

sandra hunter

FISHERS OF MEN

FOR BARNI AND ME, IT IS OUR JOB TO DO THE PLASTIC TIES. The captain says our fingers are quicker than the bigger boys. Also, we do the lookout, because our eyes are very sharp and we can move fast around the boat. It is a big responsibility. I am twelve and Barni is thirteen and we are the youngest on our crew.

When we were just children we looked after the goats. But the war came and took many of the fathers, and then we became the men. That is a big thing. You must pay for the rice and the goat-meat and the flour for the *anjera*, and then if one gets sick, you must buy the medicine. These small children get sick very easily. And then you have the repairs for the house and the fees for the ones who are in school. You cannot pay for all of that by looking after goats.

When I first came on the boat, I was struggling because of the seasickness. I had that thing for two weeks. But we were very busy with the cleaning and cooking and shooting, so the seasickness went off.

Barni told me about the manatee. It is a big, soft, sea-fish. Mammal, says Barni. And now we have tied up this very big man and he is lying down, just like a manatee, behind the bulkhead at the back of the boat. He came with his friends to kill us, but we were too many and we got him down and now he is in the plastic ties.

The captain tells Barni and me to watch this one while they organize with the others at the front and tie up the other boat that is smaller than ours. It is new and now we can have two boats.

Ours a good, long boat. It used to be for fishing, but the fish ran out so the captain put a strong motor and brought us to do this work. We sleep below and there is a kitchen, too. Our boat is fast. We can catch anyone very quickly and we go on board and they give us the money and we leave. We are the good guys. We take from

the rich and give to the poor.

The Manatee is taking little breaths. It is funny because he is so big and he only breathes very small. He has a split lip because our captain split it for him. Barni says the manatee is a mammal because it gives birth to live young and it breathes air. Our Manatee breathes air very noisily. His dried-grass hair is over his eyes. There is a bubble of blood in his split lip. It gets bigger and smaller as he breathes in-out. I want to pop the bubble.

— Water.

He speaks in English.

Barni checks the safety on his SAR80,

— We cannot give you water. You must stay there until the captain comes.

— Fleas.

I know this words *fleas*. I jump to my feet,

— You think you can insult us?

Barni,

— He is saying *please*. But his lip is broken so he cannot speak properly.

I laugh,

— An English who cannot speak properly. Now that is a joke.

— Water...

I look at Barni,

— We had better give this English some water.

Barni has a water bottle. We try to hold it to the English's bleeding lips but the water splashes out and he groans.

Barni,

— Let us make him to sit. Then he can drink.

It takes us a long time to get the English to sit. He flops as though he has lost all the bones in his body. He groans as we finally get him upright and a big spout of blood comes out of his mouth and all over my arm. I cannot tell if it is from the split lip or some other wound we can't see.

I use my shirt to wipe his blood off,

— How can we give him water? He will only swallow the blood.

Barni squats in front of the English and thinks.

— We must clean him off.

— Just leave him.

Barni looks at me,

— And if he dies? What will the captain do?

I don't want to think about that one. We had one English who died. Our friend, Kaafi shot him. Kaafi was nervous. He was ten. He had not guarded anyone before and his gun had a very light trigger. One little touch and boom. And the English went boom, too. The captain was so angry that he said he would not waste a bullet and threw Kaafi into the sea. The river sharks were everywhere. Those things have teeth like knives. You don't even want to dream about the river shark. I miss Kaafi. He could whistle two notes at the same time.

Our captain is a good captain but let me tell you I do not want to be his bad books.

Barni taught me these words, *be his bad books*. I like them very much. It makes me think of my father. He was an accountant, a very clever, important man in the city. Sometimes he would come at Christmas or for my mother's birthday. We were used to being without him. All his books were very good, but he was shot in the street because of the war. My mother cried and we all cried, too, because we had never seen her cry.

We use the English's shirt to clean off the blood. We have to tear a little of the shirt to do this and we apologize because the English is already suffering. Then we tip the water bottle against the English's broken mouth. He cannot hold the water and I can see that it hurts to drink. But he doesn't make a sound, even when Barni's hand slips and the bottle knocks against the broken mouth. The English is a brave soldier even if he tried to kill us.

