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**The Sloop John B**

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## Chapter 1

They kicked in the door and went over to the astonished old man sitting in his easy chair. He was just starting to put down his paper and get up, when they silently shoved him back down.

"Wha ... what is this?" Grandpa stuttered, his hands still down on the arms of the easy chair.

The thin, nervous one closest to him slapped him hard with the back of his hand, and pointed at him. "Just sit right there, old man, and you won't get hurt. Now where's, asswipe?"

Grandpa put his hand to his cheek. "Who? What are you talkin' about? What do you want?"

"We want the little punk what ripped us off," the other, stocky, muscular man said quietly. "Now, where is he?"

The one who slapped Grandpa grabbed him violently by the front of his shirt, ripping the buttons, as his switchblade flipped up under his nose. The stocky man stood next to the chair, his large, muscular build menacing as he flexed his fists back, and forth. He was calm, and even more threatening in this way than the thin, nervous one was. He was also an ugly man, with thick, puffy cheeks, and a livid scar underneath his chin. He was dressed in black. Both of them were dressed, all in black.

"I'll check the upstairs," the stocky man said as he calmly mounted the steps.

Suddenly, from upstairs, there came the sound of a scuffle, then footsteps down the stairs.

"I found him," the stocky man said, holding Grandpa's struggling teenage grandson with his arm behind his back.

"Tim!" Grandpa exclaimed. "These hoodlums want you?"

"Shut up, old man!" The one next to him yelled as he slapped him again.

Grandpa's hands trembled in rage, as he watched the stocky man twist Tim's arm even tighter behind his back, making him squirm in pain.

"Oh, yes ... yes. Okay. Okay. I'll be quiet. Just don't hurt the boy."

"That's better, Gramps. Now, just sit there, and you won't get hurt."

The stocky man held Tim up almost off his feet as the one who'd slapped Grandpa walked slowly over to them, his switchblade down in his hand. He grabbed the struggling teenager by the front of his shirt, bringing the switchblade up to his throat.

"Now," he growled menacingly, "What did ya do with the stuff? It ain't in the car!"

"I ... I dumped it down the sewer!" Tim said, clearly terrified. "I ain't got it!"

"Bullshit! Now I want that stuff, or the money right now!"

"I gotta go to the john," Grandpa said.

"Shut-up!" The one who'd slapped him screamed in his high-pitched voice.

"I'm gonna soil my pants!" Grandpa yelled frantically, squirming back and forth in his chair.

"Let him go," the stocky man said, laughing. "He won't do nothin' ... will you, old man?" He said, grinning broadly, twisting Tim's arm behind his back.

"No. No, I'll be right back, just don't hurt the boy."

"Okay ... No funny stuff, Pops, or you're gonna get what the asswipe here is gonna get if he don't cough up with some stuff right now!"

Grandpa got up from his chair, shuffled meekly down the hallway to the bathroom, and turned on the light. He carefully closed the door behind him and quickly went out the other door to the spare bedroom. This was his war room, where he kept all the souvenirs from when he'd been in Vietnam.

He got the old M1 rifle out of its stock and ran his hand lovingly over it. It wasn't the same type of rifle that he'd had in Saigon and Dai Do fighting the Vietcong, but it would do. Grandpa sighed. It was a long time since he'd been in Vietnam ... thirty-six years ago ... thirty-six centuries ago. But he could remember it all as if it were yesterday, the infiltrators slitting throats within their own lines while they slept, the terrifying mass attacks in the night, the sweet, sickly stench of death, and the slight grunt a man makes when a bayonet finds its mark. His bayonet had flashed red in the moonlight then.

He ran his finger over the breech, and sighed. His wife had made him file down the firing pin decades ago, afraid that their small son would somehow discharge it by accident.

He opened the display case and took out the bayonet, snapping it onto the muzzle of the old rifle with a quiet click. If he couldn't bluff them with the useless rifle, then at least he still had the bayonet. He made a couple of silent bayonet thrusts with it now, the moonlight flashing off the still razor-sharp edge of the bayonet. Yes, he'd been a hero back then in Dai Do, a very big hero. He'd even gotten the Silver Star and the Congressional Medal of Honor from President Nixon. They still hung there in their dusty case and Grandpa ran his fingers over them, trying to remember what it was like to be brave.

