

Forward:

This flash fiction short story is my contribution to the “Locked Room” genre. I got the idea for the padlocks from someone else but all the rest is my very own.

The Ship:

The Grace M. Hopper is a medium sized container freighter. The owners wanted to have her fly the American flag and refitted her to meet all the safety requirements of the U.S Maritime Administration. They wanted to outfit her to carry passengers and thought that the U.S. Flag would attract the “Top Dollar” American cruiser's interest. Her home port was Galveston Texas as this is a very active freighter port. The Ship was named after Dr. Grace Murray Hopper who was a computer scientist that invented COBOL. This is the first user-friendly business computer software system developed in the 1940's. She was also a rear admiral in the U.S. navy and the first person to use the term “bug” in reference to a glitch in a computer system when she literally found a bug (moth) causing problems with her computer.

The Crew:

Ship's captain:

First Mate: Commands the day watch and assists the Captain in administrative matters and paper work. Oversees all loading and offload operations.

Second Mate: Commands the evening watch. Assists all loading and offloading operations.

Third Mate: Commands the “Dog” watch. Assists all loading and offloading operations.

Bosun's Mate or Chief of the Boat: Supervises all deck operations.

Captain's (and passenger's) Cook:

Captain's (and passenger's) Steward:

Chief Engineer: Oversees all engineering and maintenance operations.

Engine Room Crew (The Black Gang):

Deck Crew:

No names have been given to the crew members because it really isn't necessary. The Captain's cook and steward were both female and hired from Chez Paree in the hopes that the freighter could offer something special in the way of grub.

The Passengers:

- Bernice Johnson – A middle aged no nonsense woman who impresses one with the looks of her capability.
- Thomas King – A young man who has the outgoing personality of a gambler or a “hail Johnny well met.”
- Dortha and Jason Williams – A young newly wedded couple rather shy and deferential.
- Benjamin Dolittle – A elderly gentleman, quiet in his demeanor.

- Donald Keystone – The opposite of Dolittle, this is a blustering braggart who takes over every conversation he enters.
- Julianna Rexford – An elderly lady with a personality to match Keystone's. She makes an interesting study when arguing with Keystone.
- Edith Ward – Middle aged, quiet and an altogether very nice person.
- Rachael Smyth – She is a paid companion to Julianna with a cute British accent and demeanor.

The Story:

Nine passengers are booked aboard the Grace M. Hopper, which as stated is a medium sized container vessel with luxury accommodations for passengers. She is to depart from Galveston, Texas and cruise the Caribbean with ten stops for delivering freight. The stops are also tourist spots and of interest to her passengers.

One of the passengers is a gambler, Thomas King, that is on the run from the mob. Only you and I and one other person on this ship knows that. Thomas King is, of course, a pseudonym.

The other passengers include a honeymooning couple, four single women and two single men all of which are well to do.

The ship sets sail or as we old salts say, departs.

Four days into the voyage two women and one man come to dinner and complain that they have had items stolen from their staterooms. They had been warned to keep their staterooms padlocked whenever they left it but due to the difficulty of padlocking, they had not done so. Changing the padlocks to a more modern system of locking was one of the changes to the old ship that had not been implemented yet. The victims, Julianna Rexford and Edith Ward, say they have lost a couple of items of very expensive jewelry while the man, Donald Keystone, said he had lost a large sum of cash.

The Captain tells the victims that he will order an immediate search of the ship to be conducted by the First Mate. He and his steward will conduct a search of the passenger staterooms.

During the search, he and the steward discovered the missing valuables in the Gamblers stateroom. When pressed by the passengers the Captain promised to lock the Gambler in the ship's brig and upon their return to Galveston contact the authorities for investigation and prosecution.

One of the passengers, Bernice Johnson, volunteered to help incarcerate the gambler as she stated she was a Las Vegas policewoman on vacation. She kept guard at the door of the brig while the Captain and Steward took him inside and got him settled. On the way out the Captain padlocked the door and made a point of telling everyone that he had the only two keys in his pocket.