Then he leans his head back. Barni and me watch him, because this is what we must do. We keep our hands on our SAR80s like they trained us.

Barni is still staring,

— In our village there was a girl who looked like this English, with the split lip. No one would talk to her.

— In our place, they can kill those ones because they bring bad luck.

— Galad, what kind of village do you live in where babies are killed? There is no bringing bad luck. It is just how the child is born.

I am annoyed. Barni is making me look foolish in front of the English,

— We are strong in our place. That's why we don't allow these weak ones.

— But it is true, Galad. There is a word for this thing. But I can't remember.

I spit over the side of the boat,

— If you are so smart then you should remember the special word. And you can't because there is no special word.

Barni kicks out a leg but I am too far for him to reach,

— There *is* a word.

The English moves,

— Cleft liff.

Barni looks at the English and then at me, as though this is proof,

— Yes, that is it — cleft lip!

I am not so easily fooled,

— You believe this one? He is our prisoner. He cannot tell you the truth.

Barni settles his SAR80 across his knees,

— Cleft means divided. Look at the English. His lip is cleft.

Somehow I can tell that it is true. And now I feel bad that Barni and the English know something I still don't understand.

I say,

— He is the prisoner. And he wasn't born with the — the cleft-lip. The captain gave it to him. It is not the same thing.

Barni nods,

— You are right, Galad. This was given to him.

I feel better now that Barni is on my side again.

I hold my SAR80 up,

— English, you are nothing. You don't even have a proper cleft-lip.

Barni shakes his head,

— But we must not say bad things to the prisoner. He is educated.

— But he our prisoner, only. *I* know more than him.

Barni thinks,

— You know so much? Then what are the largest oceans in the world?

I sulk,

— So?

His voice turns quiet, like he is back in a classroom. He tells the names quickly,

– The Arctic, the Pacific, the Atlantic, the Indian, the Caribbean, the

Mediterranean, the Bering Sea...

He stops.

I am pleased,

– You don't know all of them!

– Wait. I am just thinking.

The English moves his head. His voice is wet-sounding and the words come with blood,

– The South China Sea, the Sea of Okhotsk and the Gulf of Mexico.

We look at him. He looks at us. His eyes are flaming red and there is more blood in his shirt.

Barni,

– Yes, those are the others. I knew them, of course. I was just remembering.

He is now interested, the way he gets when something takes his eyes,

– What is this Sea of Okosh?

The English pulls in one of his short breaths,

– Okhotsk. It is on the edge of the Pacific Ocean, near Russia and Japan.

Barni,

– I have read about this place, Russia. It is full of bears and ice and men with big hats. You have been there?

– Snow and ice in winter. And very hot in the summer. Humid.

I look at Barni,

– What is humid?

Barni swats at a fly with his SAR80,

– When you put the clothes to dry but they never dry.

The English takes a short breath,

– Very – vyootiful. There are mountains and snow. And you can swim in the sea.

How can people just go into the sea and swim? Are they crazy?

I ask,

– But what about the River Sharks?

The English swallows. It looks painful.

— They do not have these sharks. So they can go in the water and swim all day.

Barni and me shout with laughter, and then we cover our mouths in case the captain has heard. We look over the bulkhead, but he is busy questioning the English's men.

Barni does swimming arms in the air,

— I would like to go there. I would swim all day.

I elbow him,

— You can't swim —

— I would learn.

— I would learn, too.

The English's mouth moves a little as though he would like to smile but the split lip stops him.

— You should be in school.

Barni is first,

— I was at school.

— I was at school, too.

The English nods slowly,

— You are very intelligent.

Does he mean just Barni? But he is looking at me as well. No one has ever said that thing to me. I try it out: I am very intelligent.

I can see Barni likes this thing, too. He pushes his lips together so that he won't smile.

The English,

— I am Ryker.

— I'm Barni and this is Galad.

I nudge Barni with my foot,

— Why are you telling our names? We are not supposed —

Ryker lifts his chin at me,

— What — is on your arm?

I look down. Ryker also looks at Barni. He means our names. Barni cut my name onto his forearm and I cut his name onto mine.

Barni laughs,

— See? This shows we are brothers.

He offers his forearm and I do the same so Ryker can see. The letters are weak because we didn't have a good knife.

Ryker nods,

— You're good kids. Why are you doing this?

