

BARNACLE BILL JUMPS SHIP

by
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(with Marcia Vaughan)

Captain Pete of the tugboat Liberty Belle was not a friendly man. Even his best friends would tell you that. Of all the rough sailors who lived in Ferry Cove, Captain Pete was the most solitary, the most grouchy, the fiercest and the scariest.

Captain Pete didn't mean to be fierce. But he looked terribly fierce, like an old time pirate with a thick black beard and one squinting eye that always peered at you as though he didn't believe what you were saying. When he had a deckhand on board he shouted a lot, and when he was alone he muttered to himself. Some of his friends thought he was lonely, but Captain Pete never said that.

What Captain Pete said was, "I live alone on my boat because that's the way I like it and that's that."

And nobody would contradict him, because the sailors in Ferry Cove figured if Captain Pete wanted to be a solitary old curmudgeon, that was his business.

One winter evening, when the great red sun was just setting into a low mist, the Liberty Belle steamed into Ferry Cove after a four day tow. Captain Pete's deckhand Charlie went up to the bow and dropped the anchor overboard, while the skipper put his engines in reverse and backed up to set the anchor firmly in the muddy bottom of Ferry Cove.

When the anchor was set, the two sailors went belowdecks to the galley for a last cup of coffee before Charlie rowed ashore. This was the way they ended every voyage.

Captain Pete always seemed to be scowling, so at first Charlie didn't even notice when the skipper actually did scowl.

"What's that noise?" Captain Pete said, lifting his chin into the air and looking around.

"I don't hear anything, skipper," Charlie said.

"Sounds like them old parrot fish down in the tropics, chewing on the hull," Captain Pete said.

"No parrot fish in Puget Sound, skipper," Charlie said. "Probably just waves."

"Waves," Captain Pete muttered. "I know waves, mate. Them's no waves. Somethin' scratching on my hull is what it is."

Captain Pete took his coffee cup and a flashlight up on deck and stood very quietly listening.

From on deck he couldn't hear the scratching, but there was a faint sound, a tiny sound, a sound that was barely more than silence. It was like the tiniest violin string in the world, scraped by a raspy bow.

Captain Pete walked along the deck toward the sound. He shined his flashlight down in the water and saw -- two golden eyes looking up at him from the darkness. Then he saw a tiny pink mouth just below the eyes, and that was where the sound was coming from.

"What kind of fish are you?" Captain Pete growled.

"Mew," said the tiny pink mouth.

"No parrot fish, that's for sure," muttered Captain Pete. "Maybe a baby octopus?"

"Mew," said the tiny pink mouth.

"Skipper, that's a kitten," Charlie said. "You better

get him out of there."

"I know it's a kitten, you ignoramus," Captain Pete said. "He got himself in there, he can get himself out."

But even as he said so, Captain Pete was lying on the deck to reach down over the side and grab the kitten by the scruff of his neck. The kitten clung desperately to the barnacles on the waterline, and when Captain Pete finally pulled him aboard there were still two barnacles caught in the kitten's paws.

When he got up on deck the kitten was a pitiful sight. His black fur was plastered down all over and his eyes looked too big for his body.

"Why he's no bigger than a herring," Captain Pete said.

The kitten was shivering uncontrollably, and trying to drag his skinny, waterlogged body toward the two sailors.

"Well, skipper, looks like you finally got a ship's cat," Charlie said. "Every ship needs a ship's cat."

"This boat don't need any ship's cat," Captain Pete said angrily. "I don't need any durned cat and no durned cat needs me. If you finished working, Charlie, quit messing with my business and get yourself ashore."

So Charlie rowed ashore in his skiff and Captain Pete started figuring out how to get rid of this nuisance cat the sea had gifted him.

Since the half-drowned cat was so cold he couldn't even walk, Captain Pete took him below and wrapped him up in a big blue towel and put him next to the little diesel heat stove that was always running in the cabin.

"There," he said. "That's all I'm going to do for you. No place for any durned cat on this boat. Nothing but trouble. You go ashore soon as you can walk, you understand me?"

