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THE MUSIC OF THE STORM

“Don't expect to breeze your way onto a Bugis schooner. The crews earn enough from cargoes and can do without you and your paltry fare,” cautioned my guidebook on Indonesia. But the moment I strayed into the glaring sunlight on the docks at Parepare, I discovered that this advice wasn't meant for women. As I walked alongside the row of schooners, eager shouts hit me like volleys of gunfire, from one crew after another. No woman traveler, not even a fortyish one like me, could be said to lack for willing takers.

I had no intention of going for a schooner ride. The Bugis sailors of Sulawesi Island had practiced piracy for centuries – still did, according to the stories I'd heard in my six months in Indonesia. It was the Bugis who had inspired our word “boogeymen.” If I let a crew get me out to sea, my Indonesian friends had warned, the sailors would rape me. Then they would slit my throat, help themselves to my money belt, and toss my carcass overboard.

Retreating from the men's shouts, I stumbled into a dockside eatery that smelled of the clove-flavored cigarettes popular with sailors. I rummaged in my pants pockets for a handkerchief to mop my streaming face and glasses. The place was empty. Although the sticky-sweet tea they drink in Indonesia always makes me perspire more, I sat down and ordered a cup, glad to be out from under the direct gaze of the sun and the sailors. Thank goodness I wasn't going to set foot on any schooner. No. Certainly not. Lovely though it might be to see one of those wooden ships open its seven sails to the wind, I wasn't crazy.

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All I wanted, I told myself, was a second look. I'd fled the docks too soon to really see the boats. What harm could there be in going back to the docks just once? And if I should happen to meet a crew that seemed nice . . . What if the stories about the Bugis weren't true? What if . . . ?

As I waited for my tea, I lapsed into a flow-state that frequently happens when I travel, letting my mind drift, decisions seemingly made without conscious volition. Sometimes I feel as though an inner pilot takes over where my guidebooks leave off, and maneuvers me, willy-nilly, where she wants me to go. Not that I'm easily hustled into anything. I often will loiter at the edges of a new adventure for weeks, wading in, retreating, studying the dangers and obstacles, mentally testing this or that way, all the while reassuring myself that it's only speculation – of course I won't do it – as I drift out too far to come back.

That morning in Parepare, though, I didn't get to dawdle as usual. Scarcely had my tea arrived when I saw a man closing in on my table. After a perfunctory cough or two, he offered in Indonesian to help me find a schooner. I invited him to sit, neither of us taking his offer seriously. For him, it was just an excuse to meet the new foreign woman in town; for me, a way of finagling an escorted tour of the docks. Abbas, as he was called, appeared boyish at first, all arms and legs and tousled hair, until I noticed a tiredness about his eyes. He had an anxious way of pushing back his forelock whenever he alluded to his three ships at sea. When he mentioned that he owned a fourth, the *Sumber Murni*, moored nearby and preparing to sail south along Sulawesi's coast to Ujung Pandang at its southernmost tip, I asked to see her.

I liked her instantly, though I knew nothing of ships. Fifty feet long, she had a well-rounded belly, a long, sharp nose that tilted upward, and two masts. Her hardwood

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sides creaked and sighed. I had read that the Bugis still built schooners evocative of *Treasure Island* and *Peter Pan*, and I had seen pictures before, yet one long gaze at the *Sumber Murni* lying there at anchor, with the waves slapping against her hull, almost took my breath away.

We went aboard and I met the captain. To judge from his evasiveness when I asked about the cargo, he was probably smuggling something. Barely twenty, he wore his hair in long, dark curls and walked with a swagger. None of the crew looked over thirty, and two were about twelve. Except for one hulking Ambonese, they seemed slight, almost waiflike. They're adventurers, I thought, just boys who ran away to sea. Born on little islands flung here and there throughout the archipelago, they must have grown up watching the ships come and go, dreaming of what lay beyond the reef or across the strait, until one day they left home to see for themselves.

