

## THE DISAPPEARED

I am old, don't have much longer. I want to tell you about my pain. I know. So much pain in this godawful world. But I have to talk to the great world out there because someone might hear me truly and empathize if not sympathize.

I am a mother who mourns the disappearance of my daughter. Note, I don't say loss. My daughter Elsie simply disappeared along with others. She had an infant son with her. Yes, you could say she was one of the hippies of San Francisco, one of the "dispensables" in the minds of comfortable, self-satisfied, tax-avoiding controllers of government, the ones we depend on to keep the criminals from overwhelming us. Excuse my bitterness. To me, she was a lovely girl, an innocent, who, perhaps because she was colored, like me, found acceptance with the young, who rejected our society and, with the optimism of youth, tried to make a better, more understanding community—that is, establish a faith in the goodness of man.

I worked in New York City to which I was brought from Panama by my first husband. When he left us, I married again, but my daughter, a teen-ager, was uncomfortable with him. Perhaps in rejecting him, she rejected the normal life of a job and husband. She telephoned me from wherever she went. She knew I loved her and to her I was her base from which she drew encouragement and reliance. I did not judge her but worried about her, especially when she began living in the houseboat community in Sausalito, outside San Francisco, and bore a son from a white boy who did not live with her long. She told me before she disappeared that he had dropped by the houseboat to see them and his last words were "Look after my son."

Here is the mystery. She telephoned me to mail her passport because a couple with some kids, sort of leaders in that community, wanted to take her and others to Mexico in their boat. She was excited about the adventure. After a couple of weeks or so when I did not hear from her and could not reach any one in her community, I flew to San Francisco and visited her houseboat which had been taken over by other hippies. A woman, who had lived near her, remembered her leaving on the boat. She showed me a clipping from a local newspaper that said the boat was turned back as unseaworthy by the harbor police. I opened my daughter's postal box and found her passport. She had left without it.

The article gave the names of a half-dozen young persons who had gone with Jud Stobo, his wife Asa, and their three children in their old steamer, distinctive for its focsle set nearer midships than usual. The reporter interviewed a retired merchant mariner who said he saw the ship moving up the Columbia river; he recognized it by its distinctive look. The authorities discounted his sighting and attributed a sudden storm on the Pacific near Baha to the vessels' loss. All on board were drowned, leaving no trace of vessel and bodies. I wrote to the office which investigated disappearances but it cited the storm as the probable cause of disappearance. I sought out the parents of some of the young persons on board but, when I called them, they were not interested in what happened to their children. I sensed they were glad to be rid of them. I had

nowhere to turn. Until some wreckage or some physical sign of the ship's wreck at sea could be demonstrated, I could not be satisfied of my child's death. What about the old sailor who saw the ship on the Columbia river? He knew no more than what he reported. He was pretty sure it was the ship from the description of it. Yet, there was no other sighting of it, at least reported, because others could have seen it but were unaware it was missing. I could not give up hope and returned to New York, sick with worry, and determined to get a real answer.

Since Elsie did not wait for her passport, maybe Jud Stobo decided to visit Canada; maybe they did go north along the coast and enter the river on the British Columbia and Washington State border. I had to work to have an income but as soon as I could take early retirement, which was in 1990, three years after she disappeared, I devoted all my time to the search.

First, how did the ship get past the harbor police who had found it unseaworthy? Maybe officers on a later shift took bribes to let it through. I was an older woman, shy and awkward, the most unlikely detective you could imagine. I had to force myself to be aggressive. To the office people I spoke to, I must have seemed a nuisance, and probably would have been dismissed rudely if they had not seen the agony in my eyes. There was no way to know that bribery had taken place and that the ship had passed into the Pacific. In the years since its disappearance, there had been no wreckage from the ship washed up on Pacific shores. To drive along the shore of the Columbia river and stop at houses to ask if anyone had seen a small boat with its focsle closer to midships than was usual seemed absurd, but I did it for a time. That river is very big and very long. And even if the ship went up it, surely there would be news of its docking and of its passengers. And where could Job Stobo have been taking these young persons to whom he seemed a kind and knowledgeable leader?

Last year about 25 years after my daughter and her son disappeared, I got an email from one of the missing persons bureaus that I had pestered. It said that a very old homeless man by the name of Stobo walked into its Vancouver office and talked about the missing ship. His story was jumbled, disconnected, and seemed part fantasy but part believable. Would I like to speak to him? By this time I was living on a houseboat in Sausalito, the better to be able to question the artists who stopped there in their nomadic wandering to distant parts of the world and returned over and over again. Maybe someone had known Elsie, remembered something, saw her leave, maybe came across her on their journeys. I said I was coming to Vancouver.

When I arrived at the Vancouver office I met a young man with bright expectant eyes who welcomed me into his little office. He took out a folder holding scores of letters and printed emails I had sent the office. "Some day," he said, "we expect an answer to every question. Sorry it has taken so long to answer yours. It may not be a real answer, however. We could not get much of a story out of the fellow and thought you should have a try."

"I'm grateful for anything, any crumb," I said wistfully.

The young man looked sympathetically at me and taking a paper from the folder he pointed to an address where he said Stobo lived. The office had found an inexpensive room for him in Lions Bay to the north and suggested a B&B where I could stay within my means, as the young man put it. "He'd been living on the streets, you understand," he added.

I went immediately to the B & B by bus and checked in for the evening. I wanted to speak to Stobo badly but had to quell my excitement as it was late and I should plan an approach that could gain his confidence. If there had been some tragedy in which he was involved or at fault, he would not want to discuss it. Maybe his mind was weak and his conscience made him refer to the ship but not enough to incriminate him. If I showed too much interest or let slip that my daughter had been on board, he might not say a word. After all these years of searching I had one slight strand leading back to my daughter and I did not want to break it. I tossed over in my mind various approaches but none seemed right. I decided to just meet him and let my instinct guide me. I had difficulty falling asleep until my tiredness from a long day overwhelmed me.

