

THE GREEN CROSS

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I had never thought to be a sailor, but my father knew the Admiral. So I boarded his flagship on the evening of August 2, carrying my few possessions wrapped in a shawl. It was Tisha B'av, the Day of Mourning. The ship was small, and we sailors were to sleep on the wooden deck among the coils of rope and relieve ourselves over the side. Not that any of us slept that first night, readying the ship for our departure. The mate, under whose orders I would be, barely gave us time to pass water. His name was Juan Cabrera. A small man, he had a mean look and a heavy hand to compensate for his stature.

The more experienced sailors said our vessel was a tub, lacking elegance or speed. But she would stand up to a storm, they said. And her deep draft meant that she could carry most of our provisions for the whole fleet: not just water and ship's biscuit, dried peas and hard cheese, arquebuses and the new weapon called muskets, and glass

beads and hawk's bells to trade, but also horses and animals that would be slaughtered to feed us on the voyage as long as they lasted: cows, chickens, and pigs. Salt pork was one of the staples of seamen's fare. I wondered what would happen when I refused to eat it—if they would realize why and flog me or bind me in chains to be carried back to the Inquisition on our return.

I hoped they wouldn't notice, and that I could survive on a diet of ship's biscuit and dried peas alone, once our fresh provisions were gone. I carried three Seville oranges in my shawl, along with a clean shirt and my *t'fillin*. My father had a notion that fresh oranges and lemons made for healthy teeth. My mother had made the shirt. They too would be leaving for an unknown land this day. The shawl itself was a *tallit*. I would need privacy to say my prayers correctly. I couldn't imagine how I'd get it, unless I clambered up to the crow's nest at the top of the tall mainmast. I had never feared heights, so perhaps it would be possible. I said a silent prayer to Ha'shem that it would do.

"Boy! Quit dreaming and put your back into it." Cabrera never called me by my name, Diego. When I corrected him the first day, he fetched me a clout on the ear that made my head ring for half an hour afterward. So I didn't do it again. I kept my head down as my fellows and I pumped the bilge, scrubbed the deck, and hauled on heavy ropes to trim the sails. Off duty, I tried to avoid him, but the ship was small, only 75 feet with a beam of 25 at the widest point. She carried only forty sailors, and some of us were sleeping at any given time.

The Admiral would not protect me. I doubted anyone but the two of us knew of our connection. He spent much of his time in his private quarters, poring over his maps.

We saw him at morning and evening prayers, but of course he never greeted me. They were Christian prayers. Everybody knew how devout the Admiral was. He reminded us constantly that we made this voyage to the Indies for the glory of Jesus Christ. He tolerated *conversos*, such as those whose gold had helped finance the voyage. But his friendship with my father ran deep, dating back to a shipwreck in their youth. Admiral Columbus even knew that we were *marranos*, who still practiced our Jewish faith in secret. August 3, 1492 was the date not only of our departure for the fabled Indies and my parents and younger sisters for Italy, but of the expulsion of all Jews from Spain.

By the time we reached the Canaries, I could climb the rigging to the crow's nest with as much agility as a monkey from Gibraltar. As I had feared, it was my only refuge from Cabrera, who found so many reasons to clout me that my ears grew sore and puffy. No matter how hard I worked, I could not please him. We had to wait in the Canaries for a month while the *Pinta*, one of the two caravels, was repaired. Several times we were allowed to go ashore. I took my *tallit* and *t'fillin* with me and found a quiet place to pray. The Admiral heard that many Spaniards there, and others from the island of Madeira, swore they saw land whenever their ships ventured far enough to the west. The rumor instantly spread among the crew. It put heart in all of us. No one believed any longer that the earth was flat, that if we sailed too far we would fall off the edge into nothingness or, at best, encounter monsters. But our Admiral believed the ocean between our land and the Indies was less broad than others claimed, and he had staked our ships and all our lives on this belief.

By mid-September, I had almost forgotten the sight and smell of land. I felt the weight of Cabrera's hand or the sting of the short whip he carried thrust in his belt about

as often as I escaped to the crow's nest to greet my God. It renewed my courage to raise my face to the sun, balanced high above the vast rolling sea, with the *t'fillin* bound around my head and arm and the *tallit* on my shoulders fluttering in the wind, and cry out, "*Sh'ma Yisroel Adonai elohainu Adonai echad.*" I made sure not to raise my voice overmuch, for fear of being heard. But it felt as if God Himself carried my prayers away, weaving my voice under and over the creaking of the sheets and the wind buffeting the heavy, billowing sails. Hidden from eyes on deck by the bucket of the crow's nest and the curve of the mainsail, I felt not only safe but free, as I had never been at home when we hung dark cloth to hide the light and muffle sound so we could celebrate our Shabbat in the shadow of the Inquisition.

