Pirates!

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I presume we need to make no Apology for giving the Name of History to the following Sheets, tho' they contain nothing but the Actions of a Parcel of Robbers. It is Bravery and Stratagem in War which makes Actions worthy of Record; in which Sense the Adventures here related will be thought to be deserving that Name.

Daniel Defoe, *A General History of the Robberies and Murders of the Most Notorious Pyrates*
(Preface to the Fourth Edition)

Preface

1724

I write for many reasons.

I write, not least, to quiet my grief. I find that by reliving the adventures that I shared with Minerva, I can lessen the pain of our parting. Besides that, a long sea voyage can be tedious. I must find diversions that fit my station now that I have put up my pistols and cutlass and have exchanged my breeches for a dress.

What follows is my story. Mine and Minerva's. When I have finished writing down all that happened and how it came about, I plan to deliver my papers to Mr Daniel Defoe of London who, I understand, takes an interest in all those who have chosen to follow a piratical way of life.

If our story seems a little extravagant, to have something of the air of a novel, may I assure you that this is no fiction. Our adventures need no added invention, rather I find myself forced to leave out certain details in order not to shock. You will read of many things, both strange and terrible, and to many ways of thinking most unnatural; but I urge you, reader, to hold back

your judgement of us until you have finished my account and know the full and exact circumstances of how we fell into that wicked way of life and found ourselves proclaimed notorious pirates.

The Merchant of Bristol's Daughter

1

I was of a roving frame of mind, even as a child, and for years my fancy had been to set sail on one of my father's ships. One grey summer morning in 1722, my wish was granted, but not quite in the way I would have wanted.

I sailed out of the port of Bristol on board the *Sally-Anne* with sailors wearing black armbands and the colours flapping at half-mast. The day had dawned dull and cold. The wind was freshening, gusting rain into our faces. The sailors looked up, reading the scudding clouds, brows knitted with apprehension, but this was a squall, nothing more. The last dying breaths of the storm that had wrecked my father's life and mine alongside it.

My father was a sugar merchant and a trader in slaves. He owned plantations in Jamaica, and that's where I was bound, but I had not been told the why or wherefore of it. My father's dying wish, that was all my brothers would say. I was not yet sixteen years old, and a girl, so I was neither asked, nor consulted. They assumed I was stupid. But I am far from that. I knew enough not to trust either of them and time was to prove me right. They

had sold me as surely as any African they trafficked from the coast of Guinea.

I might never see my home port again, but I did not cry as I left it. Neither did I look back as others did, hoping for a last glimpse of sweetheart or wife, looking up to the tall tower of St Mary Redcliffe, whispering a prayer: *Mother Mary, Star of the Sea, grant your blessing, watch over me*. My sweetheart was gone from the port, and in the church my father lay buried, his body corrupting and turning to clay. He had always been there to see his ships go out from the harbour. Perhaps he looked down as my ship left: a restless spirit, stricken by what he had done, helpless and raging in his ghostly impotence, knowing at last that the dead are powerless to influence the living.

If he was there, I had no sense of it. I just felt rain fall upon me, darkening my hair, running down my face in rivulets and dripping from my chin. The sky was crying for me. Misery wrapped itself around me like my sodden cloak.

We had left the harbour now and entered the snaking gorge. It reared high on either side, the tops of the cliffs lost in the descending cloud. Slowly the ship crept on, pulled by labouring oarsmen, inching its way between towering crags that seemed to narrow the Channel to a handspan and threatened to clash together and crush us like Jason and his Argonauts. The pilot yelled directions, calling the depths, guiding the ship as she crawled from the straits

of the Avon and out towards Hungroad's mud flats and dismal marshes. There, a gibbet hung low over the water, freighted with the body of some poor convicted sailor, tarred and tied tight with chains, suspended in an iron cage to creak out a warning to every passing ship.

I should have taken more notice, but I'd seen gibbets before and did not give him more than a passing thought.

Once we had gained the open Channel, the towboats cast us off and turned for home. The few passengers had hurried out of the weather long ago, scurrying down below, leaving only the sailors on deck.

There is much to do when a ship puts to sea. The sailors busied themselves about their duties, working around me, keeping their eyes averted. I was not asked to move, or sent down below. They left me alone out of respect for my sorrow, the loss of my father. That's what I thought, but talk runs fast through portside inns and alehouses. Perhaps they knew more than I did.

The order rang out: 'Make sail!' and the sailors worked even harder. The sails filled and the ship heeled, tacking against the westerly wind to gain the deep sea roads. The water beneath us swirled red with mud swept down by the swollen Severn and the ship began to plunge as river and tide met together in choppy waves. I clung on tight, my hands white on the rail. As we drew away from the land, the rain intensified, blurring sea and sky

together. All around the horizon disappeared into blowing greyness and I could see neither where I was going, nor from where I had come. The ship was beating against the tide and taking a buffeting from the wind. I was not used to a ship's motion and, as she dipped into a wave and rose again, I staggered and nearly fell, my feet slipping on the wet deck. I was gripped from behind and helped upright by my brother, Joseph.

