

Susanna's Cradle, January, 2020

Part I: The Journey

Later, much later, after the arrival and the births and the deaths, long after the ship that carried her had vanished from all sight and knowledge, there was still the cradle, fragile though it had always seemed. Susanna knew it was sinful to hold so tightly to an earthly object or to take selfish pride in her possessions. But still she loved its woven wicker, its sturdy rockers, the way it enfolded her children. There had been many times when she wished to crawl into it herself, to sleep curled up and small within its confines away from all sight and knowledge of the world and its perils.

Here is the cradle that sailed the sea, it sailed the sea for thee and me. She would often croon this invented song to her babes. The cradle and the sea, the inevitable sea. She had sailed it all those years ago and never would again and yet her prayers and the sway of the cradle were set to its rhythms. Her nourishment came from it and tasted of brine. Its salt crusted her skin on winter mornings as she went out to the village oven to check her bread or to gather her washing, cold and stiff.

It was easy enough now to grant the sea benevolence, but despite the passage of time, its terror still haunted her. God and nature and sailors were all wise enough to know that departing England for America in September was folly, even she knew that now. But those she had traveled with were desperate rather than wise and they had left to find their Canaan. Her body could still remember the autumn storms that marked their passage. There were times on the ship when there seemed to be so

many things to fear at once that the fear became more palpable than love or obedience or faith.

Sometimes now at night, with the light from the dying fire glinting on the walls, and all her family drowsing about her, she would remember how profoundly dark it was below decks, how she tried to find comfort in words she snatched from the psalms she had memorized. *He made darkness his secret place and his pavilion round about him, even darkness of waters, and clouds of the air.*

But, in those moments, just as she could not see her hand in front of her face, she could not sense God's presence, only that of the ship now down, now wildly ascending, the wind screaming across roiling water. She closed her eyes now as she had closed her eyes against the impenetrable and terrifying darkness then. And as if no time had passed, as if she were still a passenger on that ship, there was her husband prone behind her, his steady voice praying into her ear. Someone more distant retched, the smell of vomit and urine and the inexorable sea was all round them. Bodies pressed and rolled in their beds, wet wool chafing skin, cold, teeth chattering. All convinced, each to his own, that God would send them to the bottom of the sea as was His will or that God would see them through this storm as was His will. Every last soul was afraid, except her son who somehow was asleep against the bloom of her belly, his small hand clasped in hers. She could feel his breath, the only source of heat.

Susanna's fear was different. The babe within her had not moved all that day or night. Or had he? She had tried to convince herself otherwise. The violence of the storm, the wild pitching, made it seem all was motion and she told herself that she

could not distinguish his kicks from the vast swells. Time had lost meaning and she no longer knew if it were morning or night. It had been many hours since she ate or drank, and even more since she stood.

But before that day, no matter what was happening on the sea around them, no matter how much or little she herself moved, she never went more than a few hours without sensing the insistence of his feet, the way his heels moved under and across her stretching and pulling her skin from within. As the rest of her waned, nourished only with dried meat and hard bread, her belly waxed more each day. The life within was a source of inexpressible comfort to her, a reminder of where they came from and where she hoped they were headed.

Nowhere was it still but inside of her. The bitter side of hope was the crushing worry, always present, that the babe would die. The universe had been reduced to her body and her one free hand tracing courses in the dark, navigating the curve under which a beating heart lay, or so she willed it.

Her eyes had opened, although there was nothing to see. Suddenly the ship gave a great shudder, the largest one yet, and there was a terrible crack. She heard cries and murmurs all around and one man's voice above the others "May it please God to save us!" She felt the ship slap against the water - or was the water slapping against it? She no longer knew and instinctively she sat up as if to flee, her hands still pressed against her body where they were met with an answering footfall, as if her child was fleeing with her. She found herself beyond words or coherent prayer, her mind reciting a litany that soon lost meaning. *Thanks be to God, Thanks be to God, Thanks betoGOD.*

She fell back into the swells, into the relief that was the storm, into sleep that endured as the ship was tossed only God knew where.

Chapter 1

Delfshaven, The Netherlands, July 22, 1620

Susanna never was inclined to weeping, but as she watched her husband she wondered where her own tears might be. Will's deep brown eyes pooled as he looked toward the shore and his face was wet when he turned it to the azure sky. His large calloused hands reached as if to clasp the wisps of cloud that danced across its surface and pull them down for her. She wished suddenly, shockingly, that they were running through her hair.

Sensing that she was watching him, he turned to her, leaned down, and said softly, "You have been very quiet."

The nearness of him almost undid her. There was so much she wanted to ask but it was best not to start speaking aloud. *Did they have enough in their stores? Would the seeds she had carefully placed in paper packets grow in the new soil? What roof would shelter them? Where was the cradle? How was she to live without her father?*

If she allowed any one of these sentences to pass her lips, they, and many more, would spill out in an unstoppable stream of doubt.

She forced a small smile and said only, "I am waiting."

The ship was moored on a river that eventually opened out to the invisible sea. It was anchored a short distance from the bustling quay, and they leaned against the stern's side and peered out. Susanna's unease deepened as she felt the press of bodies behind her; the railing that held her in the ship's embrace came up only to her chest and the deck was