Blue Water

A Novella

By Maryanne Peters

Chapter 1

You don’t have to be rich to be into sailing. I was brought up in a small port town on the West Coast and our family was always in and around boats. My father was not a boat builder. He was a sailmaker and a chandler who occasionally a provedore. If you knew boats then you would know what that means. He built two boats at home, in our backyard.

The first boat he built was “Nimrod” built out of wood but fibre-glassed below the waterline. It was the first boat we took out of the harbour and onto the high seas – blue water sailing. Then he sold that and built a ferro-cement boat – “Resolute”. Building a boat out of concrete may seem weird, but there were plenty of these boats built in the 70s and 80s, and more recently, with new materials, there had been a revival. At least that is what my Dad said.

So, my brother and I were brought up on sail boats. We were even named after sailing boat captains, although my brother never liked to admit it. I was Jason, after the leader of the argonauts, and my little brother was Jonas, after the skipper in “Gilligan’s Island”. My father said that was so, but it probably was not true. Our dad was like that.

I had been working in my father’s business, and when Jonas left school and did not make it to college, he assumed that he would work there too. We would be down at the wharves all day. But my father said that the business could not support three people, in fact not even two. He said that he was closing it down. He and Mom were selling up and sailing “Resolute” into the Pacific.

“We will be in the South Pacific by the end of the year,” he said. “If you can make it, why don’t you join us for Christmas in Fiji?”

Then they were gone. We had only two weeks of occupation left in the rented house, which was pretty much bare. We had to fend for ourselves. It was a hard lesson. Our dad was like that, and Mom just went along with him in all things.

The problem is that we had no other skills other than on boats, although we did not see that as a problem at the start. But it quickly became apparent that there was no work on sailboats to be had. We scoured the whole West Coast for a suitable job, and we sent out our resumés both as a team and as individuals. We got back nothing.

Then when we were going through some yachting magazines Jonas found what he said was the perfect job, but with a big but. This is how he read it out to me:

“Two positions available aboard a 100 foot sail-rigged super yacht. Blah blah, must be knowledgeable of fixed and running rigging and skilled in operating a large sailing vessel, blah blah hospitality skills, serving the owner and guests, blah blah, will be required to make long voyages, very attractive remuneration.”

“That is perfect for us,” I said. “So, what is the catch.”

“They want women,” said Jonas. “But I think that we should apply.”

“You’re crazy. We won’t get the job. They want female crew only.”

“Let’s put our names down in case they don’t get the numbers,” he said. So we did.

And then we got the call. They only wanted one, but we said we came as a pair and would share the wage offered (which was not much).

The sailing vessel “Kestrel” was hardly a super yacht but it was 100 feet long. It was an old schooner rig, with a shorter foremast, and appeared to be in good order with modern stays and cordage, and newly fitted out below, but it was untidy. The owners were two middle-aged playboys Harrison (Harry) Denovich, and Malcolm (Mal) Kethall. Both were tanned, strong and fit, but not rock-stars. Still they had managed to put together a crew of four attractive young women. Only one of them, Mandy, had any experience on board a boat. As it later turned out, none of them were much use.

I suppose that I should have gone with the feeling in my gut that told me not to go to sea on this boat, but the departure coincided with us losing a place to live, and we had work, food to eat and a place to sleep, and we were going back to the sea, which is where we belonged.

I was not the ship – it was the ship’s company that had me uneasy. We had sailed for weeks with our parents and days together, but that does not prepare you for a long period of time in close company with strangers. Often as not, it does not turn out well. It was apparent to me that Harry and Mal were looking for sex from the young women aboard. They put on a good show of being the mild-mannered adventurers, but I could see the looks they gave one another when the girls’ backs were turned.

It was not that I saw myself as being the protector of the women aboard. Harry and Mal were not young, but they were bigger than both Jonas and me, and they looked tougher too. The fact is that we were kids. We were kids on our own, looking to head into the big blue ocean, which was the place we thought we knew.

I sent a message to Mom that we had a place on a boat, and that we expected to be in Fiji for Christmas.

We loaded aboard the final fresh provisions and cast off early in the spring.

Chapter 2

They call it “the Puddle Jump”, or more particularly the Pacific Puddle Jump. You can run before the wind for much of it if you follow the right route, so the boat lies more on an even keel. You catch the north winds past Baja and then the come in from the east, and you keep south on a reach until you reach the Marquesas Islands south of the equator. That is more than 3,000 nautical miles. If you can average 6 knots you can do that in 20 days, but we knew that I would take a month. From there the “Coconut Milk Run” takes you west on the Southern trade winds to Tahiti, Rarotonga, Samoa and Fiji.

