



Frank Jr. tosses line as he comes along side

WATER TAXI

Just a few more cases to unload and we could call it a day. Twelve hours is enough for anyone, especially after loading half dozen ships with their last minute stores and having to argue with the pursers over the COD's before allowing the supplies to be taken aboard. The Water Taxi business was going full steam with so many ships coming into L.A. because of the low cost bunkering fuel, and this being the only transportation available for the crews to go ashore or receive supplies while their ships rode at anchor.

The number 13 boat was coming along side with a large group of the ship's crew to off-load. "Hey! Gus! Help them with their lines and I'll finish loading the basket," I shouted to Water Taxi Service's part-time jack-of-all-trades.

"OK Ron," he yelled as he took off towards the bow to take the bow line of the incoming Water Taxi. The 13's engine rapped up in reverse and the exhaust almost choked everyone. Most of the passengers were already jumping on to my taxi to get across to the boarding ladder which led, at a precarious angle, up towards the high deck of the empty tanker.

"Busy day, huh Frank?" I asked. The question was really just an attempt to start a conversation with the head man of the Water Taxi fleet that had been pressed into driving a boat himself, because all the regular boat operators had been working too much overtime. The operators started calling in sick or having emergency crises in the family (but, if the truth were really known, they just had too much money which was burning a hole in their pockets).

"I've got another run for you after you finish this load, so meet me at the dock and I'll fill you in. I'll be back after I drop the rest of these crewmen off at the Greeker," Frank yelled.

"Aw come on Frank, Gus and I have been at it all day," I whined.

"You wanted work and now you've got it. This won't go on for ever. Better make it while you can," he replied, and that ended the conversation.

The hoist lifted the basket with the last of the stores off the deck of the taxi. Frank whipped No.13 around like it was a toy and was off and running towards a cargo ship anchored out near the middle breakwater.

Gus and I cast off and headed for the main channel and to our company dock by the ferry building, passing Bethlehem Shipyard off to the right, with a ship in dry-dock and another at the wharf being repaired. I guess I still had a longing for the sea, but I couldn't convince my family they would be better off financially if I followed my instincts.

We tied up and old Gus started hosing down the decks. Gus never said much but you knew he had been around. He had to be close to 75 years old. He only worked part time like me, but lately we'd both become steady crew. Gus remembered when these boats were used for rum-running up from Mexico in the late 20's and early 30's, and at that time had high-speed Liberty gas engines. After that he operated the taxis ferrying gamblers out to the "Rex" and "Tango" just before World War II started.

The dispatcher handed me a sheet with a list of female names and informed me that they would be my next load to take out to the Liberian ship at anchorage 11, and that I should wait for no longer than two hours and be sure to count heads coming back. (Immigration would not permit certain foreign crews ashore, but they didn't forbid visitors out to the ships at anchor.)

"Where are they and when will they get here?" I asked.

"You and Frank have to go to Wilmington and pick them up and bring them here." The dispatcher seemed to be having fun with this bit of information and couldn't keep from telling everyone. That is, until Frank docked his water taxi and came into the office. I guess he could tell from the expressions on our faces that we knew what was on tap, because he lit into the dispatcher for blabbing his big mouth

off. They nearly came to blows.

"Hey, Frank," I said, you know that I don't have a ticket to carry passengers. You could get into trouble; maybe even get your PUC lifted."

"That's exactly why I want you to help me on this one. You know the talk among the operators. They're demanding more than I can afford now and information like this would be enough ammunition to shut me down if I don't give into their demands....Now....will you help me?" he asked.

"Of course I will. I have nothing to lose so maybe we can work something out. You take the 11 boat out with the ladies and I'll follow in the 13 boat, and stay on station until they're ready to come ashore. OK?"

Frank grabbed the phone and dialed a number, "Let me speak to Jan." A moment later he said, "Hi sweetheart, how's tricks? Ha!" He thought it was funny but I doubt that whoever was on the other end of the line thought so. "We're ready on this end, how's it going at yours? ...Right...we'll be there in a few minutes."