The lady of the house gave me a good breakfast—eggs benedict—something I never made for myself. She was a sweet plump soul and called me "dear", which meant she saw me as a frail old bird. I was pretty mobile and able to walk to the address of this strange Mr. Stobo. His house was made of wood, looked a bit rundown but fitted in with the neighbourhood of frame houses fronting on the water. I steeled myself to be disappointed and climbed the steps of the verandah where I turned to look out over the cove and the vastness of the water disappearing into the distance. Some very white gulls called out as they swung along by the shoreline and headed far out into a fine haze. I heard the door open behind me and turned to see a slight, bald-headed man with a thin face and morose eyes step out and stand uncertainly looking at me. He carried a brown envelope.

"Are you Mr. Stobo?" I asked with a smile in the mildest voice I could manage.

"Could be," he said. "You the lady they said would be coming?"

"Yes, I am. Ethel Somers. Please call me Ethel."

"I haven't got much to say," he said with a slight shrug as if what he knew was as unimportant as he was. When he saw my look of disappointment, he added, "But we can talk, I guess. My room's not the place. I was goin' to the corner store for coffee."

In those few words I caught a soft side to this weatherbeaten, downtrodden wreck and felt a sudden rise in expectation, almost as great as hope, but still firmly under control. "I'd like to have coffee with you," I smiled gratefully.

He walked slowly and mumbled to himself, something about feeling the weather in his bones.

"Do you like living here?" I asked.

"Better than downtown. No addicts up here, leastways." He spat to the side. "Always liked the sea."

Could he have been the Stobo whom Elsie said was captaining the ship? I wondered. He sounded as if he spent his life at sea.

We went into a half-cafe, half groceteria and sat at a table by the window which looked over the sidewalk to tall grasses. A young girl brought him coffee and muffins.

"Same for her," he said, poking his thumb in my direction. "I got 'em trained quick," he explained. "Don't like havin' to order, unless I want somethin' different."

He sounded decisive, not at all like the incoherent, muddle-headed man whom the office for the disappeared had described. I waited until I was served and he had tasted his coffee before asking, "Have you been a sailor? You said you liked the sea."

He looked at me steadily for five seconds and nodded. "Lucky you got to me in the morning. I'm kinda receptive then. They told me what you were about. If I didn't like you, I wouldn't be here. You remind me of a warm brown lady I lived with in old Mehico. Them was the days." He gave me a slight smile.

I was taken aback for a second, then smiled and gave him a little flirtatious look that I hadn't used for years. "How much did they tell you?"

He shrugged again. "You've been lookin' for a daughter since the 80s. That right?"

I nodded.

"Disappeared, disappeared, disappeared," he mumbled. "Millions." He looked at me intently. "Goin' on as we speak. Girls and young guys tricked into sexual slavery, least ways that's what they call it nowadays. They used to call it bondage." He laughed. "I been around. I seen it first hand. Yeah, I might help you. But don't you betray me, lady. You keep silent about what I say. Understand me?"

"I swear I won't repeat anything you tell me," I whispered, excited to have found someone to help me at long last. His reference to "sexual slavery", however, alarmed me.

"See, you need a con man as a between guy who can deliver a woman looking for a modelin' career or actin' career to push into the power of the gangs. These guys are sophisticated and smart with plenty of dough. But there's the muck who can grab a girl in the city streets and hustle her to a whore house. I seen young men drugged, slumped

on the street, being picked up by criminals who sell them to the gangs and they disappear into the countries that need 'em."

"Did that happen to Elsie?" I gasped.

"There's police in cahoots with these guys 'cause the money is fantastic," he continued. "A lot of girls dies in captivity. But some escape, you know."

"Are you the Jud Stobo who ran a boat in Sausalito?" I broke in to his uninformative monologue.

Stobo gave me another long look, his small eyes glaring annoyance. "Lady, let me tell my story."

"I'm sorry," I said. "I know about all those terrible things. I'm interested in what happened to my daughter and my grandson. Are you saying they were sold into slavery?"

"Not necessarily," he grinned. "I'm givin' you background. You have to understand what could happen to know what did happen."

'Couldn't you just say who you are and what connection you have to my daughter's disappearance," I pleaded. "I've been through many many ups and downs over the years. I don't think I can take another big disappointment. Just tell me who you are."

Stobo took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I used to have a boat called the Mary Jane in Sausalito when your daughter rented a houseboat there. My mind's not clear these days so I can't remember much. But," he added quickly when he saw my apprehension, "I wrote down a lot at the time and turned it over to a journalist writin' a book on it all. He wrote a couple of chapters as a novel but died before he got far. I have his chapters and brought a xerox copy to you." He reached into his brown envelope and brought out sheafs of paper. "Let no one see it, okay."

I took the papers and glanced through them. They were typewritten.

"I don't need them back," he said standing up. "I'll be around here for some time, I guess, if you need to see me." He gave me the envelope and left me to finish my coffee.

I paid the bill and walked out of the cafe to find him contemplating the sound and hills in the distance. "Ya know, copyin' that stuff cost me. You couldn't give me \$20, could you?"

I took a 20 dollar bill from my purse and handed it to him. I wondered whether he would hit me up for money every so often. He could be phony. He may be calling himself Stobo and be working a scam. I hurried back to my room to read what this so-called novelist had written.

