

Excerpts from Painted Sailor by M Randolph Mason

She retreated to the fantail of his immense yacht and, in the civil twilight before sunrise, finished off the stale, last half of the un-corked bottle of Cabernet Sauvignon. With her crushed lips, she had sucked it straight from the chipped lip of the bottle... had savored not one gulp.

She stepped onto the dock. She wasn't about to awaken him.

As she slid her backside onto a dockside locker, she was again dankly reminded of him. He had been... uh... forceful... brutish. The residual irritation made her jeans even less friendly. No doubt, he imagined that he was pleasing her. Even her uterus ached from the battering.

She sat quietly... for about half an hour.

With the risen sun, the morning mist had burned off on the Intracoastal Waterway. The real deep-sea boats were long gone. Tourists were already down from the shops... strolling the docks... milling about... breathing air that reeked of gutted catch despite last night's hosing down by teenaged boat hands. She ignored the tourists... and they avoided her... the tourists... the boat hands. She felt about as attractive as yesterday's gutted catch. She could use a good hosing down.

After a considerable period of waiting... such being considerable only to her... she returned to his yacht....

Entering the toilet compartment in the captain's cabin, she confiscated all the drugs from his toilet kit. Then, returning to the salon, she scooped up the remaining pills scattered about the dinette. She collected all these pharmaceuticals in the right pocket of her stale jeans. She briefly examined his bulging wallet – but then returned it to the hip pocket of his hastily discarded khakis. She didn't do whore theft. Well... not money and credit cards.

The fetid air hastened her out of the salon... on deck... and thence back onto the dock... back to her seat on the dock-side locker. Nothing had changed. She was still a whore... with a pocket full of assorted, stolen drugs.

During a lull in the dock tourists, she fished out her haul. She tossed the non-narcotics into the water behind the locker. The remaining drugs in her left hand consisted of four Hydrocodone and a Percocet...

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...Walking southward along the dock... approaching the landward end... I noticed a lone flip-flop at the east edge of the dock. I stopped to examine it and, in doing so, glanced down into the water below... and an aluminum boat... with a girl lying in it.

I lowered myself into the boat and knelt over the girl. She was not a girl... but a small woman. There was no blood. She was not moving. I felt her wrist for a pulse (something I'm not especially good at). Nothing. So, I tried her neck. Also no. I tried again... a different spot. YES!

I dialed 911.

The EMTs came with a police contingent. The police were both polite and controlling. They had a plethora of questions. And I had a dearth of answers... actually none. There was no identity on the woman - plenty of identity in my wallet. The passage to Hatteras was about to be put on hold...

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...I was sitting at the salon table examining the nautical charts for Gulf Coastal Florida. My next port could be Destin Harbor. But Destin was too... uh... populated. I traced eastward on the chart and settled on Apalachicola.

"Hello!"

I looked up to see Lillian silhouetted by the morning sun. "Lillian?"

"Lily works best for me. The police told me where I could find you – but that I had best hurry."

"You certainly look much better than I last saw you. Here, let me help you aboard." Avoiding my hand, she stepped aboard.

"Lily... okay. What can I do for you?"

She replied, "More than you already have? I don't know how to thank you."

"I just wanted to bring your chaos to a halt. You appear to be revived. That's enough for me."

"I cannot repay you... though you seem to have paid me."

"I don't want to talk about money or restitution. It's enough to see you alive."

"You must be rich. This is quite a yacht!"

"This is a restored and converted Chesapeake Bay work boat. It's not mine. I have been hired to take it to its new owner. This is what I do... now."

“Ummm... I might have a foggy notion as to what you do. But where is your home?”

“Hopewell, Virginia.”

She was beginning to get too close. I wanted her to be thankful... and go... just go.

Her pretty face fell. “Matthew, I am a whore. Surely you MUST know about whores. I don’t want to be a whore... but it’s something thing I am sort of good at... though my tits are too small. I am going back to being a whore. I just wanted to thank you for saving my life. Though, in a way, you didn’t do me any favors. So... I’m just going to go now. Goodbye sweet Matthew. Do not ever forget that there’s hope... in Hopewell.”

