

The true story of a family that voyages on a sinister freighter from Yugoslavia to Japan in 1963. Part travelogue, part inner journey, and part thrilling adventure, this is a seven-month journey that most people only dream of doing.

Around the World by Mistake

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Around the World by Mistake



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11. THE RED SEA

Hostages



The Red Sea is in fact a dark oilpaint blue. We sailed out of the Suez Canal into its warm embrace. Vessels from the orient anchored near the entrance, waiting for the southbound convoys to sail through.

“I wonder why so many ships are passing ours,” I said.

Even the oldest, blackest freighters in our own convoy sped past ours as soon as we were through the canal. We watched them from the shade of the passengers’ deck after breakfast.

“They must be faster,” Alex hazarded a guess.

“Hardly those decrepit vessels. They can’t be.”

But the Jessenice went slower and slower until even the motors muffled their relentless thumping. Only the softest purr was heard. The boat barely moved forward through the sweltering heat.

“When do we get to Aden?” I asked Stefan, who came to lean over the railing with us.

“We do not anchor until tomorrow afternoon.” He seemed even paler than usual.

“Why are we going so slowly? At normal speed we would have been half way there by now.” Alex mopped his forehead with the sleeve of his thin cotton shirt.

“The ocean gets very hot here,” Stefan explained. “It be very narrow water. Too much heat collapse vacuum in motors, and cause breakdown. They explode.” Heat shimmered around, hovering almost palpably on deck. “But not to worry. There is nothing to see in Aden. Not even one bug.”

“How come?” I asked. A bug-less world was an admirable stretch of the imagination.

“Because there is not one drop of water for them.” He shook his loose white sleeves in emphasis. “It is all in bottles.”

“What a thought,” Alex said. “When are they going to turn on the air-conditioning?”

“Captain makes sure the motors not get too hot,” Stefan repeated.

“Tell him the air-conditioning will cool things down a bit.”

“I will tell him what you say, Mister. He be good captain.”

Wraithlike, he turned, receding through shimmering waves of heat.

I let my arms droop over the side of the deck rail. I wanted to touch the thick purple water far below to see how hot it was. In the sweltering mirage my arms felt long enough to reach it.

“Oceans never get so hot they feel so to the hand,” Alex said, reading my mind.

“Do they make engines explode?”

We hung there, ignorant, wondering.

“Since you said you weren’t going to do lessons,” Alex said, “I promised the kids I’d let them teach me that game of ‘Sorry’.”

“I should have guessed it would be the only game aboard.”

He gave me a kiss. “The kids are waiting. We’ll meet you for lunch.”

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He went off looking for them. I had told Jeff and Wyd it was too hot for regular lessons but in fact the slow progress of the ship made me too restless to concentrate. Heading for the stairs, I paused as I saw Bjorn posing half way up the ladder to the officers' deck. He was wearing tiny pink shorts and nothing else. Black hair curled down his muscular chest and over the pink waistband. Languidly lifting one hand behind his head, elbow up, he turned smoothly, climbed the last three stairs, and danced into the corridor. Feeling a bit like Bjorn, I climbed just enough so I could see him.

He had his ear pressed against a panel of the captain's closed door.

Grace, descending in slow motion from the upper deck, smiled knowingly as she saw me move back to the rail at her approach. The sun pounded her new white dress and sandals to blinding brilliance against the clean, white freighter walls, making me squint. In her sturdy magnificence she looked like the carved prow of some ancient sailing vessel, joggled free. Or a theater prop lowered onto center stage.

I felt decidedly limp and sooty in my faded blue cotton shirt and cut-off shorts. But blue was the color I loved most, and faded like this it seemed even softer and more beautiful.

"I hope we reach Aden during the day," Grace murmured. "Shops close there at five, as they do in England."

"Have you been to Aden before?" I asked politely.

"Oh, good heavens, yes!" A slight laugh. "We've been all over the world on freighters like this." She paused looking into a personal globe of her own. "My husband is *persona non grata* in his country. He can't go home. So, well, there's absolutely nothing open in Aden until nine in the morning. British hours. We'll be gone by then. But it's very important I get off. I've arranged for special medicine for my husband to be mailed to each port."

"Medicine?"

"Yes, for my husband's tumor," Grace said with a hint of impatience, while gazing languidly into spaces unseen by me. "He was very, very sick two years ago. He was given two months to live when we met. So sad. Such a young man with so much to live for. I

was his nurse. He says he got the will to live when we met. We were married immediately.”

“How romantic!” I said, overenthusiastically.

“Yes, isn’t it?” She replied in her usual monotone. “The medicine prevents the tumor from growing. My husband would be dead if the doctors had not discovered it.”

