

DOLL CARGO

by ANN WUEHLER

CHARACTERS

CAPTAIN JANE SNORTH: a sea captain running illegal cargo. Thirties. Jolly.
HELEN RYNERTSEN: the liaison who finds buyers for the cargo. Thirties/Forties.

SETTING

A secret port off the Mexican coast, in the belly of the cargo ship, with rows and rows of boxes big enough to hold a child. Light is dim, time is now.

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[Captain Jane Snorth takes out a small flask from the back pocket of her loose pants, takes a swig, sniffs after as if the air smells very foul. She kicks the nearest box, listens, takes another swig.]

JANE

Is it what you expected?

[Helen speaks from the rear, from behind a row of boxes. She wears all black, with a Blue Tooth device attached to her ear.]

HELEN

Shouldn't there be crying?

JANE

If they cried, they didn't get fed. They learn. Like we all do.

[Smiles. Helen does not.]

You always ask about the crying, they never cry. Relax.

HELEN

Relax? You're late, you're three days late getting to Pequeno Puerto.

JANE

Yes, those damn tsunami warnings, they get in the way of freaks and their needs.

[Helen holds up her hand, then talks into air, as if talking to someone on Blue Tooth. Jane opens open of the boxes while Helen is talking, and stares down at contents, with her mouth opening.]

HELEN

Yes, hi. I'm here. What? I said what? Are you there? Hello? I never promised that. Yes, they're here. All perfectly healthy and ready to go. All the dolls fit for collecting, yes, porcelain. What?

[Catches Jane checking the boxes and Jane's reaction. Jane signals for Helen to cut the phone call.]

I'm sorry, senator...sorry, sir, I'll have to call you back. I didn't call you senator, you're hallucinating!

[Moves toward Jane, who points down into opened box. Helen gasps. Then stares at Jane.]

JANE

I swear to God they were alive when I left Hawaii.

HELEN

You haven't...they're...this one is...this one is dead. That's one dead doll.

JANE

I know. I have eyes.

HELEN

You can't sell dead dolls.

JANE

Maybe it's just one or two. I've had some die before, you just dump them in the water here. Nobody cares. It's not like America, where they pretend to care. Here, nobody cares.

[Thumps other boxes but no sound of any life. Finds her smile.]

It's nothing. I can always find new dolls. They're cheaper than free rocks. It's not a problem. You're making this a problem.

HELEN

Oh excuse me for panicking. I have powerful, deadly people lined up for...

[She gestures vaguely toward boxes.]

People who can make me disappear. I am debt free. I wish to remain debt free. My credit report is excellent! Why not just let them run around free??

JANE

Where they can sabotage the ship and yank on things they shouldn't be yanking on? And they need to be broken, I know a thing or two about such things, and you need to break your dolls of any resistance. Thus the boxes.

HELEN

Well aren't you all speechifying and smugacious? They are DEAD. You can't sell dead dolls. Not even I would get into that trade.

[A moment, then she squares her shoulders.]

Jane, this is...

JANE

Captain, I'm a captain, I have my own ship, I'm a captain.

HELEN

You're a whore-running outlaw, uh, JANE.

JANE

I can always find a new distributor of my cargo.

HELEN

I can always put a hint in some important person's ear about just what it is you're running on this little floating rust bucket. Do you forget I work for the State Department?

JANE

You work part-time fetching sandwiches for men in ties. You're not that important. Rust bucket? I just look like a fishing trawler, out for some fish. Nobody gives me a second glance. Now why are we being so nasty to each other? Those clients of yours can wait. It just makes everything sweeter. The anticipation.

HELEN

Or it makes them nervous and they find another way to get what they want. Free market principles, duh duh duh. Are you that stupid? Oh sorry, Mr. President of France, we can't deliver your doll as promised. Bang Bang. Two dead nobodies floating in the bay out there. We need to solve this now. Now!

JANE

One of the men I've been collecting these girls for is the Prez of France?

HELEN

No, Of course not. I never said any such thing. It was an example only.

JANE

Calm down. Why would he come here to get that? They have that in France, I hear, they're very liberal there. I was pulling your chain.

HELEN

You're not funny. You think you're funny, this is not a funny situation. Are you sure they're all dead?

[Both begin checking boxes looking for living cargo.]

Damn, this one threw up, what a mess. Damn...this one threw up, too...

JANE

Maybe food poisoning. Something that hit them at the same time.

[Both stop, stare at each other.]

HELEN

At the same time.

[She looks down into contents of the box nearest her.]

Where did you get this lot?

JANE

Bombay mostly, a few from Somalia, a couple from Mongolia of all places.

HELEN

Did you get them yourself or does someone round them up for you?

JANE

Oh it's the old ploy-- about how I'm opening this school, gonna teach them to be independent and have a real life blah blah, that same old shit that gets everyone all misty. They can't give away their daughters fast enough. Others I bought off this old guy in a market, he said they were his granddaughters. Wink, wink. What do you care?