Silently, he moved down the darkened hallway past the closed bathroom door, the light still on inside, with his M1 up in front of him. Grandpa's son and daughter-in-law, Tim's parents, were killed back in the early eighties in some drug-related foul play, like what threatened his only grandson now. Back then, when Tim's parents had been killed, Grandpa hadn't been able to help them, but he was determined now that he wouldn't let them kill one of his own again. He could hear them there in the living room as they slapped his grandson back and forth.

Out he came into the light, holding his rifle up in front of him, with its bayonet at the end. Both men were turned

away from him, looking down at the unconscious, bloody Tim at their feet.

"Okay," Grandpa growled. "Get away from him!"

Both men whirled around, astonished, and stared at him for a moment, not moving. Suddenly, they both burst out laughing.

"Old man, put that thing away. That antique hasn't fired for years," the stocky man said, smirking.

"No, No, let him come on," the other one said laughing. "I haven't sliced up an old man for a long time." Grinning, the one who'd slapped him, waved his switchblade back and forth as he advanced toward Grandpa. He suddenly jumped forward past the rifle and slashed at him.

With a swift, deft motion, Grandpa brought the rifle down, stepped back rapidly, and thrust the bayonet forward deep into the man's abdomen. Grandpa shouted, like he'd done so often in Dai Do. The sounds of battle roared in his ears.

The stocky man stood for a moment, shocked, staring down at his fallen comrade. Grandpa advanced slowly toward him, his reddened bayonet out in front. The stocky man backed up, his eyes narrowing and he nodded as if in recognition that this old man wasn't so "old" after all. He flipped up his switchblade and waved it back and forth in front of him. Warily, they circled each other, Grandpa thrusting at him as the stocky man dodged back and forth, slashing at him with his blade.

Suddenly, the stocky man took up a lamp from a table next to him and threw it at Grandpa, hitting him in the face, knocking him down. The M1 with its bayonet clattered off into the corner. The stocky man leapt down on him, brandishing his switchblade in his face.

"Now, old man," he said quietly, "good-bye."

He smiled, and with an evil look on his face, grabbed Grandpa's hair and turned his face to the side, exposing his throat. All Grandpa could think of was that he'd failed his grandson, too.

The stocky man gave a sudden jolt, and he fell over on his side, arching his back. He reached back frantically, as if he had a sudden, severe itch that he couldn't quite reach. Tim stood over him, and sneering, put his foot in the middle of his back, and pulled the old M1's bayonet out of him.

Tim stood for a long time, looking down at him, an astonished look on his face. "Bastard!" He said.

Grandpa smiled. He hadn't failed his grandson after all.

Tim reached down, and helped his grandfather to his feet, and threw down the old M1.

"Are you all right Gramps?" he said. "Are you hurt?"

Grandpa took a deep sigh, and ran his fingers through his hair. "No. I'm all right. How are you?" He reached up to Tim's bruised face, and turned his chin sideways, looking at him intently.

Tim reached up to his bleeding mouth, and nodded out of breath. "I'm okay."

Grandpa looked all around at the dead bodies suddenly in his living room.

"So..." he looked up at Tim. "You wanta tell me just what happened here?"



## Chapter 10

Maresol awoke again in the early morning light with a terrified cry. It was the same nightmare that she'd had for the last three nights. Reliving the drowning of her family again and again on that small disintegrating raft, she held her face in her hands as she sobbed. The nearness of the bow wave on the other side of the hull of the *John B*, with its subsequent watery sound all night long, only served to rekindle the dream night after night.

"She's crying again, Grandpa," Tim said quietly as they sat out in the cockpit.

"Poor girl," Grandpa said as he sipped his morning coffee. "She probably lost her family in Albrie that night before we picked her up."

Tim shook his head sadly. "Wish we could help somehow."

"Yeah, it's been a real disadvantage for us not to be able to talk to her."

"You think she's gonna stop being scared of us soon?"

"I hope so. It must be awful to lose your family like that, and then find yourself all alone with strangers. I'll betcha that Castro doesn't paint a real complimentary picture of all us Yankees either. She's probably afraid that we're gonna try to do something to her."

"Like what?"

"Ah, who knows." Grandpa craned his neck around and looked up at the wind indicator and the sails billowing out. "Probably been told that we'd try and take advantage of her."

Tim sighed and looked at the open cabin, where Maresol still sobbed quietly.

Grandpa smirked. "Pretty girl, isn't she?"

"Oh, Gramps." Tim rolled his eyes.