Like them, I had run away. Six years earlier, I'd left a husband and career in San Francisco to knock around Asia and Oceania. Everywhere I went, local families took me in. I'd stay with them awhile, learning their ways, but inevitably grew restless. I hungered for the next island, the valley just beyond the next mountain range. I wondered what kind of people lived there, what language they spoke, whether they would welcome me with smiles or fall on me with spears. Before long, I'd be off again.

I always wanted the opposite of whatever I had. One night I'd be sleeping on a canopied bed in a maharajah's palace, waited on by turbaned servants; the next, on a cow-dung floor under a thatched roof, the guest of a poor family. If I had safety, I wanted risk; if I found love, I craved freedom; in community, I longed for isolation. Once, alone in the New Guinea jungle, ill with malaria and near death, I protested bitterly against my

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fate, refusing to die at the very outset of the adventure I'd waited for all my life. My unsatisfied hunger willed my body to get well.

Now, standing on the creaking deck of the *Sumber Murni*, I ran my eyes up and down her high rigging and thought of impossible quests, islands with no names, daggers, duels, and the wind in my face. To let her sail off without me was unthinkable.

After he'd shown me his ship, Abbas took me to a restaurant overlooking the harbor. He was a worrier. All through the first two courses of our lunch, he fretted about his business – about the monsoons and tides, the price of timber and rice, things in general. By the third course, he was fretting about my safety. Midway through the fourth course, a fish stew, it dawned on him that I might actually accept his offer of a schooner ride. He leaned forward and crammed his forelock back with both hands. The worry-lines over his brow deepened.

“Don't go,” he urged. “Those are rough men. I won't be with you. I'm just the owner and I have no control over what they do at sea.”

But it was no use. I was ready to sail. The more Abbas tried to dissuade me, the more I insisted on going. Something about the way he spoke of his four ships reminded me of a mother who can't rest easy until all of her brood has come home, and this made me believe I'd be safe. Besides, I was besotted with the *Sumber Murni*. Abbas's sensible warnings struck me as slurs on her fine-crafted perfection, and on her name, which meant “well of purity.”

Even so, I took precautions. When he saw he couldn't change my mind, Abbas took me to register with the harbor police as well as the city police, using his influence to speed the procedures. Lest my backpack, watch, and camera present a temptation to the crew, I sent them overland to Ujung Pandang with an Indonesian friend who was going

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there. And Abbas made a point of mentioning to the captain that my friend would be waiting for me at Ujung Pandang and that the police there had been informed.

It was nearly dark when I told Abbas good-bye and negotiated the narrow gangplank. The captain had no schedule, so I slept on deck to make sure he wouldn't leave me behind. In the night, I was awakened by shouts and saw the dark shapes of men scrambling up the rigging. A fair wind had come up, and it was time to depart. As the crew struggled to raise the huge sails, I tried to make out their faces, to discern whether they really meant to slit my throat. But the shifting lantern-light revealed scarcely more than a shoulder here and a knee there. They sounded intent on their labor, grunting and chanting in unison.

“A free girl. I like that!” It startled me to hear English spoken. Mohtar, the big Ambonese whose voice had dominated the chants, flopped down at my side.

“Where in America do you come from?”

He was bigger than me, a bronzed Goliath, and he was sitting too close.

“San Francisco,” I replied and scooted back a little.

“I was there two years ago. Working on a modern freighter. I saw San Francisco, Yokohama, Amsterdam, Singapore . . .”

“How did you like San Francisco?”

“Hard to say. I went in bars and nobody talked to me. But a free girl! You go around the world and you are fantastic. People see you. They talk to you.”

I felt wary. In my experiences in Southeast Asia, the men who jumped on me as soon as we were alone usually started by calling me “free.” They'd seen enough of my culture to know that American women were freer than their women, but not enough to understand that we had rules, too.

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Just then, a shaft from the lantern lit up Mohtar's narrowly spaced eyes. Though I usually liked Ambonese men for their easy banter, Mohtar's eyes had none of the twinkly good humor I expected. They were too intense.

I asked him why he'd quit the freighter.

For a minute, he was silent. Then he lapsed into a gravelly Indonesian: "Something happened. And I haven't been able to get married after that. But I regret nothing. I take the bad with the good."

