

Oh! Mercy

A photograph of a macaw perched on a pirate skull statue. The macaw is blue and yellow, with its wings slightly spread. The statue is a white skull with a black pirate hat featuring a skull and crossbones. The background is a tropical setting with palm trees and a thatched roof.

Ruby Peru Stell



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First Edition

Chapter One

OH! MERCY

*The sleeping and the dead are but as pictures;
'tis the eye of childhood that fears the painted Devil.*

Shakespeare

If I tell you the truth, the freedom, enjoyed for three decades will shatter into shards of glass and destroy the comely child with a special sparkle in her glacial blue eyes. Born on a Wednesday, she's full of woe and has far to go. Five little fingers and same goes for the toes. Healthy in all respects, Mercy by name. Mercy's first year in her Raggedy Ann layette leaves no hint of the tribulations yet to befall.

Momma is a fiery red haired cheerleader, probable father a brawny football hero. Small town mentality runs rampant: pregnancy usually following a hasty marriage, always clandestine and taboo.

The first portion of Mercy's life passes without much ado. Growing up brings the realization that her parents wouldn't last due to a difference in drug choices and the hippie revolution. By 1971, Vietnam is in the rear view mirror. Even though her parents are finally out from under the oppressive draft and just eighteen years old, they are already amongst the drug enlightened and abused. Their old lives soon give way to the urges of big city wiles. Speed for Papa and downers to make Momma subdued.

After a particular night of debauchery, Momma is rushed to the hospital. LSD induced a miscarriage, no one would ever know. It would have been a step-sibling for Mercy. When Papa is summoned to the hospital he learns Momma has checked out with another man, who come to her rescue. Baby Mercy disappears too.

Papa, after months of searching, finds his little family in a commune outside Normal, Oklahoma, as it is so lovingly referenced.

Nothing is normal, a farm on the outskirts of town filled with hippie ideals and free love so appealing. Momma is always restless and seems to have forgotten about Papa. He finally gives up and hitches to California to catch a wave.

Mercy, is left in the commune of “Dr. Pepper drinkin’ family,” while Momma sets sail in a GTO, red, flashy and spankin’ new. Colorado, bust or be busted. Money now is provided by the purchase and sale of window pane acid, bought in Boulder and taken to Oklahoma through Amarillo. In this dust hole, they still shave heads and “whoop ass” on long hairs passing through. The price is \$275.00 for a sheet of 1000 hits of acid so pure. At \$3.00 a hit, money is easy. Momma picks up Mercy and keeps rollin’ with baby Mercy balanced precariously on the hip of her life.

Mom opting for the simple life, blows up the TV while intoxicated and in an anti-technology fit. She begins to work her garden and sew clothes for friends and family. Mercy learns to roll *jays* for Momma to smoke while Momma wallows in this new found life. Most days are filled with chores and pickin’ up highway hitchhikers to help paint and glitter the old farm house in exchange for a bed for a night or two.

Time trickles by until it is time to move, keep rollin’, leave no clues the police can pursue. Loaded in a 1963 Econoline van, Mercy and Momma roll on to the Great Northwest, working odd jobs and selling stash too. Next stop is Oregon. The hippie code allows lodging for free. Momma works in a liquor store while Mercy steals food. Word comes that Momma’s Pa has a posse hot on their trail. Mercy is now a seasoned business prodigy way beyond her years and always knows what to do. The grift is her knack. She secures a ride to a distant outpost and calls her Grandpa alerting him where to meet her. He informs her he is to arrive in Oregon the next afternoon. Mercy hitches back and hustles her brood on down the road--keep rolling. Grandpa’s rescue attempts fail thanks to Mercy’s cunning.

Tattered overalls and no shoes with her dog Blue, she loads the van, sobers Momma. How can a child so small stand so tall? Free as a band of gypsies they continue to move. Eighteen states and still not in school. Mercy is a child of circumstances. She brandishes the charm of a black widow, luring prey into her well woven web of deception.

On a particularly hot day, dusty, dirty and parched, Mercy, now seven is ready to stop any place in search of sanctuary. Momma in her usual revealing halter top and hot pants hops out at the rest stop to replenish their water supply.

A handsome hiker, already there, insists on helping drive. He seems quite harmless and Momma is so beguiling. He joins the crew. He is drinking but not intoxicated. As they sail the sweltering highway he begins to sing raunchy songs about Momma and tries to pull down the strap on her flimsy halter. Momma can always handle herself but after drinking from his canteen she has become drowsy, almost liquid, like someone has poured her down into the seat.

The van is beginning to weave. That's when it happens. Old Blue must have had a clue; he begins a low guttural growl. "Pulls over kid, take the dog for a walk. Trust me, I'll watch over Momma."

Life's already taught Mercy not to believe anyone that says, "Trust me," so she pretends to leave. She knows what to do. He mounts Momma. Mercy picks up a boulder--*ginormous* for a child of her size. She pitches a strike, splitting his skull clean in two. Greasy black blood begins to ooze! Mercy places a towel on his head and waits for Momma to regain consciousness. "What the Hell happened?" Momma groans rubbing her head.