Suddenly, Grandpa looked over to the starboard side bow of the *John B* and quickly picked up the binoculars, focusing them. "There's a ship out there, Tim," he said. "Let's come about and tack back toward the northeast."

Rapidly, Grandpa and Tim turned the *John B* to the left. Grandpa turned the wheel, while in a practiced teamwork of seamanship, Tim worked the jib. The trick was to untie the jib from the starboard cleat and then pull the sail taut on the left, without losing too much headway speed to complete the turn. Tim watched the sails carefully, and then at the right moment, he coordinated it all with his grandfather's turn so that the *John B* turned smoothly to the port side, away from the oncoming ship.

Down below, Maresol peered out of the porthole near her bunk, as the *John B* began to turn, and saw the ship on the horizon. Obviously the two Americanos were avoiding the ship, and just as obviously seemed worried about whether it had seen

them. She looked up at the two Americanos as they looked anxiously out at the ship with the binoculars and pointed. She reached down, and felt the handle of the knife alongside the bunk. Although the Americanos had not yet made a move to molest or take advantage of her, she was still wary. There was something about these two that kept her suspicions alive. Although they had indeed been very kind and surprisingly generous to her, why had they avoided the ship? Who were they really? What were they running from?

All of these unanswerable questions continued to swirl around inside of her head, and for the first time in her life, she wished that she could speak the imperialists' language. At least then, she'd be able to listen to them as they plotted, and could figure out what they were up to. She sighed and looked out the porthole again. Maybe then she would be able to find out where on God's green earth they were taking her.

"Where are we now, Gramps?" Tim asked, sitting back down in the cockpit next to his grandfather, who still looked through the binoculars at the departing ship.

"Well." Grandpa said, sighing as brought down the binoculars and sat back down at the wheel, "let me check and see." He consulted his handheld GPS, and checked the chart that he kept rolled up next to the wheelhouse. "Oh, we're right about..." He examined the chart closely. "Here." He

pointed to a spot on the chart. "About halfway between Florida and Nassau."

"How much longer until we get there?"

"Another couple of days, depending upon the wind, of course."

Tim nodded. "Boy we have been lucky with the wind so far, haven't we?"

"Yeah, we have, very lucky. We haven't been becalmed at all the whole trip. Might happen, you know. We gotta try to keep close enough to land so that if we do run into a long windless patch, we can crank up the diesel and slip in someplace, to get some food and water before we run out."

"You think we might?"

"Never know." Grandpa looked up at the mainsail and squinted. "Speaking of the wind, why don't you pull on that mainsheet, Tim? That sail's sagging."

Tim suddenly felt a wave of anger. His grandfather was always ordering him around. He looked up at the sail. "Oh, it's all right." He shrugged.

"We can get a knot or two more out of her if it's tight."

Tim scowled. "That's all you want, is to be boss is all," he grumbled.

"No," Grandpa said patiently. "I just want the sail trimmed."

"Do it yourself, then!"

"No," Grandpa said carefully. "I'm at the helm right now. When you're not at the helm, then it's your job to keep the boat in trim."

Angrily, Tim threw down the cushion he'd been sitting on and stomped off to trim the sail.

Grandpa shook his head. He was actually glad to see Tim acting a little bit more normally again. Not that he was ordinarily a sullen teenager, but these small acts of rebellious temperament had been an occasional part of Tim's teenage personality. Grandpa welcomed it back with mixed feelings. It meant that Tim was recovering from his near brush with death with Regina, and the drug dealers, but it also meant that the quiet, compliant days were over.

"Thank you," Grandpa said as Tim sullenly went by him back into the cabin. "And talk to me in a little bit politer tone of voice, please. It's okay to be angry. Everybody gets angry, but you need to talk to me in a courteous and polite way, okay?"

"You don't to me!"

"Yes I do, and you know that, and a little less angry tone to your voice, please."

"You just don't understand," Tim muttered from somewhere in the depths of the *John B's* cabin.

Grandpa sighed. "Actually," he murmured quietly to himself, "I do."

Suddenly, Grandpa remembered himself as a young man, also about age sixteen, coming home late one afternoon after

school. His father was sitting at the kitchen table, drunk as usual, and drinking more beer, cursing at his mother while she cooked supper.

"Goddamned stupid whore," he was saying boozily. "Can't you get nothin' fucking right?"

"I was just thinking that..." She stood at the stove, stirring something on the burner.