On September 19, we saw pelicans. I was standing at the rail with Fernando, the youngest sailor after me and a quiet but kindly fellow. I had just offered to share one of my lemons, of which I had obtained a supply, along with more oranges, during our stay in the Canaries. He was laughing at me, not believing my assurance that it was a sure preventive against tooth rot, when we heard a flapping of wings and the first pelican tumbled aboard with a squawk of surprise at finding a solid surface beneath its webbed feet. It was a comical fellow, big and brown and topheavy with its long, sagging beak. Fernando and I were staring at it in amazement when we heard a sharp indrawn breath behind us.

"Thanks be to Our Savior!" We whirled to find the Admiral standing behind us, his face alight with satisfaction.

"Excellency!"

Fernando and I hardly knew whether to bow or stand at attention, and I dropped my lemon, which the pelican quickly snatched up, gulping it down whole, so we could see its shape in the bird's gullet. Cabrera would have cracked our skulls with the butt of his whip and snarled us back to work. Admiral Columbus beamed and clapped each of us on the shoulder.

"Don't you see, lads? Land! The bird means land is close at hand!"

The day before, we had seen river weeds floating from the west and a small white bird that the sailors called a water-wagtail and swore never slept at sea. But the pelicans, for another came on board that evening, filled all of us with hope that the object of our journey was close at hand.

"Imagine it, Fernando!" I exclaimed when the Admiral had moved off. "We will see the Indies!"

"Or some deserted rock fit only for a bird that shits on land but feeds at sea," Fernando said. He spat over his left shoulder for luck. But his dark eyes twinkled. Fernando came from Granada, far to the south, where the remaining Moors had been expelled at the same time as the Jews. I sometimes wondered if Fernando was a *marrano* like me. But kindly though he seemed, I never dared to ask. Such things were best left unspoken.

"I don't care," I said. "This is a great adventure! Did you ever dream you would see more of the world than anyone else you've ever known?"

"Don't get too happy, boy," Fernando said. "You watch out for Cabrera. He means you ill. He'd like nothing better than to find a way to do you an evil turn."

"I've done nothing to earn his enmity," I said. "What does he want from me?"

“Not your happiness,” Fernando said. “Or for you to bask in the favor of the Admiral. I tell you, the man is evil.” He leaned closer, his lips against my ear. “They say that in Seville he was an informer for the Inquisition. If you can, stay out of his way.” He shook his head and turned away before I could question him further. “I’ll say no more.”

In spite of Fernando’s warning, I was happy that night when I closed my eyes to sleep. But before morning, an unexpected turn of events threw me into despair. The first I knew was when Cabrera and two sailors roused me from my uncomfortable bed, a coil of rope near the forecastle that raised me a couple of inches above the prevailing wash of seawater on the deck.

“Tell us, you vile little shit!” Cabrera shouted. “What did you do with it, you spawn of Satan?” He punched me in the belly, while his two cronies, hardbitten men whom it was rumored Cabrera had recruited in the prisons of Seville, held my arms. I gasped and nearly vomited.

“What?” I choked out. “What did I do with what? I’ve done nothing!”

All around us on the deck, my fellow sailors sat up, roused by the commotion, and stared. But no one moved to stop him. Cabrera had absolute power over us all, unless the Admiral intervened. And he would not. I didn’t even know if he knew that whatever Cabrera was cursing at me about had occurred. I kept begging him to tell me what was wrong, so that I could make some kind of defense against it. But he kept punching me until my mouth and nose bled and I did vomit onto the deck. One of his sailors threw a bucket of icy seawater over me, leaving me shivering in the chill of the night. Cabrera went on cursing.

Not until they had shackled me with chains around my wrists and ankles and thrown me in the hold, as the vessel had no brig, my head dangerously close to the thrashing hooves of the horses tethered there, did I find out what had gone wrong.

Among the most treasured objects on the ship were the royal standard and the banner of the Green Cross. The Nina and the Pinta each carried a Green Cross banner too. It bore not only a cross, but the initials of the King and Queen on either side, with a crown over each letter. They were meant to be carried ashore wherever we made landfall, so the Admiral could claim any new lands we found in the names of their Most Christian Majesties and the Savior. Now the Santa Maria's Green Cross banner had gone missing, and Cabrera accused me of taking it.

“What did you do with it, you miserable little turd?” he roared, kicking at my head and groin as I lay in a puddle thickened like soup with wisps of straw and horse droppings. My chains hampered movement and ground against my flesh as I jerked and writhed, trying to avoid the blows. We sailors went barefoot, but Cabrera wore boots.

“I did nothing! I would never touch the banners! They are sacred to their Majesties!”