It sounded great. Any young sailor looks forward to this trip.

Jonas and I made ourselves busy, but the trade winds are constant. Crewing is easy except when it isn’t. Everybody had time to lie back under the sun and talk – to get to know one another. And it was not long before the tensions started.

We thought that Lucie and Neve were sisters, but they turned out to be distant cousins. We did not know it at the time, but they were runaways. Mandy and Kyra knew one another, but not so well. Mandy wanted to make a career for herself on super yachts, and Kyra tagged along with her for adventure. Mandy spent time with us learning about the deck, and she was a good cook, so she ended up doing that, with us helping. The other girls just lounged.

Lucie and Neve were both pretty, slim and blond, and born to privilege, so I guess that made them what they are. In fact, if you could interest Neve in something, she could work on it, but Lucie seemed interested in nothing but herself. Kyra was just lazy. Unlike Lucie and Neve she had to work for a living, but she did that by doing as little as possible.

We did not complain. We were doing most of the work and Harry and Mal knew it. Lucie, Neve and to lesser extent Kyra (because whining takes energy) complained regularly. Harry and Mal kept quiet until we down south of the Tropic of Cancer. That seemed like the point of no return. Then they got us together and read us the riot act.

“This is a working boat,” said Harry. “If you are not working you are paying your passage. In cash or in kind.” He looked squarely at Lucie and Neve, and added: “If you don’t have cash then we will take payment in favors.”

I don’t think they were playing dumb, but why else were they confused. Jonas and I knew what Harry expected, and we were kids.

I am going to the spare the details at this point, but I can tell you that what followed over the next two weeks was rape. Maybe not for Kyra, as she begrudgingly consented, but she had to. Mandy was spared, but only because Jonas and I pointed out that she was working her passage, and we would even cut her a piece of our single seaman’s wage to recognize that. We did not have to because she was the cook, and she was good enough to be paid.

Harry told me later that this sort of thing goes on all the time. He said that on the high seas you are outside any jurisdiction. It is supposed to be the port of registry, but where was that? Harry said that at sea the master of the vessel is the master of all. He is commander, mayor, priest, and God himself. Harry was the master of the good ship Kestrel. He was God, but not a benevolent one. And Mal was well named - his dark messenger.

Some people can find themselves attracted to bad people. It is not that they see past the evil, or want to change it, they just see the power of such people. It is power that in unrestrained by conscience. People can be attracted, but that does not make them bad in themselves, does it?

I was not brought up religious or anything, but my father was prone to say things like: “Bad begets bad” and: “Evil grows where evil is done”. Stuff like that seems like just talk, until you witness it.

Some might accuse Jonas and me. Such folks may say: “Why didn’t you try to stop it?” We were in a part of the ocean that is about as far as you can get from any land. You look on the map. Southeast of Hawaii and with Christmas Island over 2,000 nautical miles west of us, we were a long way from anywhere, even if we could get a message out. But we couldn’t because the radios were locked away.

I say it again: Jonas and I were kids. We were great at running around decks and climbing rigging, but we were not fighters. In fact, we had never stood up to anybody, as my father pointed out more than once. I am not saying that we were weaklings or cowards – just that we had not been tested. We were not about to put ourselves to the test out there.

Please do not judge us after what happened next.

Chapter 3

It should come as no surprise to you that somebody was killed, but it was not us. Who was the killer? You might ask. Was it Harry or Mal? In fact, it was Kyra. Kyra killed Neve. I still don’t understand exactly what happened, but it seemed clear that while Harry was raping Lucie, Mal got himself into some kind of three-way thing with Kyra and Neve, and it all turned bad.

Neve’s body went over the side and we were all told that it was an accident. It was a classic night-time “man overboard” situation. Harry said it again: “It happens all the time.” No big deal.

Man overboard is a muster station. We are supposed to follow search patterns and call it in. But even if we did, there would be no search. We were miles from shipping lanes. We were miles from anything. The drill is that we log the position and turn back under power, carrying out a straight line of route search with younger hands aloft. But Harry said that we had no record of the time that we went over the side. The search was beyond our capacity.

“We are kidding ourselves if we think we will ever find her,” he said. “And if we did it would only be a body, if it were still afloat.”

He told me later that Mal had stabbed the lungs and belly cavity to ensure the body sank.

Neve was gone. She would be lost totally. How sad.