Bjorn came up, looking excited. “Do you know no one disembarks at Aden? Captain gives orders. Stefan is responsible for making sure none of us escape. Captain says he will be shot if we escape. A most unhappy fate for our poor steward.”

Grace did not seem to hear. Still in slow motion, she left. I turned back to the sea, hoping Bjorn would go too. Images of Africa, just over the horizon, invaded my consciousness, undulating in and out with the indecisiveness of the schools of spineless jellyfish gathering about our ship’s hull.

Bjorn went on talking. He must have come to terms with death a long time ago, I thought. He has a time bomb in his brain, the fuse lit and about to explode. Does he think about it? Is that why everything is a game to him?

“You know what my friend the third mate tells me?” Bjorn moved closer. The thick smell of suntan oil and perspiration oozed from his smoothly tanned skin. I leaned over the sun-warmed rail. He was a spiritual octopus with tentacles of fear, and the air around him became dark with unease.

“Arabella kill her husband because he sleeps with another man. Did you know he was her psychiatrist? He gave her pills to make her more svelte. They drove her crazy. They are no longer allowed on the marketplace. They must be very bad to make her kill him. They had been married fifteen years.” He sighed. “Can you imagine, Jane, fifteen years with Arabella?”

“No.”

“Captain tells my friend third mate not to have intercourse with me. My friend refuses, of course. He has powerful friends in his country. Captain scream at him. Really, Jane, our captain is a very offensive man. Yesterday he stood outside my cabin with the second

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mate for half an hour. They listened at my door! I know, because I watched all the time from the end of the corridor.”

I propped my chin on my arms. The sea was calm. Did Grace marry him because he was going to die? When the drugs wear off because he cannot get them, does he think about it? Does the game get put away like a game of ‘Sorry,’ sometimes?

* * *

Late afternoon the next day, our little family was again on the topmost deck to watch our arrival at Aden Harbor. Harold and Bertha joined us.

“The steward says there’s no reason for us to get off,” said Harold, “but I’m a bit curious just the same.”

“If nothing else,” added Bertha, “I’m ready for a break. It’d be nice to see flowers.”

“It’d be nice to talk to some British blokes,” Harold said.

“Don’t you think people must ‘ave gardens in Aden?” said Bertha. “Someone’s got to have a garden. It’s British, you know.”

“Or maybe even a park?” Harold said.

“I don’t know,” I said, “but I’m longing to see a place with no bugs.”

“Our son Alfie doesn’t like bugs either. Remember how ‘e ‘ates earwigs, ‘Arry?”

“Why are we stopping here, if no one’s allowed off?” Jeff asked.

“We’ll stop to bunker,” Alex explained.

“What’s that?” Wyd asked.

“Refueling. This is the refueling stop for ships going to or from the Orient. They pipe diesel fuel out from shore to the bunkers where the ships tie up.”

Bit by bit, we began to make out the bunkering island with its white buildings, causeways, and docks.

An enormous ship was docked fairly close to shore.

“I thought the place was supposed to be big,” I said.

Alex shaded his eyes, puzzled.

“It’s not really that small.”

“But that one ship takes up almost everything.”

“It must be an optical illusion.”

But as the *Jessenice* nosed nearer, the ship grew larger – larger, until it seemed monstrous in proportion to our own.

“It’s American, isn’t it?” Jeff said. “I can see the flag.”

“It certainly is American,” Harold sniffed. “Ridiculous!”

The majestic freighter we were on had shrunk to proportions so small that we fitted right under the jutting flight deck of the great monster ark.

We read the huge letters on its stern: *U.S.S. Essex* – one of our titanic aircraft carriers. All the carrier’s portholes were locked against the heat, far too high up to see into in any event. They were tiny from so far away. The underside of the deck was pinned together by giant bolts as big as cars. Jeff liked that.

In spite of the intense heat, I shivered.

“It’s your *Essex*, isn’t it?” Harold said. “Why are we bunkering so close?”

“Maybe to pretend we have nothing to fear but fear itself,” Alex said.

Tension aboard ship heightened as the freighter settled almost to a stop. The officers were visibly unnerved. They walked white-faced and quickly, heads averted. The hot evening sky flared ominously red around the edges of the flight deck overhead.

Bjorn bounced over to join us, trailing a nervous Arabella.

“Not even crew is allowed off,” he told us cheerfully. “Captain’s orders.”

“Stuff the orders,” Alex growled.

Arabella pursed her scarlet lips. “Honey, the captain’s word is law on a ship. Even you should know that.”

In spite of the captain’s order, water-taxies hovered hopefully nearby. We were not more than fifty yards from our berth.

Alex met my eyes and made a gesture I understood.

“Kids,” I said, “let’s go get ready for lunch.”