He hung up the receiver, dug into his pocket, and pulled out a set of car keys and handed them to me. "Take the Caddy, go to Red's and ask for Dinko. Tell him I sent you, he knows what to do, understand?"

"Am I going to be doing anything I could be sent to jail for?" I asked.

"Hell....no! We've known each other too long for me to get you into any trouble....trust me." On that he walked out to a taxi cab stand in front of the restaurant next door, hopped into a cab and drove off.

I was working only part-time at Harbor Boat and things at the shipyards were slow, so Frank offered me a part-time job operating the non-passenger, freight only boats and occasionally the famous honey bucket barge "Ramona." She was once a famous Trans-Pac racer. She is only used around the harbor now collecting garbage off ships and then dumping the stuff out to sea. A job none of the operators wanted.

I went down to the water taxi to get my jacket and cigarettes and found Gus almost asleep in his nest made up from the life preservers. I told him to be prepared to look his best because we were going to take a load of beautiful ladies out to one of the ships. He just laughed and rolled over pretending he didn't understand what I had said.

The damn Caddy wouldn't start, I had never driven a car without a clutch before so had to go back to the office and get the dispatcher to come out and start the car. He drove it occasionally to pick up the mail or go on pick-ups for Frank. He explained the procedure and I drove all of three blocks to Red's place and parked around in back, got out and started in through the back door. A couple of drunks saw me drive up in the Caddy and started wising off. The loud-mouthed

one stood in the doorway and tried to block it so I couldn't go in. We must have made a lot of noise pushing each other around when a big bruiser came out of nowhere, grabbed both of us, and damned near choked us to death. Then announced, in some foreign accent I didn't recognize, for us to stop fighting or we'd wind up in the hospital. With the choke hold he had on us it left us little room to resist, so we agreed.

Eleven o'clock and the place was jumping. The bar was full and a bunch of men were milling around a table of pretty women. I asked where Dinko was. I kind of figured the bouncer was the guy I was looking for but was afraid to ask him, so I threw the question to a voluptuous woman sitting alone on the end stool of the long bar.

"Honey I can do soooo much more for you than he can," she whispered in a husky voice.

I told her this was a business matter.

"Well then Honey, let's cut out the middle man and get down to the business," she insisted.

"Maybe later. But I'm serious about the business matter. Now please point out who Dinko is," I pleaded.

"Annie, this joker give you trouble I toss him out on ear!" I looked around just as the bouncer was about to grab the front of my shirt "You troublemaker, OUT!"

Annie came to my rescue. "Stop Dinko, he was just asking for you. This is Dinko....in person. But I still say I can do more for you than he can." She pouted when I smiled and winked at her.

"You from Frank?" he asked. I nodded. "Why you start trouble when come in here?" he demanded.

I explained about driving up in the new red Caddy convertible and that the drunks must have gotten jealous. He accepted the reasoning, and poured me a drink without even asking what I liked. I guess he thought I looked like a Gin drinker. Half a tall glass of pure gin and the rest with lemon fizz. "Not bad," I thought as I downed the refreshing drink....He didn't offer a refill.

Dinko started talking privately with Annie, who then left her bar stool and moseyed over to the table where all the guys were standing around. All I saw her do was toss her head back, and the girls at the table stood up and headed for the back door. Dinko beckoned for me to join him at the back door and as I was leaving he told me to take the girls out of there as fast as I could, as he didn't know how long he could hold off the horny bunch they'd been sitting with.

He didn't have to convince me to get the hell out in a hurry. Taking five

pretty girls out of any bar at one time, and by one man in a big red convertible Caddy didn't seem....well you know.