I'll share it with you because maybe you can tell fact from fiction. Maybe you can see if it led me closer to finding Elsie and my grandson. Certainly, it unsettled me.

## ONE: CAPTAIN JUD STOBO CASTS OFF

As vessels go, the Mary Jane was just fine for San Francisco Bay, just fine for Jud and Asa Stobo and their kids, but just awful for ocean travel. But it was ocean travel that Jud proposed to an assorted group of youngsters living in the houseboats at Sausalito. Jud was in his thirties, long-haired, with rings in his ears and happy-looking tattoos on his arms—smiling heads and words like optimism and joy. He gave the impression of knowing it all, that the kids found reassuring, and his wife, a small lady with a bright smile and big, compassionate eyes in a small face, listened to their problems and consoled them like a good mother, so unlike the guardians they had fled from, whether they be their real mothers or the wardens of their orphanage.

These kids, all they wanted was to belong. The Stobos made them feel they belonged to the group they formed. They had parties on their boat at least twice a week. Jud was generous with food and drink and if you got drunk, really pissed, that was okay. Jud called their society “permissive”, “all-inclusive” and he encouraged his flock to shed inhibition—be themselves. How he paid for all the partying was never questioned. His bohemian life style on a ramshackle boat with an artist wife was his choice and had nothing to do with whatever wealth lay behind him. Everyone assumed he was rich but had rejected the bourgeois life for an honest, simple existence, where one can be kind instead of ruthless and one can love one's fellow human. So when he suggested they take his ship, the Mary Jane, to Mexico for a couple of weeks and soak in the music, gayety, and rhythms of life, as he put it, those kids who didn't have jobs were ready to go. Although Jud said they wouldn't need passports, that he could land his ship anywhere along the Baha Peninsula under the radar of the Mexican police, one of the gang, a colored girl with a baby under a year, telephoned her mother in New York City to send her passport and some money. She wanted always to be able to credit herself as American and she did not want her child to be thought anything but American, just in case things got sticky in Mexico. The others, aside from the Stobos, did not have children and would not have thought of going through all the trouble of acquiring a passport just to go south for a week or two.

Elsie sat on the stern of Jud's ship and listened to Jud talk about the stops they would make and the sights they would see at each place. They'd visit for a day or two, live on the ship and move on. Harry Blinder, a twenty year-old husky kid from Seattle, was ecstatic and encouraged Elsie to look forward to living in a completely different culture from anything they had known. Elsie was going because he wanted her to. She needed someone to be father to her baby. Harry was kind to them and looked after the baby when she went shopping. She was wary, however. A sixth sense warned her that such a voyage was not cheap, that someone was paying for the fuel, for the food and for the fun they were supposed to have when they stopped. Why would this someone do that? she wondered. Jud and Asa seemed almost too eager that they all make the trip. Jud,

despite his extravagant parties, did not have the character of a man with inherited wealth. He also was the type who could not make money. Elsie could read the personalities of white men and she thought Jud and his wife were under instructions. He was not a free personality. But, maybe, she reasoned, he was breaking his constraints for a time to truly enjoy himself with the gang.

"I asked my mother to send my passport," she said when Jud stopped talking to swig beer.

Jed frowned angrily. "I told you. You don't need one. The rest of us don't have passports, for God's sake!"

"Don't worry, sweetie," Asa smiled. "It'll come too late anyways. We're leaving tomorrow."

"The last thing we want to do is see customs," Jed laughed, showing gaps where his teeth went missing. "You want to be held up? Just try to go through customs without payin'."

"Let's go get some sleep," Harry Blinder said happily and scooped up Elsie's boy in his arms. Elsie followed him over the gangplank to the wharf and glanced back to see the Stobos watching them go and several couples drinking around them. She guessed that they knew what they were doing; besides, she trusted Asa, who was always generous with her and giving her advice on raising her boy.

Harry carried the boy to his bed on board the houseboat and, kissing Elsie on the cheek, he said he'd be by in the morning and went to his little houseboat a few minutes away. Elsie tucked her boy in bed. "I love you Jamie," she whispered. "We are going on a wonderful adventure tomorrow so get some sleep."

Jamie threw his arms about her neck, kissed her, and sank into the pillows, instantly asleep.

Harry called by the houseboat at 9 o'clock. He was carrying a small suitcase of clothes. He joined Elsie at the breakfast table as she and Jamie finished eating and Elsie finished a note to the couple who was to take over the houseboat for the week or ten days she would be gone.

"I didn't mention this," Elsie said, "but the old man that lives in the big boat at the far end of our row warned me that the Mary Jane is not safe."

"What does he know!" Harry scoffed.

"He's lived here for twenty years, Harry. He's a painter that a lot of people respect. He knows."

“Do you think Jud would risk the lives of his children?” Harry asked. “He’s a cool dude. I trust him as much as I’ve trusted anyone. Besides we’re going to be hugging the coast so if there’s a storm we can get to shore quick enough.”

“Still,” Elsie grimaced, “I’m not sure about this.” When she saw Harry’s quizzical look, she added, “Course I want to see Mexico and all that and it’d be fun to get away from here for a while.”

“Then, don’t worry,” Harry smiled and, seizing her small case in one hand and his in the other, cried, “Let’s go!”

Elsie placed her note in an envelope and propped it on the salt shaker in the centre of the table. Taking Jamie by the hand, she followed Harry to the dock and to the Mary Jane anchored several berths away. Half a dozen of the group were already on board. Jud seemed impatient to be underway. A clear blue sky, smooth water and a scent of fall in the air seemed to promise a happy voyage. Jud hugged them when they boarded and called to one of the boys to start the engine. Elsie went to the main stateroom where bedrolls were stashed against the walls and picked her sleeping spot with enough room for Jamie. Now that they were underway, she cast aside her reservations and decided to enjoy every moment of this adventure. Only when the ship was stopped by the Coast Guard as it tried to exit from San Francisco Bay did feelings of danger return, sharpened by her fears for Jamie, who, if anything bad happened, was unable to look out for himself.