I was curious to know what he meant, but didn't ask. Twice in my travels, I'd unintentionally become engaged to a man by saying the wrong thing, so I'd learned to stay off the topic of marriage when I didn't know the culture well.

"Since I left Ambon as a kid," Mohtar continued, "all I've wanted is a life of adventure." Then, with a quick jab to my ribs: "You and I are two of a kind!"

I resolved to keep away from Mohtar, to the extent that you can avoid anyone on a small boat. Conveniently, the captain admonished him to get back to work. Soon I heard the sails flap overhead like wings of a giant raptor, and the harbor slid away behind me.

Not long after sunrise, the shoreline dropped from view. Then the wind died. There wasn't much to do. The captain made a half-hearted show of consulting a nautical chart of the Strait of Makassar and pointed out where we were on it, but he did this mainly for my sake; these men scorned compass and sextant and navigated by the stars. In the longboat lay an old tin that housed our cooking fire; one sailor passed the time by blowing on it through a tube of bamboo. Mohtar and several others tried to catch fish, but I didn't look in their direction, not wanting Mohtar to get ideas. Instead, I sprawled on the hot deck along with the rest of the crew, fanning myself and waiting for a breeze.

Out of the blue, the mate nudged me and asked, “What’s the verb ‘to be’ in Latin?”

“I need a six-letter Japanese word for ‘teacher,’” said another sailor.

Soon five of us were poring over stacks of Indonesian-language crossword-puzzle books someone had brought up from below. I realized that without me, these “pirates” would be hard put to fill in some of the foreign terms. My throat seemed safe. Yet I felt a little disappointed to realize that nowadays pirates don’t swashbuckle anymore.

Still, I kept clear of Mohtar, who never joined in the puzzle solving. I was frequently aware of him looking at me and took care to cast my eyes elsewhere.

If we’d had a wind, or an engine, we could have reached Ujung Pandang by afternoon. But we were still at sea when the first, tentative stars of the evening blinked overhead and a dark cloud reached up towards them. Suddenly, it snuffed them out. The sea turned choppy.

The captain ordered me below, but I sat cross-legged on deck for a long time, not out of defiance, but because I couldn’t take my eyes off the waves. From about eight feet high, they steepened to thirteen feet, then eighteen. Peaks and crevasses appeared. When the wind picked up, it was dazzling to see those ink-black peaks go white and crash like avalanches of snow, throwing cold spray over the deck.

For an instant, they looked like a Himalayan landscape, and I remembered a solitary game I used to play. When I was seven or eight, I would pretend to be an explorer who’d lost her way on Mount Everest. Eventually, too tired to go on, I would fall asleep in the snow, never to wake up. Whatever dream happened to flit through my mind at the moment my body froze would also freeze. If I died dreaming I was a yeti, I

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would turn into a yeti. If I died visualizing a dandelion, I would turn into a dandelion. I was fated to live forever inside my last thought.

All at once, a shrieking wind reminded me where I was, and I gripped my glasses. Our little *Peter Pan* boat was pitching hard. The sky roared and rain crashed down. Everything went black. I couldn't tell whether the water sloshing into my lap was from waves or rain. Then lightning flashed, and suddenly I saw sailors running after crates of cargo floating about the deck, and other men crawling up the rigging, straining against the wind. Though the captain opened his mouth to shout at them, I could no longer hear him, or distinguish the thunder from the roar of breaking waves.

Despite the din, or maybe because of it, from somewhere inside my head came a snatch of music I couldn't identify, the melody of a folk song I'd heard once and forgotten, or of a medieval hymn perhaps, each note distinct and pure. I felt too happy to leave. There I sat, still absurdly cross-legged, immobilized by the power of it all – the foaming seas, the rain and spray, the wind bent on prying my glasses out of my hands, and in the center of the storm, those clear, true notes. I was too lost in the music to care when a wave broke over me from behind and hurled me to the opposite side of the deck. I barely registered standing up, trying to find something to hold onto. The short trek across the lurching deck – to reach the door of the hatch and go below – was like slogging through deep snowdrifts. My hand on the door-handle at last, I paused, exhausted, and another wave swamped me.