They ran ahead. By ourselves in our cabin Alex spoke with some urgency: “I bet we’re carrying explosives. And if they were to blow,

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then the underwater fuel pipes would go as well, and probably the Essex! It'll make the Santorini Island explosion seem like a pop gun."

"But the port authorities wouldn't allow us to bunker with explosives."

"Not if they knew."

I felt a little faint. "Explains it all. So we're not allowed off so we won't talk to anyone."

"It also means we've got to deliver the damn things to some country down the road. I'm going to check our papers right now."

Our locked briefcase lay where we had left it in the bottom drawer of our closet. Its lock was broken and our passports were missing. We went through every envelope, every paper; then hunted the room.

Alex was livid.

"Let's find the captain."

We went to the steps leading to the bridge. Sweating, Mikhail, the giant bosun, blocked our way.

"I want to see Captain Stanislav," Alex said.

They eyed each other belligerently.

Mikhail took a step backwards, shaking his large head. "He be very busy."

Then, turning swiftly for so huge a man, he climbed up to the bridge.

"At least he noticed us," Alex said unexpectedly. "I'll make a friend of him yet."

"I'll talk to Stefan," I said.

"Good idea. Go ahead."

Stefan was seated on his stool in the corner of his pantry, almost as though he was waiting for me.

"Please, Missus. Do not disturb captain now."

"He took our passports."

"On board ship Captain keep all passports."

"Then he has to give us day passes. We're being kept prisoner."

"It be too dangerous."

"More dangerous than on board? Aren't you afraid for the children?"

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“I am afraid for you, too,” he answered, softly. “But, Missus, you cannot get off the ship. Tomorrow you have passports. I promise this.”

“Tomorrow I won’t need them.”

“Missus, he be good captain. He not make mistakes.” Stefan took a deep breath: “It be dangerous here. You see those pipes under water? He make one inch mistake, one inch and they crack. Catastrophe. Please do not disturb him. We be in Bombay soon.”

“Those pipes are why I want my kids off.”

“I understand. But he not make mistakes. This no time to talk to captain. Please.” His dark eyes held mine: “Please Missus, if you be in real danger, I help. But if I bother captain now, I may not help you later.”

I stepped back, confused.

“Okay, Stefan. But I’m doing this for you. Not for the captain.”

Stefan nodded his head and slowly seemed to relax. He shook his neck to loosen the tension, then his shoulders, slowly rotated his arms and wrists. His knees swung a little; his ankles revolved in place. His toes probably twirled too. He had relaxed.

Sometime about midnight, I stood alone on my Star Deck, midway between the radioactive threat overhead and the explosive harbor below. Absorbed by the very boringness of the danger, I slipped into a trance-like acceptance of my perilous position, watching the Jessenice back up and begin to slowly make a circle over the maze of thick pipes – fat underwater tubes flowing with oil which shone like tentacles from monster sea creatures just inches from our hull. Silver fish glistened in and out of their grasp. There was no margin for error. Out of sight of the Americans overhead as it circled directly beneath the Essex’s enormous flight deck, the Jessenice hardly seemed to move at all. Glacier slow, she did not edge beyond an invisible circle the captain had drawn for himself. Flood lamps on the Essex shone overhead, too high to shed light on the green water where Jessenice was so noiselessly rotating.

Harbor lights dimmed, docks fell silent. Boats drifted off. One of our searchlights glanced off our prow, beaming onto our gangplank, then throwing a perfect circle of light onto the emerald water.

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What was I doing there in the middle of the night, under threat of possible extinction, on the other side of the world?

Silence thickened the air. Monotonous as it was, with only the tiniest of movements to witness, still I could not leave my bird-like perch. Beneath the boat monstrous creatures swam, some alive, some technical. I was hypnotized by the mysteries of the unknown; also the mysteries of the unknowable.

Some two hours later, the glacial circling stopped and we inched out from under the Essex into our own bunkering slot. Now I could see the night sky straight above me. Two white-faced crewmen surfaced from below deck. Anchors roared over the side. Without a word to me, the sailors passed on their way back to their quarters.

Motors stilled. The port stilled, Essex was still, and now the Jessenice drifted to stillness.

Still I did not leave. The sky was so clear it was easy to distinguish all the colors of the stars. Tonight they did not sparkle like clear tears and spears of song, but in colors, like a king's dream of tourmalines.

Alone, attached to the stars, it all seemed fated, determined, intensely reasoned. The one line of one person's life had circled into this moment, and all life had circled there; all of the long evolution of earth, the patient rounds of planets and stars, the ever larger arcs of clusters and galaxies had spiraled down, a snail-shell of stars and time, to this point, this moment.

I no longer wondered what I was doing there. I expanded, about to burst or shout with the happiness of being under all those blue and purple and green and yellow suns at the other end of the world.

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