"Well, you let me do the fucking thinking around here! You're such a goddamned stupid bitch that you don't know your fucking ass from a goddamned hole in the ... well," his father said sarcastic-ally, noticing him standing there in the doorway. "The no-good hippie's back in town! How was school today, asshole? Or did you think it was beneath your fuckin' majesty's dignity to even go?"

"I went to school today," he said quietly, in a respectful tone of voice. Long, bitter experiences in the past had taught him to always talk in a subservient tone of voice when his father was like this. "I always go to school."

"You watch your fucking mouth!" his father shouted at him, pointing his finger. "Or I'll come over there and put my fist right through it! You hear me?" he slurred, shaking his fist.

"Hi, Honey," his mother said as she smiled wearily, brushing her hair out of her eyes.

"You shut the fuck up, too!"

"Can't I even say hi to my own son?"

His father stood up, knocking over the chair, and backhanded his mother.

"Shut the fuck up, ya slut!"

She fell backward against the refrigerator and put her hand up against her bleeding mouth, her eyes full of fear. Suddenly enraged, he'd gone to his mother and helped her up.

"You leave her alone, you fuckin' useless little shit!" his father shouted, pointing at him.

Enraged, Grandpa had turned around toward his father, and doubled his young fists. "You leave her alone!" He shouted, his voice shrilling. "You hurt her! You always hurt her! You're the only useless one around here! All you ever do is sit around on your ass, and drink all the money away, pissing it down the toilet!"

Speechless for a moment, his mouth open, Grandpa's father swayed boozily, just staring at him. "You little shit," he said quietly, taking off his belt. "I always knew you were a useless, fuckin' hippie."

Reaching back with the belt, his father struck him with it across the face, and continued to beat him with the belt over and over, his face contorting with rage and hatred.

"You little bastard! You little shit-for-brains fuckin' hippie! You little cocksucker! Lazy! Good fer nothin' little bastard! You'll never amount to a pile of shit! You're a goddamned, fuckin--"

"No! Stop it!" Grandpa's mother had screamed.

"Shut up!" His father said, pushing her back against the refrigerator. Snarling, he raised the belt again, and was about to hit her with it, too.

Suddenly, Grandpa grabbed the end of his father's belt. "Don't you hit her anymore!" he shouted, and surprised himself as much as his father, as he punched him hard in the face with all of his young, enraged strength.

"Jesus Christ!" his father gasped, as he was knocked backward, scattering the kitchen chairs and the table. Grandpa's father hit his head on the table when he went down, and didn't move, sprawled out on the floor.

"Leonard!" Grandpa's mother screamed, and rushed over to her husband, cradling his head in her lap.

"Is he dead?" Grandpa asked.

"No," she said, caressing his father's face. "He's just passed out."

"I wish he was dead. I wish I'd killed him."

"Don't say that, honey. Don't ever say that. He is your father."

"I still wish he was dead."

His father stirred, moaning.

"You better leave for a while. You don't want to be around here when he comes to."

That was the very day that Grandpa had joined the marines, lying to the recruiter about his age. After talking to his mother on the phone, he stayed at his uncle's house,



leaving for boot camp at Fort Benning later in the week and then eventually to Vietnam six months later.

Grandpa sighed as he remembered the whole incident with regret. He never saw his parents again. Both of his parents died in an auto accident a year later. Drunk as usual, his father had run head on into another car as they were coming home from a party. He remembered reading the letter from his uncle as he sat in a foxhole near Dai Do. His eyes filling with tears, he let the letter fall down into the mud of the foxhole, and he wept unashamedly as all around him the sounds of battle raged.

Suddenly, another soldier from his platoon splashed into the foxhole next to him, and fired a pattern of bursts out into the darkened jungle.

"They're all around!" he said, his voice panicky. "The place is crawlin' with Charlie!"

Grandpa didn't care. He continued to weep unashamedly. Nearby a mortar fell, knocking earth into the foxhole and shaking the ground with its deafening blast.

"Shit!" the other soldier said, shooting another couple of bursts over the foxhole. "Shit! There's VC all over! C'mon! Let's get the hell out of here!"

The other soldier grabbed his arm and started to pull him up out of the foxhole, but as soon as he stood up, a burst of machine gun fire, nearly tore him in two, and he crumpled back down into the mud of the foxhole. Another mortar blast landed nearby, partially covering his body with earth. Grandpa sat

there staring at him for a long moment, hearing the voices of the Vietcong officers giving orders to their men.