Annie sat next to me in the front seat for the long trip of three blocks to the Water Taxi docks. I ushered the five ladies down the gangway to the floats where the taxis were tied up. The girls were half-tanked and having a great time. Annie kept scolding them "to act like ladies," but they just howled and started doing curtsies and acting just plain silly. All the giggling woke Gus up, who stuck his balding head out from under the weather curtains at the side of the boat. The girls saw him and made a beeline straight for him. They must have figured he was too old to get it up anymore, so they started to tease him by rubbing their bodies on him and kissing his bald head. But let me tell you, after seeing Gus in action I don't think 75 is too old for anything! Because, dear old Gus came to life, it even delighted the girls to see him go further than even they expected.

I was sitting on the dock box with Annie, wanting to ask her what this was all about. Down inside I was sure I knew the answer. Didn't they feel ill at ease? Did they really make enough money to make it worth their while? Did they enjoy doing this? Did they have to? I guess deep inside I looked down on them as being tramps and low-life's even though I've met them in most every port I'd hit. I remember The International Settlement in Frisco and French Quarter or Front Street down in New Orleans, The Bowery or The Battery in New York. Scully Square up in Boston, but here in San Pedro, Beacon Street really had them all beat.

The dispatcher was hurrying down the gangway onto the dock and called me aside, "Frank is down at the Boat Works and wants you to bring the No.13 boat and all the girls. He said to hurry up because someone is following him."

"Gus, leave the girls alone and crank up 13, we've got a run to make. Annie, ask your friends to climb aboard that boat over there and sit down. We're just going down the channel a little way. Ask them not to show themselves."

"It's about time you started," Annie griped, "We've wasted almost an hour waiting for you guys to take us out to our ren-dez-vous. Friday night is our biggest payday, and half the night is already wasted." The twin diesels were purring as I slipped the clutch levers in reverse and eased the throttles for more power to back out from the long narrow dock. Then, engaging the starboard clutch ahead and pouring on the coal to that engine, the boat turned around in her own length and wake.

"Damn!" I thought to myself, "Here comes the 'Islander', one of the Terminal Island ferries. I should keep out of her way even though she's off to port. Will she go ahead of me or will she cut behind me? Does she even see me?" My thoughts were running fast and furious as I maneuvered 13 out in the channel.

Then I yelled at Gus, "Gus, look and see if our running lights are on. I can see the bow and stern lights but I can't see the side lights and the switch is on." Gus climbed on the rail and walked around the outside of the house then rapped on the windshield and gave an OK hand sign. I blew the horn one long blast and continued on my course. The Islander gave four blasts in succession. As I had already crossed her bows, I figured it best if I continued on my course and not make any erratic maneuvers. I gave another blast on the horn and got no reply. Reasoning the crisis was over, I headed down the ship channel past the fuel dock and sport fishing landing. We passed the pilot station and headed into the ever windy "hurricane gulch", then turned up the channel towards the Boat Works. Frank was waving his arms on the end of the pier and motioning me to bring the boat in there. I slowed down, and pointed the bow into the dock, then put both engines in full reverse for just a second, and then stopped the engines as the wind pushed us into the dock. Gus threw Frank the stern line and I went forward and tossed him the bow line.

"What's happening, Frank, the dispatcher said someone was following you, how come?"

"Damn it, not now. Let's just get the hell out of here.... fast." He whistled towards the shed at the top of the dock. Four women came down the gangway towards us. The float we were tied to was rocking and rolling all over so I jumped on the float to help the ladies aboard. In fact, I had to grab the first one around the waist and bodily lift her aboard the taxi so Gus could assist her rest of the way.

No sooner was she aboard when all hell broke out. Cussing and screaming you wouldn't believe. Hair pulling and scratching. Poor Frank and Gus were right in the middle trying to separate the women, but without success. The gals on the float all of a sudden became athletes and bounded aboard the taxi like Olympic jumpers. And here I thought they were so helpless.