“Impious worm! I see the devil does not allow Our Savior's name to cross your lips! It is as I thought: you stole the banner to defile it.”

Cabrera had guessed I was a Jew! My heart quaked in my chest and my bowels turned to water.

“I swear I did not touch it!”

Cabrera drew back, panting, and uttered an evil laugh.

“We will prove you did.” He turned to one of the sailors who flanked him, silently watching him abuse me. “Find his belongings and search them well.”

My t’fillin! If they found them, I was doomed. Most Christians would have no reason to know what such objects were. But Cabrera had served the Inquisition.

One of the sailors standing in the shadows shifted the lantern in his hand. I thought he meant to blind me or merely to illuminate my shame. Then in the guttering light, I saw Fernando’s face. He shook his head slightly. Thank the Lord! I still had a friend. When they took me, he must have taken the *t’fillin* from my bundle and stowed them elsewhere, perhaps among his own possessions or somewhere they were even less likely to look. I thanked him with my eyes, wishing I could entreat him to tell the Admiral. His Excellency never interfered with discipline on the deck. But surely he would not let me die. However, I dared not move my lips.

Cabrera passed the time in humming to himself and bestowing an occasional kick on me. When the sailor returned, he whirled and demanded, “Well? Did you find the banner?”

The sailor shook his head.

“Nothing.”

Cabrera growled deep in his throat.

“Throw his bits and pieces overboard. He’ll have no more use for them, I’ll see to that. And search the ship!”

My mother’s shirt! I had done my best to keep my courage up until then, but now my eyes filled with tears. I clenched my jaw and willed them not to spill.

“I’ll direct the search myself,” Cabrera declared. With a parting kick that left me wheezing as I fought for breath, he sneered, “We’ll leave you to your thoughts.”

They took the lantern, leaving me in darkness. I smelled rot and seawater and the reek of penned-up animals. I heard them shifting their hooves and the occasional whicker, grunt, or moo, as one or two of the pigs and cows still remained. Above the usual creaking of the ship and lap of water washing against the timbers, I heard the thud of my terrified heart. After a while, the grooms, who had retreated to the far end of the hold, returned and went about their business of tending the animals. They ignored me, and I averted my eyes from them, that I might not read contempt or indifference in their faces. I prayed.

I do not know how many hours passed before the hatch cover nearest me banged and I heard footsteps descending into my prison. Not boots: Cabrera had not come himself, but sent sailors to drag me onto the deck. Still chained, I had no choice when they seized me under the arms and dragged me, stumbling, onto the deck.

Cabrera had assembled the whole watch. They were drawn up in ranks, every face impassive, even Fernando’s. There was no sign of the Admiral. No eye met mine, no murmur of horror or sympathy came to my ears. If I could but die of shame this moment, I would not have to endure whatever torment Cabrera planned for me. I set my jaw and did my best to hold my head high.

A sailor held the Green Cross banner whipping in the wind. It was proud and beautiful. Unlike me, it would see the Indies or perhaps an undiscovered land.

Cabrera thwacked his whip against his palm in a steady rhythm. His eyes blazed with triumph.

“There it is, boy. Did you think I wouldn’t find it? And do you know *where* it was found?” His voice became genial, with a malevolent undercurrent that chilled my blood.

“Of course you do.”

I thought to swear I did not, but realized it would do me no good. I remained silent.

Cabrera’s arm shot up, his forefinger pointing heavenward.

“The crow’s nest, boy, the crow’s nest!” Cabrera cried. “You thought yourself clever, lashing it to the mainmast beneath the bucket, where none could see it save they went aloft. But not clever enough, you sacrilegious oaf. Your hiding place is proof enough of your guilt. Who but you has clambered aloft each day, on your watch or off it, at every moment you could?”

Cabrera stepped forward as daintily as a cat despite his boots. I did my best to meet his gleaming eyes. When he stood so close that I could feel his hot breath on my face, he grasped my chin roughly, like a hawk gripping prey in its talons. His fingers were cold as ice. He addressed me in a searing whisper that caressed and flayed me at the same time.

“Would you like me to tell you how you are going to die?”

I dreaded his next words, but like the rabbit before the snake, could do nothing to avert them.

“Stop!” Sharp as an axe, a clear voice broke the spell. “What is going on here?”

It was the Admiral.

All eyes turned to Cabrera, who stood smartly to attention and nodded toward the flag.

“Your Excellency! It is a simple matter, not worthy of Your Excellency’s attention. This wretched miscreant stole the sacred banner. But we have solved the crime, retrieved the banner, and we are about to punish the criminal.”

I dared not speak. The Admiral pushed past Cabrera without touching him. The mate simply fell away, the righteous glow that had given him stature and presence fading. The Admiral seemed twice his size. Like Cabrera, he took my chin in his fingers, but how differently. His hand was gentle, and I could feel courage flowing from his fingertips into me.