Suddenly, he jumped up out of the foxhole screaming. Enraged, he sprayed the jungle around him with bullets from his M16 until the magazine was empty. Bullets buzzed, whined, and popped all around him, crackling through the air. A Vietcong soldier suddenly charged him with his bayonet, and Grandpa hit the bayonet up away from him with the butt of his empty M16 kicking the Vietcong soldier in the chest. Wrestling the rifle away from him, he plunged it deeply in the man's abdomen, and the Vietcong soldier screamed in agony.

Grandpa looked up and they were all around him, shooting and charging him with their bayonets, screaming and yelling, with the night lighting up all around him with mortar blasts and bursts of light from muzzle fire. Grandpa screamed too as he parried off the Vietcong bayonets and fought with the enemy all by himself in frenzied hand-to-hand combat. Bullets and bayonets cut into his arms, and legs, but none of them were debilitating or fatal. Blood was pouring into his eyes and it was difficult to see, but he didn't care. He didn't care if he lived or died.

Finally, after what seemed to be an eternity, he stood alone, with dead Vietcong soldiers all around him in the darkened jungle. He was shaking all over and covered with blood, both from the Vietcong soldiers and his own. Slowly at first but then growing in a crescendo was a new sound, mixed in with the sounds of battle, now further away. At first, he

ignored it as he stood there, shaking and weeping, not sure which was blinding him more, tears or his own blood, but soon the cheering from the other marines echoed loudly in the jungle.

The captain walked up to him and put his hand on his shoulder. "Son," he said his voice full of awe. "That was the goddamndest thing I ever saw in my life! In fact, that was the goddamndest thing I ever heard of!"

The captain put his arm around him and gently guided him back to company headquarters as he continued to weep helplessly. "C'mon, son, we gotta get you to a medic," he said, as all around him the other marines continued to cheer and to pound him on the back, and shoulders.

After a while, as Grandpa sat in the MASH unit recovering from his numerous but superficial wounds, he suddenly realized what had happened, and what he had done. He leaned over the side of the bed and threw up into a metal bedpan. Alarmed, the charge nurse called the physician, thinking that he was going into a delayed shock from his wounds, but Grandpa was fine. He was fine when he was discharged from the hospital two days later, and he was fine when the general pinned the Silver Star to his chest. He was even fine when President Nixon put the Congressional Medal of Honor over his head. He was fine ... just fine. Just a young man who had never gotten a chance to say good-bye to his mother or to hear his father say to him once that he was a good boy and that he loved him and that he was proud of what he'd done.

Sadly, he fingered the Congressional Medal of Honor there on his chest while the president decorated the man next to him. He sighed. He would have gladly traded it all for just one good word from his father. Grandpa sighed as he sat there at the wheel of the *John B.* It was rough being sixteen. Almost as rough as it was being fifty-five, he laughed to himself.

All of these thoughts, feelings, and images occurred in quick flashes. Grandpa had pondered those events adequately in the past, so there was no need to do so now. They were just long ago memories of an almost but not quite forgotten rebellious youth.

Tim stomped down the cabin steps and began chopping carrots angrily.

"Trim that sail!" he muttered angrily to himself. "Tote that barge! Thinks he's a big man! I know how to do stuff! I'm not stupid!"

"Tim?" his grandfather called from the cockpit, his voice a little too cheerful.

"Yes?" Tim said testily.

"You're gonna make rice tonight, right?"

"Yeah," Tim mumbled, still chopping the carrots. "What of it?" He said under his breath.

"You want me to make it?"

"I can do it, Grandpa."

"You sure? It's kind of tricky if you never done it before. You gotta stir --"

"I can do it, Grandpa."

"Okay." Grandpa said.

Maresol peeked out between the curtains in front of her bunk and watched as the young Americano was furiously chopping carrots. She reached back and touched the knife. Something was happening. The two Americanos were arguing about something. Probably about her.

She continued to watch through the curtains as the young Americano cooked supper. So far, they had not tried to poison or drug her, but instead of easing her suspicions, it only served to confuse her and make her more wary of other more subtle plots. Suddenly, a thought occurred to her. Maybe these two weren't CIA agents after all, but just a couple of rich Americano tourists sailing in their luxurious yacht, idling away their time while the poor workers they oppressed starved. Her eyes narrowed. That made them even worse than the CIA, since their greed and oppression supported the activities of the CIA and the capitalist taskmasters. She blinked. But they didn't seem to be greedy. They'd actually been kind, and generous with her since she'd been on the boat, and Maresol found herself very confused and perplexed. What were these two up to?