The captain of the patrol boat which came alongside questioned Jud for a few moments before climbing aboard. He walked the length of the deck and looked below. He smiled at the young men and women clustered on the deck and patted Jamie on the head when the boy ran up to him. He shook his head ruefully. “This ship will fall apart when the waves start to swell, Mr. Stobo. We cannot allow you to continue. You are putting the lives of these youngsters at risk, I’m afraid.” He looked sympathetically at Stobo’s crestfallen features.

“I’ve taken it on the Pacific loads of times,” Jud said emphatically. “It’s a good ship.”

“You can risk your own life if you wish, but I’m concerned about the lives of your passengers,” the captain said sternly. “Now, return to the Bay or I shall impound the ship.”

“Okay, okay,” Jud nodded. He accompanied the captain to the railing and watched him climb into the coast guard cutter. He did not give a damn what the man said. He was thinking of a way to get past this barrier.

Elsie had overheard the captain and told Harry that she was scared. “I’m glad we have to go back,” she whispered. She called Jamie to her and held him on her lap.



The Mary Jane steamed back into the harbor. Jud called everyone on deck and addressed them as if he were the leader of a cult. Elsie realized with a jolt that he really looked at them as his followers and that he expected them to do what he said. The others accepted their dependence on him, as if the relationship had always been there but confirmed only now. He told them not to be disappointed. He would find a way to get around these bourgeois rules. Nothing would stand in the way of their having a good time. He directed the ship to the nearest marina.

Harry expected Elsie to be enthusiastic in support of Jud's plan to outfox the Coast Guard. "He's a brilliant guy," Harry said admiringly. "We got nothing to worry about."

"I want to go back," Elsie complained. She noticed a hardness in Jud's attitude to any question he was asked. He resented any suggestion, as if it challenged his authority. Now that the voyage was underway he became a different person; a grim character from within him seemed to emerge. Asa too was no longer a sweet-natured soul. She looked angry and avoided contact with any passenger and kept her children in the captain's cabin away from the others. "Why are we stopping at this place?"

Harry looked out the cabin window. "He's making a call from a phone box. I bet he's going over the head of the Coast Guard." Harry went onto the deck to talk with some of the other "hippies".

When Jud returned he told them that he had an all clear. They had to wait until the present shift of Coast Guard was replaced, that is, about an hour. They would not be stopped.

Harry returned to tell Elsie. "I guess he wasn't expecting that captain to turn up. Cheer up, Elsie. We'll be okay. We're going to have fun. Asa hosting us to drinks so let's go." He unrolled a sleeping mat and placed Jamie on it. "Poor little guy, he's sleepy. We won't be gone long," he patted Jamie's cheek as the boy closed his eyes.

Elsie felt trapped. She had committed herself and now that she wanted out of the whole thing she feared making the others angry. Their chance of avoiding the Coast Guard could be ruined by her insisting to go back. When she came to the others talking and laughing, her reservations began to drain away and after her third drink she no longer remembered what they were. They were still partying when they steamed into the Pacific, the waves of which were rolling steadily by the swiftly moving craft. Jud Stobo walked amongst them cheerfully. "What did I tell you," he called out to Harry Blinder. "Mexico, here we come!"

Only that evening when Elsie took her turn as lookout at a corner window of the captain's cabin did she see a map and the long voyage ahead. It seemed they would take days and nights along the California coast to reach Baha Mexico. She began to doubt Stobo's judgment. Surely he could not think they could reach Mexico and return within a week or ten days. They had to make stops for food and fuel. If they did ten miles an hour, traveling day and night, they could make Mexico in three days, she

reckoned, but that was unrealistic. She thought it would take them a week. And then there was the long coast of the Baha peninsular. The Stobos must have been planning to be away for a month. She did not have the money to spend for that length of time. After three in the morning when her shift ended and she slipped into her sleeping bag, she became very concerned. The others were free and easy; they had no responsibilities, no children. They could be gone for six months and live off the Stobos without a second thought. She had fitted in just fine with them and as long as they lived in Sausalito where she could get welfare; she liked the easy company and freedom from judgment and criticism. The birth of Jamie changed her, she thought, although she had not actually realized that change until now, when it began to worry her. She tried to sleep and had a fitful night. She woke early when Jamie tugged at her collar. She hugged him and looked round for Harry Blinder. A few men and women were still sleeping. Harry had risen and was probably making or eating breakfast. Elsie took Jamie with her to the galley and sat beside Harry who was talking with a couple about the rougher feel of the sea and wondering whether a storm was brewing.

"I'm concerned," Elsie broke in. "The Coast Guard was right. It's gonna take us days to get to Mexico and this boat just is not seaworthy. I was on lookout last night and I was scared by the way we rocked. I want to go back."

"There's no goin' back," the black-haired, intense young man named Alex said and his partner nodded vigorously, her long brown hair bouncing on her shoulders. "I told Jud I didn't like the look of things and to take us ashore. He said we signed on for good. He can't let us off."

"That's awful!" Elsie cried. "I'm getting off on our next stop for fuel or whatever."

"He won't let you," Barbie, the partner of Alex warned. "When I asked how he could stop us, he pointed to those big goofs he calls the crew and at the rifles on the wall of his cabin."

"Those big goofs Barbie's talkin' about just got on before we left Sausalito," Harry informed Elsie. "I didn't see them until we were underway."