The tiny black head with golden eyes turned toward him. The little pink mouth made one more faint "Mew", and then the eyes closed and the kitten was asleep.

"Hmph," Captain Pete said. "What a nuisance. Probably even going to want something to eat when he wakes up. Wouldn't surprise me a bit." So he took a bowl of the milk he kept for his own coffee and put it beside the kitten's head.

"Don't get any foolish ideas you're going to stay on this boat," he scolded the sleeping kitten. "I live alone because that's the way I like it and that's that."

And with that, he wrapped himself up in his other blanket and settled into his bunk with a tired sigh.

"Barnacles," he thought, as he was drifting off to sleep. He chuckled to himself. "Hanging on to the barnacles for dear life, he was. Sometimes there's nothing to do but hang on and hope for the best. Been in a spot like that myself, once or twice."

In the middle of the night he felt a strange sensation in his bunk. The boat wasn't rolling at all, and in his sleep Captain Pete couldn't figure out what was happening. He opened his eyes, and in the moonlight streaming through the porthole he saw a strange lump moving up his blanket. Pretty soon the lump had moved all the way from the foot of the bunk to the head, and a tiny, nightblack head with golden eyes popped out next to his shoulder.

"Barnacle Bill the Sailor," Captain Pete said sleepily. "No, that's wrong. Call you Barnacle Bill the Cat, 'cause you sure ain't much of a sailor."

Barnacle Bill the Cat snuggled his skinny body in the crook of Captain Pete's arm and put his chin on the skipper's shoulder and closed his eyes and went back to sleep.

"Durn nuisance cat," the skipper said, and he, too, went back to sleep.

It was raining hard the next day, and the wind came up something fierce, whipping the waves of Ferry Cove into whitecaps and slamming them against the hull of the Liberty Belle. Inside the sturdy hull the boat was warm and cozy, and Captain Pete decided he'd wait another day before he took the kitten ashore and got rid of him.

The skipper had to admit the kitten was a tough little critter.

Even being half-drowned and three-quarters frozen Barnacle Bill was up and poking around the cabin the very next day, his delicate nose sniffing along every inch of the wheelhouse and the galley and the engine.

"Hangs on when he has to, gets going when he can," the skipper muttered. "That's how I do it myself."

Once Barnacle even disappeared for two hours, and Captain Pete thought he'd gone overboard again, but finally saw the two golden eyes peering mischievously at him from the dark reaches of the fo'c'sle up forward.

Barnacle launched himself like a tiny rocket out of the fo'c'sle and zoomed the whole length of the cabin. He didn't even seem to touch the deck, but caromed off the bunk and the galley bulkhead. As he passed Captain Pete in mid-flight, he reached out and tapped the skipper lightly with both front paws in a one-two punch as delicate as a butterfly's touch.

It made even Captain Pete laugh.

The next time Captain Pete went ashore for provisions Barnacle was hiding someplace in the boat, and the skipper couldn't find him.

"Durn nuisance cat," Captain Pete muttered. "Always around when you don't want him, can't find him when you do. Be glad to get rid of him."

Captain Pete was tired of Barnacle stealing all his milk from him, so he stopped by at Wally Madrone's grocery store and bought a bag of kitten food. While he was at it, he

bought a bag of kitty litter and a litter pan to put it in.

"You get a cat, skipper?" Wally Madrone said in surprise.

"I don't need any durn cat and no durn cat needs me," Captain Pete snapped. "Just some flotsam and jetsam got washed up in the harbor and I ain't got rid of it yet."

When he got back to the Liberty Belle, Captain Pete realized he'd made a big mistake. Here he was with a full bag of kitten food and a full bag of kitty litter, and it was all going to be a big waste of money when he got rid of Barnacle.

"Durn nuisance cat," he muttered. "Now he's costing me money. Well I bought it, and I don't throw good money away. Come here, you Barnacle! You see this food? You better start eating, 'cause you're not going anyplace until I've got my money's worth."