With that, she climbed back to the dock and began striding away. She just... went.

A great and unexplainable fear came over me. I felt adrift... as if I had abandoned ship too soon. I searched for her as she must be hurrying shoreward... away from me. I could not discern her in the very same sunlight in which she had arrived.

“Lily!” I yelled.

“...I’m sorry!” I whispered as I fell back into my seat.

Half an hour passed. I spread the charts on the salon table, entered GPS coordinates into my handheld Garmin, and then radioed Zack’s that I was departing.

As the last line was coming aboard, she stood across from me on the dock. Tears streamed down her face. My hand reached out to her. I snatched her down, onto the boat. We fell together as the old deadrise began to drift away from the dock. Somehow, I managed to push Lily away, recover control of my focus, and jump to the work-deck helm to get us away from the dock.

As I negotiated the channel through Perdido Pass, she leaned, a few feet away, against the coaming. It was all I could do to focus on the narrow passage, the turbulence of the incoming tide, and the old boat. Passing the outer marker, I put two more nautical miles out on a calm sea. At an arbitrary point I put the boat in neutral and cut the engine. We stood quietly beside the work-deck helm for a time which I cannot remember.

There was nothing to say.

“Where are we?”

I answered, “About two miles southeast of Orange Beach... in the Gulf of America.”

Only a sigh from Lily. Then she mumbled, “I can’t swim.”

I ignored that. “Can I get something for you to eat?”

“If you threw me over the side, our troubles would be ended...”

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...“Tim Borden, this Lily Painter. Lily, my friend and dispatcher, Tim Borden.”

Tim stepped down onto *Martha Jen* and held out his hand to her. She hesitated but kept her hands in her pockets. “Very pleased to meet you, Tim responded.” And turning to look up at me, “Nice crew.”

“Except for the basin, she’s been on since we crossed the bar at West Pass.”

“Red-right-returning,” Lily said quietly.

“There won’t be much of that in the Pacific,” responded Tim.

I quickly corrected him, “We aren’t taking that one.”

Without taking his eyes off Lily, he responded, “*We*? It’s okay, I do have another lead for you. And it takes you back to your home waters.

I looked back at Lily... whose face bore no expression.

“Is it a real offer? I asked, “Tell me more.”

“The request is from a law firm, Ladd, Ladd, and Jimerson in Norfolk Virginia. The boat is a First 32 Bénéteau shallow draft sloop. The contract is from Oriental, North Carolina; White Creek... to Phoebus, Virginia; Jones Creek. The young owner got himself intoxicated and fell off a dock late at night. His widow, who was with him at the time, is still in shock. The law firm wants the boat brought home. You’ll have to rent a car to get to Oriental.”

That was strange. *Why didn’t they just lift the boat and ship it overland?*

“Uh...” I looked at Lily. She nodded. “Okay, I’ll have to work it up, but I think we’ll take it.”

Tim smiled, “I think I knew that before I drove over here.” He continued, “Are you staying aboard tonight or going to a hotel?”

Lily pointed at the deck but pulled her hand back before Tim could turn to her.
“Aboard.”

“Then, I’ll see you about 0900 tomorrow.” And turning to Lily, “It was very much a pleasure to meet you... to find you standing here. Thank you for your help with the *Martha Jen*... and Matthew.”

“Tim,” I stopped him, “Could you drop me off at a rental car agency?”

“Sure. Which one?”

“I haven’t looked for one yet.”

Tim took out his cellphone and after a brief time he offered, “There is a rental agency at the Gulf Shores Airport.”

“That’s fine. Lily, I’ll be back shortly.”

Lily asked, “Can I go with you?”

“Sure. We can go someplace to eat.”

“Be right back... want to change clothes.”

Tim asked, “Are you all right? Is she all right? She’s kind of... strange....”