"I haven't seen them," Elsie said wide-eyed. "It sounds like we're being kidnapped."

Harry sat Jamie on his knee. "Come here, big boy. You like sailing in the ocean?"

Jamie nodded and laughed gleefully. He reached up to feel Harry's face.

"Why would he want to keep us on board?" Elsie said. "Why would he want my little boy?"

Alex cleared his throat. "We've heard about human trafficking. We think Jud's money comes from a gang who's hired him to bring them some young blood." He paused when he saw Elsie's frightened expression. "We could be wrong. But there's rumors going

among the gang at how rough Jud's been treating some people. We're to blame for getting high and not really payin' attention to what's goin' on." He looked at Harry. "Your good vibes about the trip sort of influenced me."

"We don't know anything yet," Harry said comfortingly. "Jud might be in a bad temper. That's all. I know him pretty good. I'll tell him to let you off at our next marina stop. Don't worry, Elsie sweetheart."

"When will you speak to him?" Elsie asked anxiously, on the verge of tears.

"Now," Harry smiled and standing gave Jamie to Alex to hold. "Anything to make you feel safe."

Harry went to Jud's cabin concerned that the passengers felt threatened but certain that they misunderstood Jud's intentions and confident the unease could be easily put to rest. Jud was drinking coffee with Asa at a small table while his three children, two boys and a girl, played a board game on the floor. Jud frowned at Harry as if questioning his temerity in intruding on his breakfast time.

"Hi pal," Harry greeted him happily. "And how's Asa? Lookin' forward to swinging with rhumba? What's the matter? You look a bit down."

"What do you want, Harry?" Jud said.

"Boy! Are you Mr Business all of a sudden!" Harry sat opposite them.

"We're not in a camp for hippies any longer," Jud said with a sneer. "I've got the lives of you all in my hands. Got to get you to our destination. Understand?"

"What destination?" Harry frowned. "Aren't we just on a holiday?"

Jud looked over at Asa who stood up and sat on the floor with her children. "You guys were on a permanent holiday. I never liked to see you just hanging around and making out while the state paid you a livin'. So I'm turning' you over to some people who can put you to work."

Harry gawked at him. "What do you mean? You were hangin' out with us just like everyone else."

"Yeah, I had a purpose. You came here to complain, didn't you?" Jud smiled sarcastically. "So let me set you straight. No one is leavin' this ship till we get to Mexico."

Harry, in shock, began to understand that he and all of the group were in trouble. "And when we get to Mexico? What then?"

"You'll find out when we meet our friends," Jud said seriously. "I've got work to do, so scram."

"You can't stop anyone from leavin' the ship," Harry said angrily.

"Do you want me to put you in irons below deck?" Jud smiled. "No captain allows for an expression of mutiny."

"That's not mutiny!" Harry cried. "We don't want to take over the ship. Some just want to leave. I'm not one of them but I think Elsie and her kid should not be included in your plans, whatever they are."

"Elsie and her kid fit into my plans just right. Now do I have to call one of my men to throw you out of here?"

As Harry walked angrily out the cabin door, he heard Asa complain to Jud that Elsie should be let go and his swearing at her before the door closed. Harry's disillusionment crept upon upon him like a swamp to drag him down. He stood by the railing and watched the swell of the sea. His mind raced about looking for answers. He dare not show more defiance. He returned to the galley and sat with Elsie who was still talking with Alex and Barbie. His glum look warned them that he brought bad news.

"You're absolutely right, Alex," Harry said. "This is a slave ship and we're gonna be sold when he gets us to Mexico. Those goons who came out of the woodwork after we left the Bay must belong to the gang who are going to disappear us."

Alex smiled. "I always wondered what happened to those guys I used to see sitting drugged against the buildings in New York and the black guys with their brown fedoras sitting waiting in their cars. I guess I'm going to find out."

"It isn't funny," Barbie whispered. "We've got to do something."

"They've got the goons and the guns," Alex said. "And most of our group won't have the guts to do anything. They're a bunch of fuckin' fatalists."

Elsie held Jamie close against her chest. "Did Jud say anything about us?"

Harry looked at her sadly. "I feel responsible for you and I'll do my best to get you out of this."

Elsie thought of the barbarity of child pornography and sexual torture. She felt paralyzed and tried to stop herself from crying. "Why didn't I see through that man!" she sniffed. "I saw the warning signals."

"He gave us a good time," Barbie said stroking Elsie's arm. "That's all that we were interested in. We've got to tell the others."

"Watch out," Harry warned. "We're being watched. And you can't trust everyone. Leave it to Alex and me. We'll work out something. I'd rather die than be imprisoned in a brothel. Do they call a male sexual camp a brothel?" he asked Alex.

Alex hiked his black eyebrows and looked frightened. "Damn! Let's break up. One of Jud's goons just sat down near us."

Elsie looked sideways to see a beefy man in his twenties with Mexican features sitting astride a bench at the next table. He was looking unconcerned and gazing about disinterestedly. She stood up and led Jamie, who was learning to walk, by the hand to the passengers' room. Barbie walked with her while Harry and Alex went in the opposite direction.

## TWO; SURPRISED!

Harry and Alex split up when they saw some of their fellow captives, for that is how they saw themselves, and joining in shuffleboard or in tossing quoits they quietly passed on what they had learned. Most of the others had suspicions about Jud but none had guessed that Jud had planned such an operation from when he first arrived among them. Cautioned to not show concern, they continued to play games but not with the same enthusiasm. Elsie and Barbie spoke to the women, and, despite warning them to disguise their feelings, they saw the worried faces and felt the sudden depression envelope them.