Maresol suddenly noticed that the young Americano was putting way too much rice in a pan on the stove. He filled the pan almost to the top, and then poured in just enough water to cover it. What was he doing? Maresol moved back from the curtains. It was going to explode all over. They were going to sink from all the rice!

Soon, the suspense was killing her, and she timidly peeked out again through the side of the curtain to see the rice on the stove begin to boil over, and Tim frantically ladling it into another pan.

"Eek!" she squeaked involuntarily, and retreated back again on the bunk.

Curiosity eventually got the best of her, and she peeked out once more to see Tim still ladling a boiling rice volcano into other pots and pans that continued to send geysers of rice up into the air. The young Americano even had rice in his hair. She laughed to herself.

Suddenly, the old Americano started to come down into the cabin, and Maresol noticed that he stopped dead in his tracks upon seeing Tim struggling with the rice. The old man retreated quickly, shaking his head and smiling. Why did he do that? A senior CIA agent would not have tolerated such incompetence in a junior partner, and neither would a rich, oppressive capitalist. She sat back on the bunk amazed and perplexed, and she hid underneath the pillow to ponder these questions further. Supper was going to be late anyhow.

Supper that evening was good, but strained. Still wary of being drugged or poisoned, Maresol cautiously waited until the two Americanos began eating their food first, and then she ate heartily. She was amazed at how well and quickly the young Americano had hidden the rice that up until only a few minutes before was covering all of the bulkheads, galley, and carpeting. The old Americano seemed amused, but didn't appear to mention the overflowing rice that Maresol knew he was well aware of. The young Americano, on the other hand, ate quietly, looking down at his plate.

She stood up from the table after having eaten her fill. She still didn't always finish her plate, however, just in case the Americanos had put something in it, and she stood by the table, hanging her head. She still didn't know exactly what these two were up to, but she nevertheless thought that it would be the height of rudeness and ingratitude not to at least thank them for being kind to her, even if it was part of a plot of some sort. Almost as much a surprise to her as to Tim and Grandpa, she thanked them.

"Senor CIA agents, or rich, lazy capitalists, or whatever you are," she said in Spanish, still hanging her head, looking down at the floor. "thank you for saving my life, and for being so kind and generous to me. I am, however, a loyal Cuban citizen, and will do nothing at all willingly to embarrass my country or its unselfish and glorious leader, Fidel Castro. I go now."

Maresol turned, and then as she passed by the door to the bathroom, she paused, and as an afterthought, opened the door. Tim started to come up out of his seat in a panic with his mouth open, but it was too late. There in the sink sat three encrusted pans embedded in a still smoldering mountain of excess rice lava. Maresol put her hand to her mouth, but it was too late. Her shoulders shook, and she suddenly burst out laughing and looked back at the two Americanos who still sat at the table. The old man was also laughing, as if he already knew what it was that she was looking at, while the young Americano blushed and looked down at his plate. For a moment, just briefly before she went inside, her eyes met Grandpa's eyes, and they shared the joke. Those eyes bothered her suddenly. They were so full of life, gentleness, and warmth, devoid of any pretense or guile. How could anybody with innocent eyes like that do anything wrong?

Maresol lay down again on her bunk and drew the curtains. Her grandmother's warning to her that "the Devil is very handsome" came back into her head, as well as all the lessons in school about the great, evil, "imperialist" giant to the north. Why had she left Cuba? She crossed herself. It was evidently the will of God that she suffer, for some unknown sin that she had committed.

"Holy Mother of God," she prayed, "forgive me."

Then, she remembered the dark, stormy sea, and the raft pitching up and down in the cruel waves as one by one her family all slipped off and into the water. First, her sister



Gloria was washed overboard with a terrified scream. Her Uncle Juan dove in to try and save her, but he never returned to the raft either. Then her mother, who was still tearfully holding Gloria's baby, was swept overboard by another wave.

"Maria!" her father called out, and then also went in after her like Uncle Juan had, but he too disappeared beneath the dark waves and never returned.

Maresol still clung to the heaving raft in the cruel, angry sea, weeping bitterly. Surely she was being punished for not trying to save her family, too, she thought miserably as she held her face in her hands.

"I am a coward," she whispered. "I was meant to drown, too."