Then I was truly lost. I gripped the handle, my legs sailing across the deck, and strong arms pulled me into the hold. I lay down in pitch-blackness on a bamboo mat, though I could no more sleep there than on the back of a racing camel. With every roll of the ship, my feet seesawed over my head and I felt sick to my stomach. Once, I flew clear

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off the mat. All during the night I could hear hurried footsteps of sailors descending and going up again into the howling gale. One of the men fed me a cup of tea, holding the rim to my lips as if I were a child. Afterwards, he washed my face, handed me a fluffy towel, and said, “Go ahead and vomit on this. Really, it’s nothing. I’ll wash it later.”

I passed the whole night as one instant. Just at the moment when the second wave swamped me, my thoughts froze. My last sensation before starting below had been joy at hearing those strange, sweet notes inside of me, a sensation I’ve never experienced before or since, and somehow, as I was being pulled into the hold, one of the notes elongated, trilling and swelling like a concert of cicadas, drawing me into itself.

By morning, the storm had subsided. To my embarrassment, I saw that I had vomited and urinated on my clothing. My face was damp with tears. A familiar voice – it belonged to the man who had given me tea in the dark – asked how I was. Looking up, I saw Mohtar. For the first time, I noticed that his left shirt-sleeve was hanging limp and empty by his side. He had only one arm.

Thinking back to our earlier conversation, I realized he must have been injured while working on the freighter, and this was why he had given up on marriage. I recalled an afternoon several weeks earlier on Ambon Island when I’d overheard two village women gossiping about someone who’d had part of his arm bitten off by a wild boar in the forest; the women seemed to assume losing a limb made a man unmarriageable. Now I was beginning to grasp what Mohtar meant about regretting nothing, about taking the bad with the good.

Later, as I knelt on the deck in clothes I’d borrowed from him, washing his towel and my soiled garments in a bucket of sea-water, a school of dolphins romped by. *I could die now without regret*, I thought. In the storm, I had lost some of my old hunger for

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living life at full tilt, for seeking the opposite of what I had, because the thing I'd wanted most, without knowing it, was simply to hear the music inside of me.

It makes no sense, I know, to say I went inside a note that night, or to say the note held an ocean within it, an ocean bigger than the one battering our ship. But from the moment my thoughts froze, I could neither speak nor move, much less form a rational idea. I felt only the one note, felt it pierce me with a delight that verged on pain, pulling me under, dragging me down to the bottom of a sea where it seemed very cold, yet the heat seared me. My ears rang, though I heard nothing but silence. And I dwelled in that note until morning.

Of course, I was conscious of being on a Bugis ship in the Strait of Makassar; I was conscious of my fear and nausea and the slow passing of the hours, of the sailor who fed me tea, though his voice seemed to come from a great distance. I didn't sleep a bit.

In the morning, I wondered what, if anything, was left to do. I toyed with the idea of going home, maybe having babies or getting a respectable job. Devoting the rest of my life to the poor? But I knew I would do nothing of the sort. I would keep traveling. Before that night on the *Sumber Murni*, I'd half-expected that my travels would eventually transform me into a different, wiser person who'd be ready to settle down. Now I knew I was never going to change that much. I was still me.

Fifteen years later, I'm wandering still.

Travel has a way of confounding your expectations. Board a pirate ship hoping to see swordplay, and you may find wordplay instead; ascend a holy mountain in search of enlightenment, and you may be lucky just to find a place to go to the bathroom; run away from home thinking to purge yourself of your restlessness, and you may spend your whole life on the road.

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For me, travel is like breathing. True, as I've grown older and physically worse for wear, it's gotten harder not to have a permanent home, but travel has also become less a hunger, more a disciplined art. Perhaps what I'd been craving all along was less the opposite of whatever I *had* than the opposite of whatever I *sought* – the confounding of my expectations. Nowadays I try to go with whatever happens, riding the waves and remembering there is music in everything. In everything. Not just in the moments of ecstasy. But in the fear and the nausea and the slow passing of hours. Like Mohtar, I try to take the bad with the good and treat both as the same gift, welcoming each pleasure and each pain of life on the road with the same glad heart I did that night, moving in time with the music of the storm.