Frank yelled for me to get the boat away from the dock even as the fighting was going on. Two gals had each other by the hair, rolling around on the deck, trying to kick each other. Another couple were locked together in choke holds and neither one would let loose. Annie had two of her girls cornered back aft and swore she'd throw them both over the side if they didn't stay right where they were. Gus was straddling one girl and fighting off another who was trying to get at the one he was holding down.

Poor Frank. Two Mexican cuties had him down on the deck going at him with everything they had, shoes, elbows, knees and fists. His clothes were torn to shreds and blood was oozing from a cut on his cheek. Frank hadn't even considered the territorial boundaries that the prostitutes hold dear when he offered to take on

the job of recruiting the women, but he found out in a hurry.

I slowly steered the boat out towards the Liberian freighter that the women were supposed to visit, hoping calm would take over as we neared the ship, but no such luck. One of Annie's girls broke loose and tore into one of the Mexican girls. Annie walked over to her and punched her right in the mouth, knocking her on her butt. Annie then grabbed two other girls and flung them across the deck into the bulwarks, then dared either one to get up. That ended the fighting for the time being. Annie, in that frame of mind, wasn't one you'd want to tangle with.

"What the hell do we do now Frank" I yelled above the roar of the engines. I spun the helm hard over and held it there until we made a full circle. I was hoping to cross our own wake, knowing we would violently roll from side to side. My effort to scare the women worked. Those that were standing were flung to the seats that lined both sides of the hull. The women on the deck stayed there.

The side-curtains were all down so no one could see outside. Everyone must have thought we were about to sink and they all started screaming to get out. I kept the 50 ft. taxi in a tight circle and even opened up the throttle on the starboard engine. The momentum forced everyone down and the roar of the two Jimmys exhausting out the stern was deafening because, with the side curtains down, it sounded like we were in a tunnel.

This maneuver seemed to remove any thoughts of carrying on with the fighting. A couple of the girls became seasick and puked on the deck. When that happened I figured they'd had enough so shut the engines down.

Frank told Gus to take the helm, and me to take the girls that I brought aboard to the stern of the boat and keep them there. Annie offered her assistance by threatening to "knock the first one that didn't comply on their ass".

With the engines shut down we were drifting in a calmed sea, so we started rolling up the heavy slatted canvas side curtains to let in some fresh air. I grabbed a bucket with a lanyard and tossed it over the side to fill with water to slop the mess on the deck.

An alert anchor watch on a nearby cargo ship (probably wondering what all the commotion was about) turned on his powerful search light and played it on one of the most disgusting sights imaginable. What was just a short time before the cream of the crop of "Ladies of the Night" were now exposed to be some of the ugliest sluts I've seen anywhere in the world.

The girls, who must have been equally shocked at their appearance, screamed at the ship to turn off that friggin'light.

Poor Frank, sensing it a lost cause, ordered Gus to head for the water taxi dock. Then he started ranting that this trip had cost him over \$500 already, and that

he could lose another \$500 if the night was a total bust. All the way back he was yelling and screaming, the gist of which was that if he ever took another whore out to a ship again, or even let one put a foot on one of his taxis, he hoped someone would set him in cement overshoes and deep-six him! Annie, who overheard the ranting, demanded, "What the hell do you mean you already lost 500 bucks. Me and my girls are the only losers here. You haven't come across with one penny!"

"Jan, in Wilmington, told me the pimps were demanding \$50 a girl, payable in advance, for six women, Frank lamented. "I paid them \$300 and then they only came up with these four....and refused to return the hundred extra back to me. They told me take what they offered, or take nothing. As I left the parking lot in the cab with the four girls I told them what I thought of them. That's when they took off after me and I headed for the Boat Works."

"But that's only \$300. What about the other \$200?" Annie demanded.

"Dinko doesn't come cheap," Frank responded.

"Why that son of a....," was all that Annie could say.

I went home that night dead tired. My wife greeted me at the front door with the start of the usual welcome home kiss until she spotted the lipstick and smelled the cheap perfume. I told her the story almost as you have read it here but she would believe none of it and this one incident began the end of our marriage.