Derek, a long-jawed, lanky fellow who at six-foot five would be intimidating if his personality were less gentle, told Harry that the Mary Jane would probably stop near San Diego for fuel. "That's when we have to make a break for it."

"That's why Jud told Harry nobody's leaving," Alex said. "He's warning us not to try."

"You mean he knew his passengers were getting restless and he wanted to warn them of the consequences if they tried anything," Derek said.

An older man with a black beard covering his face who everyone called "Pops" spoke up behind Harry. "He's not takin' the ship to land. Don't you think he's goin' to have a ship give us fuel at sea? The only way we're going' to get out of this mess is to take over the ship. Jud knows it and so do his Mexican friends. But you got to be prepared to die. Then you don't know if he's selling us to a drug gang or what our future is. I'm kinda curious to find out."

"Curiosity killed the cat," Alex said.

"Better than fighting those Mexicans who have the guns and look like they want to use them," Pops said meaningfully. "Think of your options. Life is cheap to those guys."

"I'm all for takin' over the ship," Harry said tersely. "If we don't, our life will be hell. And I think Jud and Asa are fools if they think they can sell us and walk away with the money. No Mexican slave-trader is gonna let them go. I bet them and their kids will be part of the booty."

"Unless," Derek said, "he's being protected by someone high up in the organization."

"In that case," Alex said, "even if we do free ourselves, we'll be marked for assassination. Those criminal syndicates don't like to admit failure."

"We're talking above our heads," Pops laughed sarcastically. "No one knows how big Jud's game is. See if anyone can find out more and then we can plan accordingly."

"Guess you're right," Harry sighed. "Let's break up. A goon is watching us."

They walked away in twos and pretended to be discussing sports in louder voices. Harry's turn to man the look-out station was due. He climbed the steps to the bridge and stopped by the steersman to look at the indicators.

"Barometers rising," he said. "Heard anything on the radio about a storm?"

The steersman, a sinewy, sharp-faced Mexican who looked as if he had been starved and resented the world for it, grunted. "Not your business," he growled. "Go to watch."

Harry smiled at the woman he was relieving and she nodded grimly at him as she passed. All the group must be aware of their predicament, he thought, and wondering what could be done. He noticed the waves were bigger and the ship rode them roughly. Presently Jud came into the cabin and looked at the instruments. He stood watching the sea for a few minutes. Saying something to the steersman he stepped over to Harry's position.

"A storm's coming, Jud," Harry warned. "We should be heading for shore."

"I don't think so," Jud said tersely. "Our Mary Jane has weathered many a storm in its day."

"It's day has passed," Harry smiled. "'Mary and Jane are goin' to split if we get a big one."

"Funny," Jud said. "We're not seeing land till we get to Baha, my friend."

"The rumor is," Harry stared at him, "your selling us to one of the Mexican drug gangs. That right?"

"Ha!" Jud barked. "Ridiculous! Just keep looking out for ships and stop talkin' nonsense. I'm taking us on a dream holiday and I don't want any fucking craziness to mess it up."

"Then why not head for shore. If we capsize, you lose your wife and kids. Have you thought of that?"

"We're okay," Jud turned away and went to the steersman whom he replaced at the wheel. "Go get the passengers all into the main cabin and tell them to put on life jackets," he ordered, then grabbed the arm of the man as he was leaving, "And make sure my wife and kids got them on first." He looked at Harry and pointed to life jackets hanging on the wall.

Harry, shaking his head, took down the jackets, handed one to Jud and put on the other. At least, he thought, he's concerned and must be considering whether to head for shore or risk drowning them all. A strong wind buffeted the ship and sheets of rain swept over the decks. Harry watched Jud's face closely for signs of misgiving, some doubt that he could work on to persuade him that their lives were worth more than the sack of gold he was promised. He felt hopeful when two of the Mexican goons, their heavy dull faces frowning in alarm, came into the cabin, stood behind Jud and watched him steer through the swelling sea.

To avoid being dangerously rocked, Jud steered the ship into the wind which took them further out to sea. The Mexicans began arguing with him, but he insisted that he knew what he was doing. The Mary Jane creaked and groaned and swayed as it cut through the huge waves. The Mexicans clung onto the railing on either side of Jud and watched the ocean in fear. They were not sailors, Harry smiled to himself; they could be the power to make Jud run for land. The swaying motion of the ship made Harry dizzy. He could see the ocean only between sweeps of rain. The great abysses that opened up into which the ship plunged turned his stomach. He saw both Mexicans doubled over run from the cabin to the ship's railing, and, guessing that they were vomiting, he felt like doing the same. He glanced at Jud Stobo, his long black hair flicking about his shoulders, gripping the wheel like a madman. The storm was rising in intensity. Harry left the cabin and ran on the tossing deck, slipping and falling and grabbing onto whatever he could. When he reached the passengers' cabin full of crying women and swearing men, he stumbled over the lean steersman whom Jud had ordered to give out life jackets. The man groaned and gripped his stomach in pain. Picking himself up, Harry looked round for Elsie and heard her calling to him somewhere from the midst of women huddled together against the cabin wall. He found her crouched with a sobbing Jamie on her lap. Sitting beside her, he encircled his arms about them both and tried to calm her by claiming that the ship was taking the storm well and would ride it out while expecting the ship to fall apart at any moment.

With the wind howling and rain seeping across the cabin floor, this band of hippies lost their visions of a sunny, swinging Mexico. Some were too sick to think while others prepared for a watery grave. The lanky Derek dancing nimbly over bodies came to sit beside him as darkness fell.

“Now’s the time to take over the ship,” Derek shouted in Harry’s ear. “Alex and me, we threw the two biggest goons over the side.”