“Diego.” When he spoke my name, a sliver of hope cracked the darkness in my soul. “You will speak the truth to me. Did you take, steal, or in any way misuse or desecrate this banner?”

I cleared my parched throat. They had given me no water in the hold.

“No, Your Excellency.” I cleared my throat again and spoke less hoarsely. “Admiral Columbus, I did not touch the banner. I swear it by God, my father’s life, and my own soul.”

The Admiral’s fingers drifted off my chin as he turned and regarded Cabrera, who stood at attention but, with the Admiral towering over him, seemed but a puffed-up little man who fed on blood like a scavenger.

“And on what grounds do you accuse this particular lad of the theft?”

“It could be no one else, Your Excellency,” Cabrera said. “We found the banner lashed to the mainmast just below the crow’s nest. This, er, lad, Your Excellency, is the only sailor with a habit of spending much time aloft. He climbs the rigging every day, my lord, and stays there for hours, shirking his appointed work.”

The Admiral turned back to me, his face neutral but his voice, it seemed to me, benign.

“And do you shirk your duties, young Diego?”

“No, your Excellency, I swear it,” I said. “I have gone aloft only when it is not my watch, or when it is my duty to serve as lookout—or to scrub the crow’s nest when sea birds have fouled it.”

It seemed to me a smile tugged at the corners of the Admiral’s mouth.

“And what draws you to this high perch beyond your duty?”

“I—I feel closer to God there, Your Excellency. And I like to look for land. I believe we will find it soon, Your Excellency, ever since we saw the pelican.”

“Ah, the pelican,” the Admiral murmured. He said nothing more, so I spoke again.

“I dream of being the first to spy the shore.”

Now the Admiral smiled outright, though none but I could see.

“As do I, Diego, as do I.” He paused, and no man dared interrupt. “Tell me, Diego, when did you last climb aloft?”

“Yesterday, Excellency,” I said. “The day before we saw the pelican. It—it excited me, and since the bird had come on deck, I preferred to stay where I would have a closer view if another boarded. And it did, my lord, it did—that very evening. Otherwise, I was on watch and at my duties until tonight, when I slept until—until I was awakened and told the banner was gone.”

“And do we have witnesses to this account?”

Cabrera opened his mouth, but the Admiral ignored him. He surveyed the ranks of sailors with a stern eye.

“Did anyone see this lad, Diego, going about his duties on this day?”

To my great pleasure, not only Fernando, but several men spoke up.

“Aye, Your Excellency, he swabbed the decks with me on the midday watch.”

“I bedded down beside him this evening, Excellency, and marked him well at the evening meal.”

“He stood next to me at evening prayers, Your Excellency, and prayed with great devotion.”

“We stood together at the rail,” Fernando said, “as Your Excellency knows, when the pelican came aboard this morning. He did not leave the deck, and so I will swear in the name of Christ Our Savior, if need be.”

“And are there any witnesses who saw this boy in the rigging, or in the crow’s nest, or in possession of the Green Cross banner at any time?”

Silence.

“Cabrera! Strike his chains!” His voice was crisp with command. “I find this boy not guilty!”

“But—but—but—” Cabrera sputtered. “Your Excellency! I must protest!”

Would he mention his suspicion that I was *marrano*? I held my breath. Cabrera drew a deep breath, I thought to accuse me. But in the end he held his peace. He had no proof, after all. And he too had no doubt heard the rumors about Columbus himself. He didn’t dare.

“Excellency, even without witnesses,” Cabrera said, “how do we know he did not take the banner at some earlier time?”

“Do you question *my* word, mate?” Columbus asked. “For the witness is myself. I saw the lad at the rail when we beheld the first pelican this morning. And directly after that, I went to view the royal standard and the Green Cross banner where they lay in their accustomed place. The pelican confirmed my faith that very soon we will encounter land, and I wished to pray in the presence of the symbols of our mighty patrons, God and Their Majesties. After that, witnesses bear out that he had no opportunity to steal or conceal the banner. The lad is innocent. The matter is closed.”

“If not he, Your Excellency,” Cabrera said, “then who? For someone undoubtedly took the flag and attempted to conceal it.”

“A good question, mate,” the Admiral said blandly. “Perhaps we will never know. Now disperse these men and go about your business. At once!”

I stood there rubbing my wrists, on which the shackles had left red marks that would no doubt turn to bruises. I could not help believing that the Admiral, like me, suspected that Cabrera had hidden the flag himself so he would have something to accuse me of. Dazed with relief and gratitude, I cast him one last shy glance and mouthed, “I thank you, Excellency.”

And before he turned away, Columbus winked.

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