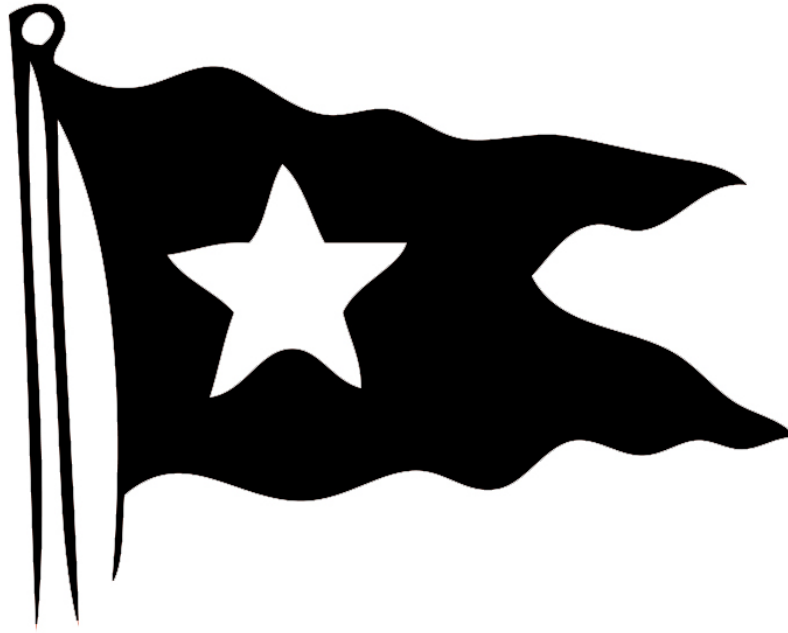


VOICES FROM THE DEEP



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I remember a sailor in a dark coat with gold bands on its sleeves. The emblem on his cap featured a crown above a red flag with a single white star. It was he who told us there were no more boats. He directed me to collect a life-belt then moved on.

I could have jumped the rail like so many others, I could have tried to swim away. But where would I swim to? How long could I survive? And I did not care for the idea of dying in the midst of a hundred splashing strangers like a man drowning in a public pool. I was better than that, so I headed to my cabin to die alone.

Those I passed wore similar expressions: combinations of desperation, fear, and bewilderment. They could not understand why I was going in the wrong direction. But they were mistaken. We were all headed to the same place.

At the top of the Grand Staircase, I paused at the balustrade. Above me, a crystal chandelier hung from the frosted glass dome. Next to me stood a young man, looking ridiculous in life-belt, white tie, and tails. But then, I realized, I too was dressed for a formal sinking.

Something in the stairwell had mesmerized the boy. It was an extraordinary sight. There, two decks below us, the Atlantic Ocean was crawling *upward* one oaken step at a time. For a few seconds, I believed we were witnessing a violation of the laws of nature. But it was an illusion, of course; the water was not rising; it was we who were drifting downward.

I felt like I should speak, but what could I say? The water was coming for us. It was inevitable, and we both accepted it.



Despite the name, a life-belt is a sort of vest with book-sized blocks of cork sewn into it. It slipped over your head like a poncho and had two ties across the chest. Upon reaching my room, I removed mine and tossed it onto the bed. For the living, life-belts and their ilk serve but two purposes: to keep you safe or to keep you *feeling* safe. At that point, mine was incapable of doing either. To leave it on would at best delay that which I could not avoid. And what difference did it make if I drown on the floor instead of against the ceiling?

Hoping it would keep me both warm and placid, I poured myself a glass of Armagnac. It was excellent brandy, my father's favorite. I placed the drink on the dressing table, removed my tuxedo jacket, hung it in the wardrobe, then took a seat on the sofa.

The lights dimmed to a pink, like sunset in the desert. I thought of Nubia and the hills above the Nile. The moment called for a cigarette, but I had given them up months earlier. I should have asked the young man for one. A smoke before the firing squad. Surely that would have been worth disturbing his final minutes.

I considered looting nearby rooms—someone must have left cigarettes behind—but I could not get myself to rise. My hands felt heavy, burdened. My breathing slowed. I exhaled, slumped, and sank into the cushions, overcome by a listless gloom.

Receiving bad news—in this case, the worst possible news—there is an initial numbing blow. Disbelief. But I was a well-trained gentleman; I did not gasp, I did not cry out, I did not question or accuse. I remained calm and composed. But alone in my room, with the constraints of society set aside, I gave in to the pressure of inevitability.