The imprisonment occurred after dinner and the Gambler's food tray was left in the brig with the assurance that it would be removed when breakfast was delivered the next day.

The next day, the Captain and Steward together unlocked and entered the brig and found the Gambler dead. His throat had been cut sometime during the night. Oddly, there was no knife or cutting instrument in evidence in the brig. The Captain, after consulting with the Las Vegas policewoman decided to complete the cruise, return to Galveston and allow them to conduct the investigation.

Upon return to Galveston the police locked down the ship, and held it's passengers and crew while conducting the investigation. When they finished, they were at a loss. They then gathered all the evidence obtainable, interviewed everyone and allowed them to leave the ship when each had been cleared. The Captain himself was a person of interest until he proved that he had been on the bridge all night and had never left it. The fact that he had both keys to the brig in his pocket was very disturbing to the police. The police then had nothing left to do but declare it a cold case.

Several months later, the Captain, while onshore at a port of call saw the Las Vegas policewoman Bernice Johnson alone in a bar and because he was conflicted decided to get a few things off his chest.

He invited himself to her table and after a few desultory comments brought up the murder on the freighter. He told the woman that the only person that could have brought off the murder was either herself or the Steward. And the Steward, for many reasons, could not have done it. He wasn't certain but thought that Johnson had done the evil act. He explained that he had recently been to Las Vegas and had stopped at a police station in order to look her up and was told that there was no Bernice Johnson on the Las Vegas police force. He said that he had to know how and why and pledged his eternal silence on the matter. There was no extradition on the island for capital murder anyway.

Bernice Johnson thought about it for a while and everything at the table was silent while she ruminated on the idea. After a while Bernice said that she would tell all because everything that she said was totally unprovable and she missed getting some appreciation for the perfect murder. She told the Captain, in the nicest way possible, that she was a "Hit Woman" and the Gambler was a marked man because of his gambling debts. Her employers wanted to make an example of him to other debtors. And why not a woman – after all, women can do everything a man can do and a few things that a man cannot do.

She said that she spent the first few days exploring the ship and trying to come up with a plan that would work. She saw the spare padlocks in the engine room and discovered that they all came with only two keys. They were of the same make and model as the padlock on the brig door which she also so on her explorations. She saw that the only way to breach the locks security would be to have access to the keys and make a spare key. She then took a lock and it's keys. She had also observed that the passengers did not padlock their staterooms like they were told to do. At dinner she had seen that a couple of the ladies could not help

showing off their expensive jewelry and the well-to-do gentleman bragged about how they had brought along a lot of money to maybe do some "Duty Free" shopping.

During the fifth day out, she went into the passengers staterooms and stole a necklace, a diamond tennis bracelet and a wallet with about fifteen hundred dollars in it. She then went to the gambler's stateroom and hid the valuables. She knew that when the ladies dressed for dinner, they would find their jewelry missing and the proverbial poop would hit the fan.

This indeed was the primary item of discussion at the evening's meal and resulted in the Captain promising to search the ship.

When the valuables were found in the gambler's stateroom and it was decided to incarcerate him in the ship's brig, she volunteered to assist. While waiting at the door of the brig, she substituted the lock she had stolen from the engine room with the lock originally on the door and put the original lock in her pocket. When the Captain and Steward came out the Captain locked the door and shook the lock to ensure it was absolutely locked.

Later that night after everyone was asleep, Bernice took the knife she had brought on board with her and went to the brig. She made sure the gambler was asleep and silently unlocked the door. She went to the bunk where the gambler was sleeping and with one movement slit his throat and turned his head away from her. He tried to yell but could only make a choking sound. She held his head until he had bled out, wiped the knife on his clothing and then returned to the door. She put her padlock in her pocket and replaced it with the original padlock for which only the Captain had the keys. She locked the brig door and returned to her room after discarding the knife overboard.

She then said to the Captain. Don't you think that was the perfect murder? Since my instructions were to make it as showy a murder as possible as an incentive to other debtors I think I succeeded.

The end.