"She's crying again, Grandpa," Tim said quietly as he sat in the cockpit near the door.

"Aw, poor girl." Grandpa shook his head. "Why don't you bring her up on deck? It's time we introduced our young guest to the sunshine. It'd be good for her to come out for a while."

"Sure."

"Carefully though, huh? I mean, don't frighten the poor thing. You know, knock first."

Tim rolled his eyes. Sometimes Grandpa could be so stupid. Of course, everybody knows that you're supposed to knock before entering a room. "I will," he said impatiently, and then went down into the cabin.

"I hope so," Grandpa said to himself, still wondering where the missing kitchen knife might actually be.

Tim hesitated before the curtain to Maresol's bunk as she continued to weep forlornly. His heart was racing as he knocked on the bulkhead beside the curtain, and cleared his throat. "Maresol," he said quietly. "Why don't you come out on deck with us? It's a beautiful day out there."

Maresol ceased sobbing and straightened, suddenly terrified. Were they coming for her finally? Now? She touched the handle of the knife there beside her, between the bunk and the hull of the *John B.* The young Americano knocked again, and called to her gently. Maresol stayed still, waiting. Soon, however, the young Americano inexplicably sighed, like he was disappointed, and then turned around, and went back away from the curtain. There was something in his voice that called to Maresol, however, something beyond the words ... something pleasant and something innocent like the old man. It was something different that she couldn't explain. She suddenly opened the curtain.

"Que'?" she said. "What is it?"

Tim turned around, and his face brightened. He beckoned to her. "It ... it's a nice day out today," Tim stammered. "We were hoping that you might like to come up, and enjoy some of the sunshine, instead of staying down here in the dark."

It's really a beautiful day out there." He swung his arm up to the cabin door, toward the cockpit where Grandpa sat.

Maresol shook her head, and immediately the young Americano's handsome face fell and his shoulders slumped. He was really disappointed that she didn't want to come up with them into the sunshine, Maresol thought.

She reconsidered, and looked out of the porthole near her bunk. It had been a long time since she'd even wanted to go out into the elements again, but suddenly she felt stifled down there in the cabin. The young Americano turned around and climbed up the stairs, disappearing through the cabin door. Carefully, Maresol stepped out into the cabin and gingerly, for the first time, climbed up the steps behind him into the sunshine, blinking her eyes against it.

"She won't come out, Gramps," Tim was saying. "She --" He stopped in midsentence when he saw her coming up out of the cabin into the cockpit.

"Well..." Grandpa beamed at her. "She snuck out behind you, Tim."

Tim smiled at her, and beckoned for her to sit down, patting one of the cushions beside him. "She's as quiet as a cat. I didn't even hear her."

Maresol blinked several more times, and shaded her eyes against the sudden brightness. She carefully stepped out into the cockpit and her eyes darted back and forth between the old man, and the young Americano. She sighed and breathed in deeply. It did feel good to be out again. She looked all

around. Nothing at all could be seen but an endless blue sunny sky, and an endless blue, rolling ocean. Where were they? The young Americano patted the cushion beside him again. Maresol warily took the cushion and moved it as far away from him and as close to the cabin door as she could, then sat down.

"There we are," Grandpa said triumphantly. "See, we don't bite."

"Oh, Grandpa." Tim rolled his eyes.

"Why don't you turn on the radio for our young guest? Get her feeling maybe a little more comfortable."

"Can't. We're out of range. All we get is static."

"Oh. Too bad."

"Why don't you play us something, Grandpa. On your guitar?"

Grandpa shrugged. "If you want. Here, you take the wheel, and I'll go down and get it."

Maresol watched the two Americanos carefully as they switched places and the old one went down into the cabin again. She began to relax, and to look around at the boat from the outside. She shook her head. It was a very nice boat. A very rich one. It must have cost thousands and thousands of American money. U.S. currency, Maresol knew well, was highly prized in Cuba by not only Castro himself for the boost to the failing economy that its influx provided, but also by the black market that would accept nothing else. She sniffed in disgust. How much food could that money buy to

give to the starving, oppressed poor working class in America? How many ragged people would it clothe?