[Closes top of nearest box.]

HELEN

Wait...wait...I promise fresh product. And you're not funny, this is a serious problem.

JANE

Please. The minute they get on board my Bouncing Dolphin, they're all fresh as apple pie, born again, pure as the driven snow! Why, is someone complaining?

HELEN

Not yet. Don't buy questionable goods! There are millions of these little unwanted bitches. You can't find the good clean unused ones??

JANE

How do I know any of that shit? Or care?? You want these kids, you get what you get.

HELEN

Uh, you mean, like now? when I get nothing?? When I have to call several important men and say, hey, sorry, no fresh dolls! They're all dead! Is that what I get?

JANE

Helen, you're always so hysterical. You need to relax. Want a drink? Want to make out?

HELEN

I could use a Grey Goose Martini and no, I don't want to make out.

[A moment, then both smile.]

Okay, sometimes you can be funny.

JANE

There's no need for drama. There are dolls right here in Mexico. And I bet, in America. I bet we can fill your orders locally if we have to.

HELEN

Oh sure, and get caught locally, too. Or get caught in America, where they might not care about most crap but they sure do care about kidnapped kids.

JANE

Only the white, pretty blond ones.

HELEN

Oh come on, we're not about to go on some weird American kid-snatching spree. That's suicide.

JANE

We're women. It's not suicide at all. We can get away with all kinds of crap. I can get anyone anywhere to trust me. Oh are you lost? Do you need some help? Ah, it's okay, it's okay, honey.

[Takes a big swig out of her flask, offers it to Helen, who hesitates, then accepts it.]

There ya go! Hair of the motherfucking dog, baby.

HELEN

What is this? Straight gasoline or a mixture of shit and gasoline? I honestly want to know.

JANE

It's out of Norway. I don't know what it is.

HELEN

So it could be fermented whale piss.

[Hands back flask. Jane accepts it with a grin.]

I don't think I can trust you anymore with these assignments.

JANE

Excuse me? There was a tsunami warning. And one of them or a couple must have had cholera or...

HELEN

I know, it's never your fault. Ever. Oh. Excuse me. I have to take this call.

[Jane about to speak but Helen waggles her finger furiously at Jane.]

Oh hi! Yes, no, they're not here yet, that shipment of porcelain dolls, nope! I don't know when they're coming in, soon. You're not a fan of shotguns and chainsaws, are ya? Going through a tunnel!

[Clears throat. Sighs. To Jane, done with her call.]

Cholera? Really? Why not act of God?

JANE

Am I allowed to talk now?

HELEN

Captain, we have a mess. Your mess. Which is now my mess. Maybe we should go gather up some local flora and fauna. You know, in this tiny poor place where everyone knows everyone, since we're nowhere near a real fucking goddamn center of population.

JANE

Hey, I pay a lot of money to dock here. Everyone looks the other way. They might be willing to part with a few of their brats.

HELEN

You know this for sure?

JANE

Well, no. I don't. But! It doesn't hurt to ask. You never know until you try. I never thought I'd be a happy or debt-free woman, but yet, here I am. And it's not whale piss, I think it's like ouzo, Norwegian ouzo or something. It's an acquired taste.

HELEN

Acquired taste of idiots and people you just can't trust with the simplest tasks in the world.

[Looks around at boxes then back to Jane.]

HELEN (cont...)

This isn't the first time. Is it that hard to keep them alive? Do you feed them? Water them once in a while? It smells like shit and death in here. Where do they go to the bathroom? A well-treated product is a more valuable product.

JANE

That some European Socialist nonsense. A badly treated product ain't trying to escape. Or sabotage your goddamn boat. This is how I roll, you don't like it, you can find another supplier. Go ahead. Google it. Ask your high and mighty friends. Hell, go retro. Try the Yellow Pages.

HELEN

I already have.

[Clears her throat, takes out a wad of cash from her pocket.]

I'll pay the expenses but not for the dead cargo. Ten thou should cover it.

JANE

Ten Thou? Are you insane? It's not my fault they died, what part of not my fault don't you get?

HELEN

I an insane to put up with you and your devil may care ways.

JANE

My what?

HELEN

You mix the product willy-nilly, you have arrived in Pequeno Peurto late the last three times. You ran afoul of that Navy exercise down around...

JANE

Oh I'm sorry I'm not a fucking robot. I deliver when I can deliver, you can't control the oceans or the Navies or the weather or anything else on this planet. And you've been going behind my back looking for other captains to deliver your dolls? That's cold.

HELEN

No, it's business, it's good business. You don't put all your dolls in one basket. I've learned that now that hard way.