'Come, Nancy,' he said. 'It's time to go below. You are getting in the way of the sailors. They have enough to do without the worry of you falling overboard!'

He escorted me below decks, making a show of smiling kindness and brotherly concern for the benefit of any who might have been watching. I understand now the reason for his concern. If I'd gone overboard, I would have taken his future with me.

Joseph left me in the hands of a steward, Abe Reynolds, who helped me out of my sodden cloak and fussed and clucked over the state of my clothes. He and my maid, Susan, shared a similar distrust of damp; it being, in their opinion, at the root of most illness. He brought me hot broth to drink, but at the sight and smell of it I suddenly felt abominably sick.

'I'm sure it's very nice, but . . .' I did not finish the sentence and barely reached the bucket in time.

I had to ask Abe to take the soup away.

‘You don’t want to get a chill, Miss,’ he said, with exactly Susan’s tone of concern and reproof.

It was too late for that. I was already shivering. He urged me out of my wet clothes and brought heated bricks to warm me. I lay in my bunk with the bricks tucked about my feet, shaking and puking by turns. I had never felt so ill. I thought I was going to die.

‘That’s what they all think, Miss,’ he said with a grin. His front teeth had long ago been lost to scurvy. The eye teeth hung either side of the gap in his mouth like a pair of discoloured tusks. ‘It’ll get better given time. I’ll look in later.’

I lay back in my bunk, thinking I could never be a sailor as long as I lived. Reynolds was right. In the end the sickness did subside, but it left me feeling weak and tired, fit for nothing but lying on my bunk.

They say that those who go to sea either look forward, or look back. What lay in front of me remained obscure, so I had no choice but to reflect on my life so far.

2

I was brought up in a household of men, my mother having died on the day that I was born. My father had loved her so much, so the story went, that he could not bear life in Bristol without her. I was handed straight over to a wet nurse, my brothers farmed out to relatives, and he had left on the next ship for Jamaica, not returning for more than a year. He came back with Robert, who took over the running of the household. Robert prepared our food, waited on table, showed guests into and out of the house. The only other servant was a boy, Nathan, who looked after the fires and did all the things that Robert didn't do. A woman came in for the washing, otherwise Robert and Nathan did everything. My father saw no reason to pay a houseful of women to sit about clacking and gossiping and eating his food, their backsides getting fatter by the day.

Robert looked after me well. He fed me, clothed me, made sure I was clean and tidy, especially for church on Sunday. He did not worship with us. We went to St Mary Redcliffe, while he went to the Baptist church in Broadmead. He went twice

every Sunday. The congregation had welcomed him, despite his colour.

'God don't care what face you've got,' he declared. 'As long as the Glory of God shines in your heart.'

He was a gentle man, and a wise one. Since no one else seemed interested, he taught me to read at the kitchen table, where he had taught himself. We read what we could find: the Bible and prayer book, tracts and sermons that Robert brought back from his church, along with ballads and broadsides he collected in the street outside. As I became proficient, I prowled the house taking books from my brothers' rooms and my father's library. I chose anything that interested me, and read to Robert about the myths and legends of the Greeks and Romans, and from Exquemelin's *The Buccaneers of America* and *A New Voyage Round the World* by William Dampier. Adventure and discovery. That was the life for me. Would it not be splendid? Did Robert not agree? He shook his head at me, and his dark sad eyes took on an expression of pity and sorrow: such a life was not for me. I was a girl. Anyway, pirates were Godless men and all bound for Hell. I'd be better off reading *The Pilgrim's Progress*. I read on defiantly, holding my book so he could no longer see me. I had grown red and tears threatened to spill. I had not realised until then that being a girl would be such a grievous handicap. But Robert was just a servant, I thought to myself. What did he know?

By the time I was seven or eight years old, I had the run of the house. My brothers were away at school. Each one had his course in life planned from the cradle. Henry, the oldest, was to be a trader, like our father; Joseph was to be a planter; Little Ned, the youngest, was destined for a Regiment of Foot. There were no plans for me because, as Robert had pointed out, I was a girl. I seemed to be there as an afterthought, an addition, sometimes petted, more often bullied. Frequently ignored.

We lived in a street that ran down to the Welsh Backs, a stone's cast from the docks and the sugar house. Our house was old, tall but narrow, and jostled about by other houses. There was only a step between us and the cobbled street that rumbled with carts and echoed with shouts and cries from the early morning until late into the night. Our house was small compared to the grand houses that other sugar merchants were building. It was lined with panelling which made it dark, the stairs sagged and the ceilings were low, but my father saw no reason to move from it. He was not a man to welcome change, and he could see the masts of his ships from his bedroom window. He was near to his place of work and the inns and coffee houses where he did business. Why would he want to live anywhere else?