Lucie was beside herself. I think that Harry really did try to comfort her. But she was so inconsolable that she was verging on crazy. The whole story came out about her and Neve being in a lesbian relationship and running away because of the expectations of her family. She said that her grandfather, who was a cousin to Neve’s grandfather, was very rich and would be trying to find them both.

Mal said that it could have been suicide. Lucie threw herself off the boat. She could not face her family. Who knows? But people slip and fall too, and with a gulp of seawater they can barely call out. We would have been asleep and the boat on autopilot. It just would have sailed on. And the ocean is huge.

It now seems to me that this kind of despair would be worse than death. I don’t know how it happened but it would have been quick compared to watching that said disappear as you tread water and wait for a slow death.

Lucie was in grief. There are stages of grief, I know, but I am not sure what they are. I know there was anger. She was not stupid. Of course she thought it was Mal. We all did. Like I say, the guy seemed evil.

But what can you do? We were a crew. You can go to the stem of the boat and look ahead and imagine that you are alone, but you are on a boat with others. You cannot escape unless you go the way Neve did. You have to find a way to cope. At least Jonas and I had each other.

Chapter 4

We bypassed the Marquesas Islands and took a more westerly course to the Society Island Group and Tahiti, docking at the port of Papeete. We were to go ashore, but Harry told us that we should say nothing about Neve.

He said that he would report the loss of a crew member. We would re-provision and be on our way. Nothing had to change. Mal would protect Kyra and deny she had done anything wrong. Jonas and I, and Mandy, would say nothing.

Lucie would stay with Harry. She would do as she was told. She was terrified.

Harry never reported anything, but he was spoken to by the local authorities. They had been approached by an American man looking for two missing runaways, and they were following a line of enquiry that the two girls might be about Harry’s boat which left the States around the time of their disappearance.

Despite Tahiti being a major tourist destination the local police seemed to struggle with English so they suggested that if Harry wanted to deny any knowledge he do so directly with the person working on behalf of the families. Harry told me about the call. It went something like this:

y got signed off to leave. Then Harry received a call from a man claiming to.

The caller: “I have been hired by the grandfather of Neve [her surname] and Lucie [her surname]. I am aware that they boarded your vessel in San Francisco. They had better be fit and well. The family will hold you responsible for their care. I understand that they are hiding from their families but I have been tasked with confirming that they are well and happy. I will be coming down to Tahiti tomorrow to speak with them. I am not going to drag them back kicking and screaming. I have been hired to find them and report their status. Beyond that, their choices are their own.”

Harry told me that he replied: “They are not aboard my boat”, but the caller was insistent.

“I don’t know these young women, but their grandfather has asked that I speak with them, so that is what I am going to do.”

We left Papeete in a hurry that night without any of this being known to us.

We backtracked to the Marquesas where Harry had contacts, but it was clear to everyone that he was stressed by something – at the time we did not know what. But eventually I listened in on a conversation between Harry and Mal sitting in the cockpit one night.

“You and that little bitch of yours are responsible for this,” Harry said. A long friendship was under strain. Harry had never been in the position before, but I suspected that he knew that Mal was bad news, even though they were friends.

“This guy arrived in Papeete will soon find out where we are headed,” said Mal. “He will find us. We need to tell him that the girls are still alive and having fun, so not ready to go home. Perhaps we can get Kyra to pretend to be one of them and meet this guy. She can tell them that they are staying in the South Pacific. Maybe even get Granddad to send some cash over by Western Union?”

“Not Kyra,” said Harry. She is small and dark. Honestly, those boys would do a better job of being Neve and Lucie than Kyra or Mandy.”

I listened. There was silence. What a crazy idea? But they must have been nodding at one another, because the next morning, that is exactly what they proposed.

“Look, we know you guys want no part of this, but this way nobody aboard gets into any trouble. We are a crew. We have time before we make it to Rarotonga or Samoa. Mandy and Kyra can prepare you to be Lucie and Neve.”

“Why us?” asked Jonas. “We’re guys.”

“Just look at yourselves,” said Mal. “You are the same height as them, slim, fair, blue eyed. We understand that the guy who met Harry has never met the girls. He just working off some photos and passport details. Kyra and Mandy may be girls but they are not a fit. You are, provided that we can turn you into girls. And we have weeks aboard to do that.”

“This means safe passage through Sydney,” I demanded of them. “If we are your accomplices in this then we will have to keep your secret and we will. We just want to get there and then we are gone.”

“Samoa, Fiji and then Australia,” said Harry. “I promise.”

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