JANE

You're a drug mule, baby. You're replaceable. Me, now...I have the necessary training and skills needed to prosper in finding little dolls for your freaks. Ain't hardly anybody can do what I do and get away with it as many years as I have. So you back your shit down, honey peaches lambypie darling.

HELEN

They are throwing little girls out in the street in parts of India. How hard can it be?

JANE

Babies, not seven or eight year olds. Babies.

HELEN

I won't back my shit down. You have failed to complete this contract! I am fucked! We're just supposed to start throwing all these worthless dolls out into the bay?? Someone, who's very powerful and runs a chain of famous banks, oh yes, that guy! was expecting a certain ethnicity, they won't be fooled by mud quality beaner tots! Jesus! I need a damn martini.

JANE

He won't care as long as it's young. I was thinking of heading back out to the big blue Pacific, and just tossing the garbage. That's all they are now, garbage. It's kinda sad. If you let yourself think about it. Which I don't.

HELEN

Never? Hell's a little close tonight.

JANE

Hell is being in debt, being on welfare, having no choices. These dolls, what choices do they have? Now that's hell. Their mothers should have ripped them right outta their bellies, you know? Everyone getting all upset about girls not being born, who gives a shit?? There's plenty of babies, they're throwing away babies left, right, and sideways still. We're doing em a favor, giving em a taste of heaven for a few hours. Then they die. Now that's a good life. A few hours of putting up with some pain, maybe a piece of cheesecake...then whatever comes after, and you're done!

HELEN

Now is that Christian, Jewish or Buddist? Or a combo of the three? Or are you just high? We're doing awful things for big amounts of cash. There is no defense for this. Cheesecake, are you kidding me? So. Fine. Good! You go dump those...things out in the ocean. And don't dump em near Hawaii or whatever, okay?? But, you, me...we're done. If I can't move product into the hands that demand it, well, then, I'm out of business, and sleeping with the koi in some...

JANE

Like I'd dump near Honolulu. That Pacific is endless and its waters are kind...a lot kinder than the death they had coming after your clients were done with em.

[A small cry is heard and Jane starts, hand to her heart.]

Damn! One made it. Near the back, I think.

[Helen remains where she is as Jane searches the boxes.]

Uh. No. No, that one's...ugh, what a mess, maybe they all drank some poison or someone poisoned them...

HELEN

Or maybe you got careless, food poisoning.

JANE

Hey, could be, a lot can happen at sea. I can always head back and get another dozen or a thousand or...

HELEN

You really don't care. About anything. You really don't care.

JANE

[Stops, straightens, looks toward Helen.]

Helen Rynertsen...I made my peace with the devil years ago. You want the still-living one or not?

HELEN

I had every one placed, a place in Vegas, a ring out of Boise. What good is one gonna do me?

[Takes a moment, then continues.]

What devil? You're one of his best captains. There. See how I called you captain?

JANE

I did, that was clever. And I know about the devil. I know all about him. I've seen him dancing out there on a stormy night, twirling and laughing in those big waves, he's waiting, he's waiting for me. And I'm okay with that.

[Silence. A box wiggles and rustles, then nothing. Jane walks over to it.]

You want quit of me, fine. It was a rough trip, it's just been me and no crew...no witnesses, you know. Things like this happen in the livestock business, that's what these dolls are, right, just livestock. But you're making a mistake. We understand each other, we know what we're doing, we have no illusions.

HELEN

I've got a few illusions left.

[Jane peers down into box that wiggled.]

JANE

It's alive. Scared. About five. If not...I can toss it with the rest.

HELEN

It. Um. Let me see it first.

[Comes over to box, peers down, then shakes her head, frowns.]

No. Maybe. Shit.

[Shakes her head, mutters to self as if going over a list in her head. Jane waits.]

I need older dolls. Who aren't so breakable. Toss her. I guess.

JANE

I guess you didn't need to bring your van. Do they ever check you at the border?

HELEN

Not once. I'm very good at pretending I'm not monstrous.

[Jane moves away from the box. Their eyes meet.]

I can't trust you if the cargo doesn't survive. And...I guess we can go get some local color. And we can go over your care of the dolls, right? Make a check list, a to-do list so they get here to Mexico, to this tiny port of Pequeno Peurto, safely.

JANE

That's redundant. Pequeno Peurto means tiny port. Yes, okay, you can make a bunch of lists for me. Feed them, water them, get them here alive ...which cuts into our bottom line.

[Helen peers into box that wiggled.]

HELEN

So you're coming to help me, right? You're very good at procuring. Right? This is making me all very nervous. Very nervous.

JANE

All this nonsense and worry, and dead dolls. Everything and everyone gets thrown away.

HELEN

Yes. You're goddamn right about that.

[Helen peers down into box yet. As if she cannot look away.]

Throw these dead girls out, get some live ones. Make a list for you. Make some calls. So much to do!

[Jane tugs on Helen's arm as lights fade to black. End of play.]

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