“They’re gone!” Harry exclaimed in wonder.

“They were sick, easy to handle,” Derek shouted. “There’s just another guy with the guns and the guy vomiting on the floor over there. We’ll let Jud steer the ship since he’s the only one who might get us out of this hell.”

“I’m not in good shape myself,” Harry said. “What plans do you have?”

“We’ve got to get control of the gun room.” Derek looked round at the clusters of bodies lying in vomit and sea water. “Rebecca, you know, the really sexy dame. The word is that the guy with the guns was making eyes at her and guys wondered if she could persuade him to come on our side. But that was before the storm.”

Elsie, who was listening, shouted. “I’ll bring her over. She’s my friend.” She gave the sleeping Jamie to Harry and getting to her feet with difficulty stumbled to the other side of the cabin where she sank beside a blond girl who had drawn her legs up tight against her chest and was trying to sleep. Within minutes, holding Rebecca by the hand, she led her stumbling, falling and looking miserable back to Harry and Derek.

Derek suggested that Rebecca go to the gun cabin and ask for shelter. She had to seduce the goon and make sure the door was unlocked. “Our lives depend upon you,” Derek emphasized and clasped her hands.

“How do you know he’ll want me?” Rebecca cried. “I’m a sick-looking cat right now.”

“That’s just it,” Harry said. “He’ll take you in because he’ll pity you and think you’re an easy lay. But be very careful.”

“I used to be in amateur theatricals,” Rebecca smiled, “but never played Jezebel.”

“You have to play it smart,” Derek warned. “The guy knows the way we feel and he’ll get suspicious easily. We’ll give you five minutes to seduce him. Okay?”

“Where are Alex and Pops?” Harry asked.

“On look-out with Jed,” Derek signaled for them to leave.

Harry and Derek helped Rebecca out of the cabin and along the deck as they clung to ropes and fixtures of the ship to keep from being swept overboard. They let Rebecca go on her own when they neared the small gun cabin and watched hidden behind the focsle as she staggered crying up to the glass door of the cabin and hammered on it. The door opened and she fell into the cabin. When they saw the door slam shut, they moved rapidly to the bridge and Derek, stepping in, beckoned to Pops to get Alex on the



far side and come out. Jud, concentrating on steering the ship, did not see them. The four men scrambled to a space behind the focsle where they could hear themselves shout.

“Four minutes,” Derek held up four fingers and looked at his watch. “Rebecca’s in there.”

Alex grabbed a metal pipe which had come loose and was bouncing about. Streaming with water, they looked at each other silently and wondering whether they would succeed. If they failed they’d be shot for sure. Derek motioned forward with his arm and they followed him to the gun cabin. Derek tried the door. It was locked. He peered through the glass and saw the Mexican goon atop a naked Rebecca on a cot. Rebecca’s clothes were strewn on the floor.

“He’s raping her,” Derek cried and seizing the metal pipe from Alex swung it hard against the glass, smashing it.

The Mexican, a tall muscular man, looked round in surprise. Derek reached through the shattered glass and fumbled for the lock on the door. The Mexican leaped to his feet and reached for a rifle on the wall. Derek swung the door open and the four men rushed in as the Mexican brought round the rifle to fire just as Rebecca leaped on him and brought him falling back against the cot and slumping to the floor. She gave the men the seconds they needed to wrestle away the rifle and press the Mexican on his back. Derek held the rifle barrel to the head of the Mexican but Harry cried out, “No!”

Rebecca, naked, hurriedly seized her clothes and put them on while the men tied the arms and legs of the Mexican.

“We should shoot him,” Derek argued. “He could cause us trouble.”

“We’ll carry him on deck and tie him to something solid,” Harry said. He motioned to the others to lift him and they carried him out the door. “Good work, Rebecca,” he called back.

They found a long rope, backed the Mexican against a metal stanchion and wound the rope several times round the stanchion and him while the ocean splashed over the ship knocking them off their feet. Tied securely, the Mexican yelled that he had no chance if the ship sank.

“You didn’t give us a chance,” Pops yelled back.

The men went to the passengers’ cabin bound the hands and feet of the lean Mexican faint on the floor and propped him against the wall. Derek told those who were able to function to keep guard over him. Scrambling over the flooded deck, Pops went to the gun cabin to stand guard with Rebecca who was trying to push cardboard into the door

where the glass had been. The other three went to the bridge, one squatting on the floor and two stretching out to get sleep while Jud Stobo guided them through the storm.

The storm raged through the night, and, amazingly, the Mary Jane stuck together, although some of the deck fixtures were torn away, and in the early morning calm it moved like a battered old lady. Jud sank to the floor, exhausted, as the storm finished its crazy hammering, and Derek, awaking from sleep, stretched him out and tied his hands behind his back. Derek took over at the wheel.

The ship had been driven far out into the Pacific. Derek turned it round toward the east and, he hoped, the California shore. The motor spluttered as if the ordeal had worn it out. Alex warned that they might be running out of fuel. Without power they could drift forever. He called on everyone to help unfurl the one main sail and haul it up onto the ship's mast which had been rarely used. Alex knew about sailing from days spent with Barbie in sail boats, he said. He and Barbie would get them back safely, that is, if there was wind. At the moment, a slight breeze skipped over the water.

When Jud Stobo woke up late in the day he found his hands tied and a rope tying him to a post on the bridge. Derek helped him to sit up and explained that they expected him to read his instruments so they would know where he had taken them. Elsie and Jamie sat on pillows near-by. Elsie, nervously apprehensive, insisted on being where the ship was run; she thought her presence could pressure the men to work harder to save them. The hippies had cleaned up the passengers' cabin and were relaxing on the deck in the sun, drinking beer, and laughing at the dangers they survived. Some women were grilling Asa in her cabin while her children ran about the ship.