Barni,

— You think we choose to be stuck —

And he stops. For a moment we forgot the English was our prisoner.

Ryker,

— You should be at home with your families. I wish I was at home with my family.

I can see my mother cooking our meal. I can smell the onions and the vegetables. The rice is already cooked and steaming in another pot. My sisters are cleaning and preparing the hut for the night. My brothers are playing outside. I can hear them calling and arguing and laughing.

Barni lifts his SAR80,

— We are here because we are the best. And we have caught all of your men. Now your men must answer to our captain.

Each time Ryker speaks, more blood comes from his mouth,

— They — the others are coming. They will take everyone. Even you.

Barni leans closer,

— Who is coming?

— They can take your boat.

I am shocked,

— That is *stealing*.

Ryker's eyes close and his head rolls to one side. He is still bleeding from the mouth.

If another boat comes, like Ryker says, the captain will tell us, *You know what those SAR80s are for, boys*. I will be the first to shoot and the captain will be so proud of me that he will give me another special hat, like the last time. I shot two men. They tried to come on board. They had a small boat and they wanted our boat because it is bigger. The captain told them to go off. They wouldn't listen and so he told us to fire.

And I shot first. They fell backwards. One fell into the sea and got sucked under into the motor. It was a terrible noise and the motor broke. We had to paddle the boat to shore for repairs. Everyone was given permission to visit our families for one day. But I couldn't go to my home.

When I first told my mother I was going to join the captain she became very angry with me. But I told her not to worry. We have good weapons and cannot get caught. And if we do, the captain can just pay the judge and we will go free. Everyone knows this.

But when I came from the first trip and gave her the money she was still angry,
— Galad, I am your mother but I hide my face when the others talk about pirates. All this big-talk. But it is a bad thing. Your father would be shamed.

Sometimes at night, I tell the truth to myself: I have shamed my mother and my family. I have shamed my father. But there is nothing else for me to do. And now I cannot go home because my mother can cry when she sees me. She will not let me come to her hut. I send the money only, and hope that my brothers and sisters will stay in school.

Barni is picking his bottom lip. This is how he looks when he is thinking,

— Galad, what if others are coming?

I point to where the empty dark blue sea reaches up to touch the edge of the light blue sky,

— Can you see a ship? There is no ship. See our captain? See how he is strong? All of us are strong. We took all of these men who tried to kill us. They are our prisoners. We can do this to anyone who comes.

— But Ryker said —

— He is our prisoner. Why should we believe him?

— He was right about the seas.

— He cannot be right about everything. Maybe he is mixing some truth and some lies to fool us.

— But, Galad. What if he dies? I don't want him to die.

— If he dies it, is his time. We did not kill him.

Ryker has more blood coming from inside his shirt.

Barni looks at me,

— What if you were him, Galad? If you were tied up with a broken mouth?

— I would not put myself in that place, brother. I follow the rules.

— Maybe Ryker's rules were to attack our boat. He followed his rules.

— Well, his rules are not the right rules.

— But what if our rules are not right?

I cannot believe Barni would say such a thing,

— You are only joking. These are the captain's rules.

Barni keeps looking at Ryker,

— He is an educated man. He has books in his house. He reads to his children every evening.

— Barni, you cannot know this.

— He is a good man. He is a *father*.

— But he tried to kill us.

Ryker coughs and spits and pulls himself up,

— We didn't want to kill anyone. But piracy is against the law —

I jump on the one word I can laugh at,

— *Piracy!* As if we go about setting things on fire!

Gunshot. Me and Barni crouch down behind the bulkhead. We look over the top. The captain is at the other end of the boat, waving his arms. Three of the crew pick up something. They throw it over the side. There is a lot of movement in the water, like a boiling pot of rice. The river sharks have come. I sit down next to Ryker.

Barni, still watching,

— Ryker, one of your men is dead.

The breath lifts Ryker's big chest,

— Others will come.

I am angry,

— You think we should believe you, Ryker?

— Galad, you and Barni must leave. When the others come, they will not know you are only children. They can shoot you.

Barni,

— We are not *children*.

Ryker's words come like the last trickle of water from the cup,

— There must be a life raft. Go to the ships. Use your shirt as a white flag.