It was not my first death sentence. I should have been better prepared. But there is a frightening difference between having a year or two left and learning you shall be gone within an hour. I was desperate for another sip of brandy, but I no longer had the energy or will to move. Instead, I sat there and waited for the end.

What then does one do with the last minutes of life? What did I do? Did I picture my wife or daughters? My sister or mother? Did I compile a list of deeds left undone? Forgivenesses not sought? Wrongs never avenged? Did I ponder the possibility of a world beyond living? Did I pray? No, I merely let my mind go where it would.

Swimming backward through my memories, I found an August day, decades ago: I was a boy, and I was sailing on the Bay. Father had pushed aside my mother's protests and let me take my dinghy out alone. The sea was calm, the wind was cool, and I was happy and free. This, I decided, would be my dying thought. It was a good choice.

As I tried to lose myself in the memory, in other rooms and on other decks, deep in the ship, appliances, furniture, and other trappings tumbled. Great crashing rumbles shook the floor. In my tilting stateroom, my jacket was leaning out of the wardrobe as if attempting an escape. My bottle of very fine and very old Armagnac slipped from my dressing table, fell to the floor, then rolled under the electric heater. The snifter too soon fell, shattering next to the bed.

The far side of the room continued to rise. My toiletries tumbled from the sink. The sofa felt as if I were leaning back in a barber's chair. Everything not fixed to the floor slid in my direction. There was a distant explosion of glass and metal and the rushing of a river. The sea had broken through the upper decks. I could hear it pouring along hallways, searching for me. I shut my eyes and tried to become the young boy in the sailboat. I tried to feel the wind, to smell the Bay in late summer. But when the sea kicked in my door, the warmth of that world was drawn

away, and with it my happy thoughts. Until it hits, you don't realize how much power water carries, how much weight. It rushed in, pressing me to the sofa, and I could think of nothing but its morbid promise.

As an adult, I was too busy for God; I took pride in being self-sufficient. But by the time the water had risen to the level of my chest, I no longer cared to die quietly. When it had reached my mouth, I was begging the Lord to save me. And as my panicked gasps sucked the brine into my lungs, I implored Him to show Himself to me, to prove His existence by not letting it end like this.

I wanted to die with dignity, to overcome my base instincts like a rational, civilized man. There was no chance of escape, so I prepared myself. Yet when the ice-cold water surrounds you, the reasonable human vanishes, leaving behind a cave-dwelling savage blinded by the terror of death. In that moment even the most pious would sell his soul, if the Devil would have it, for one more lung-full of air.

Remarkably, the electric lights were glowing when I expired.

I have no memory of my descent to the bottom. Neither do I know how much time passed between my death and whatever this current existence is. I only recall waking in my room cold and alone. There was no temporary misunderstanding, no irrational joy; I knew I was flesh no more.

With miles of sea above me, I should have been blind. But with a little effort, I could make out the walls around me and the ceiling above, my furniture, my luggage, the stateroom door. My bottle of brandy was back on the dressing table and next to it sat the snifter, like myself, reborn in the darkness. But as in a dream, texture was missing, along with details like marred wood or chipped paint, and color had all but disappeared.

But whatever sort of light it was, unlike the sun or a candle or an electric light, it did nothing to warm this place. The cold envelops me, penetrates me. My every step leads me through curtains of icy knives. In school they told us brine could remain unfrozen at temperatures lower than fresh water. This, I can attest, is an absolute fact.

I am amazed I can still feel the cold. I would have thought that, like an Eskimo, a being in my situation would get used to these conditions—or at the least go numb from exposure. But that has not happened; the chill has not diminished. My skin aches, my joints creak, and I am occasionally taken with shivering fits.

And how is it I even feel pain and fatigue? I know my corporeal self is gone, that my eyes, bones, and brain have returned to dust. What exactly am I? When I look, I see myself as I was that night, dressed for dinner, not draped in dusty rags like a gothic specter. Has my body reformed, as it was, but now made from a spirit essence? or do I feel the deck beneath my feet, do I detect clothes on my frame, do I open doors and take the stairs because I know of no other way? Could it be I inhabit the form of a man through simple force of habit?