"This freak will endanger our freedom. We've got to get rid of him, pronto." Still groggy and in shock, Momma resumes driving *Devil's Backbone*, a snake of a road, until lush bushes laden the view. Mercy knows there is no chance for amends and that a body will roll off if they just cut it loose. Without braking, Mercy jimmies the rear door. It burst open and acts like a coal shoot jettisoning that hairy Neanderthal right out into the wide blue yonder. No time for regrets. The Gods have slipped and the Devil is amused!

Chapter Two

Mercy at the Ritz

The devil watches all opportunity ...William Concreve

Mercy knows they need to get rolling...like yesterday but to where? Middle of February and it's a "Mardi Gras Good Time Opportunity." *Clandestiny*, where everyone wears a mask. The Big Easy might be the focus of a new destination. Safety in numbers, the ability to blend in. Gone are the shadows of yesterday and their tragedies; Momma is safe if not coherent.

Stuffing Momma and her dog into the van, Mercy stacks phone books adding stature to the driver's seat, preparing to blast off towards the Louisiana Blues. Check the map, find gas money, and come up with a way to support this pitiful crew; something this mental giant of a kid certainly could do. What is the name of the place that promised all the trimmings and secrets well kept? Something to do with crackers... yeah, it's the Ritz. Mercy knows Momma's friend, the piano player, a perfect jump start!

It's arduous driving when your feet barely hit the gas pedal much less the brake. Surviving means having to continue looking for your next break and that is exactly what Mercy plans to do. Humming down the highway gradually erases the mean man's face from her memory. He WAS trying to hurt Momma and that wouldn't do. So she had done the only thing she was taught how to do...keep rollin'.

The Ritz is just off Bourbon Street and easy to locate. The splendor of Camelot but with a certain bordello flavor, lots of gold lame and red velvet ambience--a place where you don't look at the fine print. Mercy knows this is a grifter's delight and she'll be able to make money...literally. Forging and "slight of the hand" documentation

alteration. A skill Mercy has mastered traveling about while most children are in school learning the alphabet and tying their shoes.

The Big Easy provides the opportunity to change skill to cash. Fast untraceable capital. Need, necessity and greed will guarantee these impresarios success, beyond belief.

Perusing the Ritz's back door entrance she spies Mac at the piano, just like Lady Luck was scheming. Exhaling, she slides onto the narrow piano bench and snuggles next to this dashing *high yellor* rake with nappy grey muttonchops.

"Lordy, lordy little darling, pure eye elixir to look into your sweet face. If You needs soothin' then you's gots my unconditional attention," chimes Mac. A room plus help is unfolding. Momma's delusional *Spell of Invisibility*, supposedly veiled ole Blue dog as he passes the front desk, making everything "Alakazam." Mac is a monumental man for never questioning Momma's insanity.

Settling Momma is always like trying to reroute a hurricane or arresting a charging army; everywhere there are casualties. On imaginary wings she swoops the lobby, straddling a grand steed most recognize as our dog. To Momma, he is a Pegasus awaiting her every wish. Next, her further progression will rest on everybody's' head. Yes, everyone must have their head covered in the presence of the Grande Dame, Mercy's MOTHER. Gloves and shoes are optional but win favor with Madame. Booze is chilled to a "pink nose temp," drugs procured, just waiting for her to ingest her salvation.

A milliner's dream frozen, silence, then a great gong thrills, Faded-Glamor has arrived. She pretends to levitate as if on a great magic rug, with her dog and a bevy of unrecognizable demigods. She is RELIGIOUS as in "Catholic girl gone unfathomably bad."

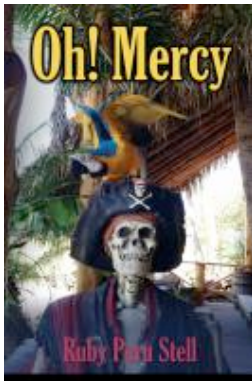
The Ritz promised all the trimmings and secrets well kept, so hell yes bring it on, a safe new home for Momma. Besides being monumental, Mac is a magic man. He tickles Momma's fancy and juggles all her eccentric demands, a true Carney. Everything begins to fold together; angel wings, just meant to be.

Piano Mac has kept all Momma's old equipment for "a la forgery." Mac has the know-how; Mercy has the gumption. Possessing the

plates, press, paper and pigeons, all Mercy needs is a way to pass bills and control their distribution. Mac has always wanted his own sex stable now might be the right time. There is plenty of flesh provided in the Quarter; just round it up and turn it into the best damn pocket profit. All seems almost too easy, giving Mercy a cold case of the grifter jitter blues.

Sleep on it, scheming while dreaming, that is always Mercy's plan. In the bright lights of reality, she has been delivered to the Promised Land. Now just count the money!

Mac spreads the word that there is ACTION for the taking and things progress nicely. Mac's lackeys will replace customers' money with fake loot while the girls are twisting their hearts. Then "Johns" pay with the fake stash so most of the funny money is reclaimed. No one gets hurt and everyone is somehow spreading phony flash. Fake ID's could be a side job, a part time gig. Soon they'd all be soaking up bubbles in that solid gold bath tub Momma is always dreaming about. You know what they say, "When you bathe with dogs you will ALWAYS get fleas." Oh, Mercy!



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