I try to sound brave,

— We will not leave our captain, Ryker.

Ryker turns his head away.

There is shouting from the front of the boat. We look over the bulkhead. Our crew is fighting Ryker's crew. Ryker's crew is wearing blue and white. But very quickly there is too much blood and it is difficult to tell who is our crew and who is theirs.

And far off, where the straight line of dark blue catches the light blue, I can see something bumpy and uneven. Barni has seen it, too. We are staring, hoping that it is just mist. But the bumpy becomes bigger and separates into shapes. They are fast. Faster than us.

Ryker hasn't moved. His eyes are closed and his face looks like old milk.

Barni has his SAR80 ready,

— Galad, what if Ryker is right and we are shot?

— We can shoot back.

I don't want to be shot but this is what happens in our job.

Barni rests his SAR80 on the railing,

— The captain is not looking this way, Galad.

I am staring at the ships coming so fast,

— We must tell him about those ships.

I am about to bang on the side of the boat to get the captain's attention, when Barni grabs my arm,

— I know where the life raft is.

— Barni, we cannot do that thing.

— Look how many they are. When it is one ship we have a chance. But here are five — six — there are *eight* of them.

I lean over the side and whistle twice. The captain looks to me, and then out to sea. Then he is shouting orders. The crew is still full of anger and fighting. He fires his gun into the air. They all stop. Then he is giving orders and the crew is jumping to take the prisoners below, to prepare their guns and the rocket launcher.

The captain looks back and Barni and me raise our SAR80s. He turns away. Barni kneels down by Ryker,

— Ryker, the ships you told us about. They are coming. What must we do?

The ships are moving out so they can surround us. My head has that bubbling feeling I always get when we are about to fight. I will shoot first. The captain will give me a cap like he did before.

— I am going to the life raft. Are you coming?

I turn around and Barni has gone. His gun is lying on the deck. Ryker's head is rolled to one side.

I run to the back and I see Barni inflating the life raft from the green tank.

He looks up at me,

— Come, Galad. I will wave my shirt as a white flag. They will not shoot us.

— Stop! If the captain —

An explosion like the world has blown up. All of us are thrown. Splashing and smoke and screaming. The boat is rocking like some god is shaking us. The captain's voice, as if he is shouting orders through a tin can. Two of our men are lying down. There is something red with white poking out, maybe a leg, near the front of the boat.

I scramble up,

— Barni!

He struggles to lift and push the inflated raft over the side. He has tied the rope around his right wrist.

— Galad, the captain does not care about us.

I look back at the captain. He is shouting orders, pulling and slapping at the crew.

Barni climbs down into the raft. He is dangerously near the motor. I am holding my breath. Please don't let him get sucked under.

If the captain sees, he will shoot. Or he will throw Barni to the river sharks. Or he will capture Barni and do terrible things to him.

— Galad! Come quickly! Come with me!

He holds his hand out, as though he could lift me down like he would take a

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small bird from the nest. My eyes are blurry. I am afraid for my brother. I lift the SAR80. If I shoot a hole in the raft he will have to come back and I will grab him before the river sharks can.

But my hands shake. I can't shoot. I am useless.

I go back to Ryker. He has fallen on his side. I crouch down,

— Ryker? Please tell me. *Fadlan*. What must I do?

I try hard to get him to sit. If only he can sit he will be okay and he can tell me what to do. But I can't lift him and my hands and arms are covered with his blood.

I hear the raft motor start up. Barni is going from behind. There are two ships behind us now. Maybe he will reach them with their blue and red and white striped flags. They will see a young boy waving his shirt. They will not shoot.

I sit next to Ryker and pull his head into my lap because that might help him feel comfortable. Also, when the blue-and-red-and-white men come on board, they will see we have respected him.

Gunfire from our boat and *k-k-k-k* as bullets kick across the water close by Ryker and me. They are shooting towards the back of the boat. I wrap my arms around Ryker's head.

A single scream. I am certain it isn't Barni. I know he has reached the ships and they are taking him on board. They are giving him water to wash and food to eat. The English are always nice to prisoners. I look at my left forearm where I cut his name. He is looking at his left forearm where he cut mine.

Ryker says nothing. I can't even hear his small breaths anymore. I am crying but it is not because I am a child. 🕒