I'd like to say it was curiosity or some other noble motivation, but it was simple boredom that prompted me to leave my room. That and the cold—anything to keep my mind from the cold. For fear of becoming lost, I kept to areas of the ship with which I was familiar. I walked the halls and promenades of the Boat Deck, B Deck, most of A; visited the First Class Dining Saloon, the Reading and Smoking Rooms, the Barber Shop, the Verandah and Palm Courts, the exquisite decor of the Turkish Baths, and the wicker chairs and ivied trellises of the Café Parisian.

Eventually, I persuaded myself to venture into the unknown. But as I puttered through the ship, I somehow knew what room I was in, as if I'd memorized the entire layout or helped in the ship's very construction. No matter where I roamed, getting lost was an impossibility.

Perhaps the dead are granted senses unknown to the living. Either way, gift or not, it has allowed me to visit the ship in its entirety. And as I roamed, I came to learn another unexpected fact: there are others down here. I first perceived them as a whisper of a whisper, like hairs standing on the back of one's neck. The feeling would come and go, as if crossing a strange wake. It was stronger in some areas of the ship and absent in others. But soon their voices became strong and distinct. And with time they became visible.

To my great disappointment, they do not appear aware of my existence. I have called out to them, challenged them, touched them, but they cannot be roused. Why I alone can perceive them is another mystery of this place.

Some mumble to themselves, some argue with imaginary companions. Some call out for rescue or comfort or fellowship. Some relive the sinking, continually experiencing their terrible ends. Some believe they yet live. But whichever way they perceive their surroundings or their plight, the majority are storytellers. Whether I am near or not, they tell their tales as if someone is listening.

In the mahogany-paneled First Class Smoking Room, a sportsman plays endless rounds of solitaire as he waits for a poker game that can never begin.

In a stateroom not unlike my own, a man waits impatiently as his wife chooses the proper outfit for abandoning ship. She then changes her mind and picks another. She cycles through a half-dozen costumes before the process starts anew. Whose nightmare is this? The husband's or the wife's? Both?

Near the electric fireplace of the Reading and Writing Room, a woman, older and without evident shame, surveys piece-by-piece the contents of her jewelry box. Each item is described in glorious detail, appraised for quality and worth, and then named—James, Robert, Wilhelm, Rosamund, Mister and Mis'ess Caruthers—in honor of the former love from whom the piece was acquired. And with every bracelet, ring, necklace, and brooch (the Caruthers were earrings) the intimate and vivid story behind its giving is told.

In the bowels of the ship, his shovel inches beyond his reach, a man struggles in agony, roasting under tons of still-burning coal.

Hovering twenty feet above the deck, a young man, maybe thirteen, his eyes bulging, holds his breath as he claws for the surface, but does not rise.

Next to the empty launch davits, a handful of men wrestle for a spot in a lifeboat that has already left them behind. Like pups battling for a free teat, they wrench and claw. I am not sure if

they fight to save their own lives or to prevent anyone else from being saved. The experience does not improve my overall opinion of mankind.

I have observed four individuals—three men and a young woman—I call runners. On most occasions, I can only hear their footfalls echoing through a hallway or around a corner. But sometimes they run my way, passing me, passing *through* me, in a state of unending hysteria. At a random point in the hall, a runner might pause, try a door or two, find them locked, then trot off, continuing their strange hunt. When I check the doors, I find them open to me. Another riddle I cannot solve.

And there are those that do and say nothing. They sit or lie motionless, usually where they died or where they last recall living. You are more likely to encounter them above decks, but they are everywhere. And though they are as impalpable as I, their sleeping forms can trip you just the same.

I believe they are those who have given up, and in doing so, become like corpses. The theory is sound, and it fits my observations, but I have no way of knowing what goes on in their minds.

At times I tire of the others, and I fall back to the comfort and familiarity of the Café Parisian and pretend the starless night is blue skies and sunshine. This is the one quality we here share. Our reasons might differ—weakness, confusion, intransigence—but we held on to life too tightly, and while death took us, the shadows of our lives remained. We are rememberers, cursed with the knowledge of how we used to be, of *who* we used to be. Our sins, our mistakes, our losses, our loves and joys; we know it all. And that knowledge does nothing but add to the torture of being stuck between.

So you endure the timeless cold and dark—not really sitting, not really watching, not really existing—and wait for the return of something real. *Anything* real.

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