

1. □ □ BILLET OF LAST RESORT (Excerpt)

Copyright J. R. Rogers 2014

(“*Billet of Last Resort*” first appeared online in *The Legendary* □ Issue 36, March 2012.)

The 55-foot side trawler *Mary Jane* prepared to sail on the high tide from her berth at the foot of the commercial docks. Moments before, Gus was still on the pier. He loosened the lines waiting for the captain to give him the go-ahead to finish the job while squinting through the fog of a grey Texas dawn at a dirty brown seagull diving into the oily, brackish water of Corpus Christi Bay. He wondered what the bird had found to eat in the murky slop.

Up in the wheelhouse, Captain Harry Rickers was still tuning the engines, running up the revolutions, and then idling the massive twin Caterpillar diesels.

Again, Gus heard the growling of the engines. Then, a split second later, the violent thrashing of displaced water as the screws bit deeply into the harbor waters. The *Mary Jane* shuddered and her lines went taut before Rickers throttled her back. Then the lines went slack once again. He often tuned the engines that way before shoving off. □ Gus knew the Old Man thrilled at the raw horsepower he commanded and never missed an opportunity to run flat out whenever he could.

“Cast off, mister,” Ricker shouted finally from the open wheelhouse door.

Gus struggled to remove the lines from the large iron cleats. His amputated left thumb made grasping the thick, rough hemp lines difficult but he managed then jumped aboard the *Mary Jane* already inching away. There were three of them aboard, including Hector, the deckhand who doubled as the cook.

Up in the narrow wheelhouse Rickers pointed the vessel southwest into the bay and beyond the horizon toward Mexico. The *Mary Jane* surged quickly forward as the water peeled away from her bow.

The deck vibrated as Gus and Hector retrieved then stowed the old truck tires hanging over the port side. With the high tide came a breeze, which sailors say is good luck. That morning it blew heavy with the smell of rotting fish, painted wood and diesel

fuel. It tugged at the faded American flag displayed in regulation fashion from a jack staff on her stern.

Rickers applied still more power to the diesels.

Neither man looked back at the rapidly disappearing shoreline as the *Mary Jane* left Corpus and made for the breakwater. Moments later, she slipped into a fog bank and disappeared from view. Left behind were only puffs of black smoke lingering on the wind and the little oily waves lapping noisily at the crumbling dock.

It took almost three hours for the sun to burn off the early morning fog and by then they were alone at sea with little to do. Gus was ready to slip into his off-duty shipboard routine. He pulled off his black rubber boots in defiance of the Old Man's rules then snaked his way up to the bow. He made his way around the familiar nets and weighted footropes and floats stowed along the rail, all of the essential gear of the commercial shrimper that would sit idle that trip.

Rickers had briefed the crew last night. The Old Man climbed down the narrow ladder into their bunkroom at dinner.

At first, they ignored him. They lowered their voices and continued their conversation surprised by his appearance. Rickers always ate alone up in the wheelhouse surrounded by his instruments. He liked to sit in the elevated pilot's chair holding the Styrofoam plate with the little compartments next to his stomach. Rickers listened to the Coast Guard emergency channel while he ate, the way others watched TV. He insisted on solitude. But last night, he had set his empty plate down on the corner of their little folding sea table and interrupted their meal.

"All right you two listen up for a minute. There's been a change in plans."

Hector looked up first.

"We get underway tomorrow at 0600 like usual. Then it's going to be different. We're getting out of the shrimping business on this run." He paused for effect, confident that he now had their attention. "Going to haul something a little different." Rickers let that sink in for a moment then cocked his left leg up on the rails of Gus's bunk. He found a cigarette in his pocket, lit it with an old, worn Zippo, then lifted his cap and smoothed his hand back and forth over his sweaty, balding pate. He waited for their reaction.

Hector drew his sleeve across his mouth, an angry quizzical look in his eyes. He crumpled his messy paper plate and tossed it into the trashcan.

Gus saw the tattooed muscles on his shipmate's arm twitch and his broad shoulders shudder.

Hector stood and hiked his pants. "What? No more work?" He spoke in thick accented English.

"Captain?" Gus said. He turned to get a better look at him. "Why aren't we going to shrimp?" Gus didn't like surprises. He moved his plate aside then pushed back his chair. "Seems sort of sudden, doesn't it? What's going on?" □

Rickers looked at Gus. He didn't bother with Hector. He sensed a challenge to his authority. "I'm not answering any of your damn fool questions tonight," he told them irritably. "Hold them till we get to Campeche. We'll take on fuel and stores there." Then he leaned forward, stubbed out his cigarette in their ashtray, and lowered his voice. He looked first at Gus then at Hector. "You two keep your lips buttoned about this if you know what's good for you," he warned them. Then he stood and reached for the ladder to the deck. "In the meantime, it's normal shipboard routine." □

Gus glared at the gear as he made his way forward. He was annoyed and angry at their last minute change in plans. It was not a good sign. He found his habitual perch, atop the anchor housing and made himself comfortable. He extended his legs until they reached the leading edge of the forward hatch cover. From his vantage point, he could look out at sea, gaze at the sky, and sometime just forget. Already, he wasn't looking forward to their trip. He had sailed with Rickers only once before and had found the experience tolerable. The work was good, honest, backbreaking work hauling up the nets alive with thousands of teeming shrimp. It all helped deaden his past. The vast ocean, he thought, as he looked around, and the stiff, relentless wind so full of strength and vitality.

He liked to stand at the bow, his arms spread-eagle, and let the full punch of the wind try and knock him down. Afterward, he felt intoxicated. But most of all he liked the rhythm of the bow; how it lifted and then fell silently through the water. It calmed him, like the motion in a rocking chair. Gus had never been to sea before, but in the *Mary Jane* he sensed he might have found his calling; and now this, Rickers' little chat with them.

He'd heard the stories before, everybody had. Running empty trawlers south to Mexico was common enough if you were part of the shrimp fleet, but what was Rickers planning to bring back? Was it drugs? It had to be, he knew, the sinking feeling in his stomach causing him to panic at the thought of certain prison time if something went wrong. Down at the seamen's hiring hall in Corpus two months ago he was warned. □ "Keep your nose clean," the official growled. "I don't owe you but one chance. That's the deal we have with the Parole Board. Lucky for you Rickers don't mind ex-cons." Then he stamped Gus's newly issued seaman's card before he gave it to him. "Pier 15, the *Mary Jane*." □

The man's steel grey brush cut hair reminded Gus of the institutional look favored by the prison guards. Yes, thought Gus, he needed this damn job more than anything right now, but now the Old Man was being tempted by something far more intriguing than shrimp.

(Excerpted from Billet of Last Resort in The Way Things Were - Collected Stories)