Suddenly the old Americano came back out of the cabin, carrying a guitar case. He set it down on the seat opposite her and opened it up, taking out a gleaming black and yellow acoustic guitar. Maresol's eyes opened wide. It too was very expensive-looking. None of the old, and cracked guitars that Maresol had ever seen in Cuba, even those of professional musicians, looked nearly as nice as this one. Suddenly, she was offended. Even the great Cuban classical guitarist Juan Rodregos didn't have as nice a guitar as this one. And what do greedy, rich, oppressive imperialists know of real music and culture, being so overly concerned with nothing but money and how to get more? She sniffed, as Grandpa fumbled on the guitar, trying to tune it.

Suddenly, much to her surprise and shock, the old man began to play a very complicated and very beautiful classical piece on his guitar. Maresol's mouth fell open. The old Americano was good. Not only that, but he seemed to play with an ease, a fluid, practiced grace that actually raised goosebumps on her arm. She even recognized it as a piece she had attempted to play herself on her neighbor's piano in Cuba. She knew firsthand that it was not an easy piece of music. Maresol's mouth remained open as she watched his nimble fingers fly over the frets and strings as if the very intricate music he was playing were nothing at all. Suddenly, he was done. Maresol impulsively stood up and applauded.

"Muy bien, Senor CIA!" she said. "Very, very good!"  
Grandpa smiled.

"I think she likes it, Gramps," Tim said. "What was that?"

"Gavotte en Rondeau, by Bach."

"Bach! Johann Sebastian Bach!" Maresol said enthusiastically, sitting down. "Yes, I know that one!"

"Ah..." Grandpa smiled. "Another classical music aficionado."

Tim rolled his eyes.

"Well, okay, for an appreciative audience, another one."

Again, Grandpa played a song, and once more Maresol was enthralled with his expertise and interpretation of the music.

"Aye." Maresol smiled with pleasure after the song was finished. "That was very, very nice, Senor rich capitalist! Where did you learn how to play like that, and have enough time to get all the money for this boat?"

"I wish I knew what she just said, Grandpa. It's too bad she doesn't speak English."

"Yeah. Too bad. But, like they say, music is the international language."

"Do you know one in Spanish?"

"What, you mean me sing?" Grandpa laughed. "Now that would make her jump overboard and swim back to Cuba!"

"No. I mean a song from Cuba. Did you ever play any songs from Cuba when you were playing with the Florida Symphony?"

"Oh, a Cuban composer? Yeah. Sure. Here's one."

Suddenly, much to Maresol's surprise, and delight, the old Americano began to play a guitar solo written by Rodregos. He knew of Rodregos! Maresol sat listening, entranced. She had heard Rodregos play once and suddenly realized that although this old man wasn't nearly as good as him, he was better than anybody else Maresol had ever heard. She applauded again, this time with tears in her eyes.

That evening, as Maresol lay in her bunk, she tossed and turned. She couldn't sleep. Something was wrong, and she couldn't figure out what it was. These two Americanos did not at all fit the mold of the stereotyped greedy, rich American. Indeed, they had been very generous and nice to her. They also knew and appreciated culture and music, and when she was crying earlier, the young Americano actually seemed worried about her, and concerned for her well-being. What was his name again? Tim. That was it. His name was Tim, and the old Americano was called "Grandpa." It didn't sound like a name, more like a title. Perhaps it was something like "Colonel" or "Major," like the old Soviet KGB. Maresol shook her head. No. These two were not spies. She was sure of that now.

Maresol was not sure what bothered her the most, whether it was that Grandpa, and Tim didn't fit the typical picture of Americans she'd been taught in school, or the old man's eyes. They were so warm and innocent-looking. Then there was the problem with Tim as well. Yes, the devil is very handsome, but he was not a devil. Just watching him, Maresol could tell

that he was a good, kind, decent young man, just like the old one.

Maresol turned over. She could hear the music again in her mind, and she smiled as she remembered it. The way the old Americano played, it was a thing of true beauty. It had touched her soul. Music doesn't lie, she thought.

But then there was suddenly something that bothered her the most of all. She turned over in her bunk and tried not to think of it, but it was still there, forcing its way into her consciousness. It was a misty, indistinct memory that was almost more of a feeling than a real thought, since it occurred when she was still on the raft, semiconscious. Those strong, masculine hands bothered her now as she thought of them lifting her up with ease from the raft onto the *John B.* She buried her face in the pillow as she remembered another saying her grandmother had.

"You can tell a lot about a man in how he touches you. There is nothing so gentle as true strength, and yet nothing so strong as true gentleness."

Those hands kept bothering her. They were so gentle.



This is an exciting sea adventure inspired by the song.

**The Sloop John B**

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