in a cloth. A living grave. This young man, he thinks, this young man, one of his own, whom he has condemned to the darkest brightest hell, among all the others. This one loyal. This one so good and so long gone.

Edward exhales death against his cheek. Francis turns his head to listen.

"Close," Edward breathes, like it's the last word there is.

Yes, Francis wants to say. Yes, you're close. But the words don't come. *Worse than nothing*, he hears himself say, to Thomas, to poor Thomas lying facedown on the stones, unburied, unmourned, unheld. His heart which he had thought had no pain left aches again.

He puts his arm around Edward, gentle as he can. Tries to think of anything: a prayer, a lullaby. Cannot.

Instead presses a kiss to his temple, as for a child put to bed.

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