He did not spend all of his time in Bristol. At least a part of every year he was in Jamaica, running our plantation. I knew that his trips were important; the plantation was the place the

sugar came from and the sugar paid for everything, but as I grew older, I resented his long absences. When he came back, I would scold and berate him, even though he brought me presents. A monkey (which died) and a parrot that Ned taught to swear. A dead monkey and a foul-mouthed parrot did not make up for a father. When he was away I would wander into the room he called his library and curl up in his chair. The room was small and dark, like the others, and in his absence it grew dusty and smelt of ashes and stale tobacco smoke.

When he was at home and the lamps were lit and the fire burning, the library was my favourite place in the world. It was full of the most wonderful things that he had brought back from his travels, or that had been given to him by his captains. A tiny green crocodile on black wires hung from the ceiling, its stubby legs splayed out, little sharp white teeth bared in a long thin snout. A strange spiny puffed fish hung next to it, and shelves around the room held all sorts of other fascinating objects: carved effigies, curving lengths of elephants' tusks, plaques of tortoiseshell, a polished coconut set in a silver cup, a giant shell curled like a great pink fist. A battered globe occupied one corner of the cramped room, its surface worn and patterned with intersecting lines in red and black, showing the routes the ships took, outward and back, criss-crossing from Africa, to the Caribbean, and returning to Bristol. Sometimes my father would spin the globe and

then stop it with both his hands, tracing the seaways with his fingers, telling off the names of the ships that sailed them, like a blind man reading a face. He was proud of his ships, and proud of his collection of curiosities. He would point to places, naming the lands where his treasures originated. To me, they became as familiar and ordinary as pewter or pottery might have been in some other person's house.

My father's family had been grocers but, being venturesome in his youth, and enterprising besides that, my father had broken away from that rather dull line of business and had shipped for the West Indies.

I loved to hear tales from that time in his life, and he loved to tell them. I would sit on his knee, with my head against his shoulder, taking comfort from the warmth of him and his heart beating next to mine, while he told me of his life when his associates were buccaneers and he had come to acquire Fountainhead.

Fountainhead was the name of our plantation. It had a sign that I thought looked a little like a weeping willow tree and it was stamped on everything. Even carved in the wood above the door to our house.

Besides the plantation, my father owned a sugar house, refining muscovado and molasses. Not only from his own plantation: he

acted as factor and agent for other planters. If he was in Bristol, he was more often at his sugar house than he was at home.

Robert taught me to read, but I learned to letter and number in my father's office. My copy books were the invoices and accounts, ships' logs and bills of lading he used in his daily business. The room was small and warm with a round window, like a porthole, overlooking the docks. The air was filled with the sweet syrup smell of boiling sugar: it seeped everywhere, clinging to clothes and hair, the whole building steeped in it.

I would sit at his crowded desk, laboriously copying out lists of names and goods, balancing them against sums of money. I'd do this for mornings together, covering myself in ink and pages and pages in words and figures. Finally, he'd smile at me. Enough for today. He had business to conduct, captains and merchants waiting to see him.

I would run down to where the sugar was stored, begging twists of muscovado and a pocketful of chips from the sugar loaves, then I'd go to find William.

I had always known William. From my first memory we had been together. His mother, Mari, had been my wet nurse. I had lived with her until I was three or four, when I was plucked from her care like a puppy from a litter, and taken back into my own household. Perhaps my father no longer felt the loss of

my mother so deeply now, for he made a great fuss of me and, as a young child, I only ever remembered kindness from him. He was an indulgent parent, some might say too indulgent, for he left me to do as I liked. I consequently ran wild, spending most of my time getting into mischief with the other children of the port.

I did not want for playmates. Docks and ships attract children like a shambles attracts flies. I led them on with my pockets full of glistening chunks of white sugar and dark crumbling muscovado done up in twisted paper. 'Spice', they called it. 'Got any spice, Nancy?' We made playthings out of whatever we found: swarming over barrels, playing king-of-the-castle, making seesaws with planks, rolling barrel hoops along with staves, swinging from nets, climbing ropes and rat lines.

William was our leader, and his word was law. I was mate to his captain, and together we led a marauding crew all over the town.

My mind was made up. Even then. I had it all worked out.

My father had no plans for me, other than that I would be married. That's where I would prove myself helpful. He would not have to go to the bother of finding me a husband, because I would marry William. He would be a captain, like his father, and I would be his wife. Had we not already sworn a solemn oath to each other? Pricking our thumbs and bleeding them together? He would sail the seas, and I would go with him.

That much I had decided and, once my mind was made up, I seldom saw a reason to change it. If I willed it, then that is what would happen. It did not cross my mind that we would not always be together. A sailor's life would be my life, too.

We lived for each day, and each day was similar to the one before. We thought in the way of all children: life would go on much the same, with little change or difference, until one day we would arrive at the future that we saw.