Barbie came to Alex and Harry discussing their predicament by the ship's railing. "Asa admitted Jud and her were run by a gang in Los Angeles with connections to traders in Baha. We could have been sold to anywhere in the world! God damn it! They've been doing this for at least ten years."

"What's Interpol doing?" Alex asked. "Isn't someone combatting human trafficking?"

"Police in Baha are bribed," she said. "Once you get locked in the hold of a ship you could end up in a place like Zanzibar working in the sex industry, making big money for some miserable rich pimp."

"The goons," Harry nodded to the two Mexicans tied up on deck, "are probably part of the Los Angeles operation."

"What shall we do with them?" Alex wondered. "Derek wants to throw them overboard."

"Can't do that," Harry winced. "Even though they are killers, we are not. They might be useful to us." He watched as a couple of women fed them and gave them water. "If we make them see that their survival depends on our survival, we could have a better defence if we need it."

“Sure as hell we’re nowhere near Mexico,” Alex said. “Our gas runs out in another hour or so. We’ve got this pitiful sail to take us hundreds of miles to somewhere. Meanwhile Derek is making Jud fix up his communications system.”

“Can we trust Jud?” Barbie wondered. “I’ve lost confidence in that meathead.”

Derek came to them, his long-jawed face drawn in anger. “I’ve got our captain working on his radio which was drenched. We’re drifting south. With luck we could hit Guadalupe Island. Least, he says, we might make it. I told Pops to distribute the rifles to a few of the guys. Never know what we could meet up with out here.”

“Pirates?” Alex suggested. “Or human traffickers?”

“Let’s talk to the goons,” Harry said and they walked to where the Mexicans were tied.

The motor stopped abruptly. A soft breeze filled the sail and they moved at a snail’s pace south-east. Unable to resuscitate his radio, Jud had to wait until it dried out. He went to Elsie and her son and taking her hand, he asked her to forgive him. The events of the night had changed him, he said. The miracle of their survival gave him a chance to reform his life. He had prayed all the time when he was at the wheel.

Elsie saw the contrition in his eyes. “Just get us safely home,” she said, “then I can forgive you. How could you do this knowing that I had Jamie?”

Jud looked embarrassed. “They took children. I’m sorry. I have kids. I know how you feel. I was just a bad ass.”

Derek approached them. “Your Mexican friends said that the traffickers will be hunting us down and they have ships. If they pick up your radio signal before the coast guard, we’ll all be doomed and you and them will be shot.”

Jud nodded. “That puts us on your side for sure. I’m going to talk to Asa. She’s always got the good ideas. She can suggest a way out of this mess.”

---

I put down the manuscript and felt the tension drain away after finishing the two chapters. My hopes depended on Asa’s solution, but was there one? Or was this just the imagination of the so-called novelist? Why was Stobo giving me this? To torture me? To tell me what really happened? Tears rolled down my cheeks as I thought of Elsie and little Jamie on that rickety old boat lost in the Pacific under a hot sun and at the mercy of marauders on the sea. If the story was true, supplied by Stobo to the writer, then Elsie and Jamie were not drowned as the U S Coast Guard thought, and Stobo must be the Captain Stobo of the Mary Jane. If he survived, maybe the others did too. I ate a meagre lunch and decided to confront Stobo with telling me the rest of the story, even if it was devastating—although at this point I was skeptical of whatever I was told.

I found Stobo in his boarding house. His room was small with a narrow bed but good-looking wooden furniture and good light from a tall window. He gestured to an armchair where I sat and sought for words to begin.

“You read it all?” he asked.

“Yes and it leaves me wondering,” I said angrily. “Now will you tell me what happened afterward?”

“They got to Guadalupe Island,” Stobo said quickly. “They didn’t know for sure because there’s other rocky islets around but when they drifted into the northern part into a little village on the beach, say, about 300 persons, they learned it was. They were out of water and drinks so reached it before anyone died. The Mary Jane went under just as they got there.”

I breathed a great sigh so relieved I was to know that Elsie might be alive.

Stobo looked at me with a pleased expression. “Ya see, I had to bring you along with what happened, otherwise you wouldn’t have believed me.”

“How did you live on the island?” I asked.

“The mists leave pools of water. Russian whalers left wild goats there that ate the vegetation and thousands of them survived, which the islanders used for a source of food. And there’s fishing—plenty of it and sometimes they caught whales. They didn’t want to go to mainland Mexico when the islanders offered to send a boat there because they were scared the drug gangs and their police would find them. Anyway, most of them thought it was a paradise.”

“And Elsie and her son?” I asked tentatively. “Did they stay?”

“She took up with Harry Blinder. Jamie grew into a good-lookin’ young man,” Stobo affirmed. “Captain Jud Stobo came back to the mainland with one of the supply boats sent from the mainland about five years ago; that was after Asa died, and his three children wanted to leave.”

“Why do you refer to Captain Stobo as if you are not Jud Stobo?” I frowned.

“Because, Mrs. Ethel Somers, I’m not sure that I am Captain Stobo.”

I saw the pained look on his narrow face and the happy tattoos on his arms as he raised them to his eyes. I had a sinking feeling that his mind was unhinged, that what he told me might be fiction. Was he giving me a happy ending? saying to let my daughter and grandson live on in paradise and forget them? I left him, not knowing if he was Stobo or an imposter and undecided whether to go to Guadalupe or let Elsie and Jamie live there

in my imagination. I was strongly leaning to let them be and feel good about them as I returned to my houseboat in Sausalito. But still, I worried.