That seemed to suit Barnacle pretty well. He obeyed Captain Pete right away and started eating like a true deckhand. It was shortly after that day a peculiar thing started happening.

Now, everybody who lived in Ferry Cove knew Captain Pete didn't want any company and never asked anybody aboard. But gossip travels fast in a small harbor, and between Charlie's story and Wally Madrone, pretty soon everybody knew there was a cat aboard the stout little tug. They wanted to see this creature who had not only survived hanging on to the barnacles, but survived Captain Pete's bad temper.

The first dinghy that came rowing up alongside the Liberty Belle was Julia, who lived on a little sailboat named Legacy. The women who live on the water are as independent as the men, and Julia, in particular, was just about as cantankerous as Captain Pete himself.

"Permission to come aboard, skipper," Julia called from her dinghy.

"Permission denied," Captain Pete growled. "Don't want any company. Not now or any other time."

"I didn't come to keep you company, you old fool," Julia said. "I came to see Barnacle and make sure you're not mistreating a poor innocent little animal."

"Mistreating! Why, I bought that durn nuisance cat the best food I could get my hands on, and I bought him -- "

"Skipper, just shut up your mouth about what you bought and grant permission to come aboard. I came to see that cat and I'm not leaving until I do."

This shocked Captain Pete, because nobody ever talked to him that way. But the truth was, he had respect for Julia because he knew she was the kind of sailor who could hang on to the barnacles for dear life when she had to. Just like him, just like Barnacle the Cat.

"Oh, all right," he said grudgingly. "Permission granted."

Julia tied up her dinghy at the stern of Liberty Belle, and before she'd even made the painter fast, Barnacle came flying out of the cabin on one of his full-boat zooms and launched himself into her arms as though he'd been waiting for her all his short life.

Julia had a brand new catnip mouse in her backpack, and the two of them started playing together on the aft deck like old friends.

Captain Pete couldn't think of anything to say, so he went below to the galley to make himself a cup of coffee.

While the water was heating, he poked his head back up on deck. Barnacle was lying on his back, wriggling happily while Julia scratched his stomach and crooned to him.

"Don't suppose you'd like a cup of coffee," Captain Pete said. He was a little embarrassed, because he didn't really know how to be hospitable. It was a lot like being friendly, and that just wasn't the way he did things.

"No, thanks," Julia said. "Wouldn't mind a cup of tea, though."

"Don't have any durn tea," Captain Pete said. "Drink coffee myself, because that's the way I like it, and that's that."

Without saying a word, Julia reached in her backpack and brought out a teabag, which she tossed to Captain Pete, and went on playing with Barnacle.

Now, the water people in Ferry Cove all know each other's dinghies, and whose dinghy is tied to whose boat. It isn't that they spy on each other -- but in a small harbor it's hard not to notice what's going on. By the time Julia left the Liberty Belle, everybody in Ferry Cove knew Captain Pete had granted permission for a visitor to come aboard to play with Barnacle Bill.

One by one over the next week at least a dozen sailors had all rowed over to the Liberty Belle to see the new ship's cat. It was more people than had been on board the Liberty Belle in the last five years. Suddenly it seemed as if the little tug had become the most popular boat in the harbor. Captain Pete bought extra coffee at Wally Madrone's grocery store, and even put in a box of tea bags specially for Julia of Legacy.

Sometimes, after playing with Barnacle Bill, the sailors would hang around and talk about their adventures at sea, and other sailors they had known, and what work they were doing on their own boats. Captain Pete found he didn't even mind the conversation, as long as they stuck to talking about boats and the sea, and mostly they did that anyway.

The one thing Captain Pete would never admit, though, was that Barnacle Bill was his ship's cat. He stuck to his story that he was going to get rid of the durn nuisance cat just as soon as the bag of kitten food was all eaten up.

"I live alone because that's how I like it, and that's that. I don't need any durn ship's cat at all," he'd say,

and nobody ever argued with him.