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The Place Where All Ends Meet

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Thesis Abstract

The purpose of this project was twofold. One was entirely personal - to prove to myself that, whilst being a full-time student, I could produce a novella and see a story through to its entirety, instead of having previously stuck to short stories and poetry which offered a quick 'out'. Being an international student, time is very much of the essence, and I wanted to ensure that when graduation came, I could look back at my four years at Baruch with both pride, and fondness. That I achieved everything I set out to do, and maximised every moment I had in America.

The second was to explore this particular time in my life. I've made the crossing between England and America six times and, for me, such a trip lends itself perfectly as the basis for a novella. The people I met and the experiences I encountered have never been replicated on land. And for a young man coming to a country such as the United States for the very first time, that sense of unsurety - lost in transition - could not have been symbolised more poetically when compared to being at sea for several days. The novella presented itself, to me, as a coming of age story, and one that I have wanted to tell now for the past four years.

So, during the summer before I started this novella, I made the journey across the Atlantic a further two times. When I had taken the ship before, I never truly considered my surroundings, or recorded what happened. But now, with the thesis in mind, I walked around every deck of the ship, taking notes and observing how people behaved both with one another, and on their own. I reached out to the people I had met on previous voyages, asked them all sorts of questions in order to encapsulate them on the page. For every character in this novella is based on someone who exists in real

life. Every interaction was true. Everything that happened on the ship was true. It was just my job to make sure I honoured that.

Indeed, I had somewhat underestimated the work involved in this thesis. What started out as a collection of six 2,500-word pieces, soon transformed into a much more meaningful and thorough body of work. And I'm glad that was the case, because I wanted to respect both the required commitment of an honors thesis, and the story and its meaning to me. I submitted draft after draft to my mentor, Professor Davis, and, meeting every Thursday, we began assembling the narrative.

Truth be told, it wasn't until the end of the Fall Semester when I felt like I had finally come to terms with the story I wanted to tell. Up until then, I had written the first three chapters, only for Professor Davis and myself to realise that it just wasn't working. So, by the time I returned for the Spring Semester, a new plan of action had been established, and the work produced was something I was much more happier with than what I had churned out previously. The way in which the story was being told changed countless times. Even a week before deadline day, a significant change was made to the novella's ending. This constant striving for the highest quality and the honing of such a craft has proved to be one of the more rewarding aspects of this process.

But working closely with Professor Davis, who both encouraged me and challenged me, has been the highlight of it all. She has taught me more about creative writing than I could ever imagine, and her patience and insight has been invaluable. I can't thank her enough for the time she put in to make sure that this was something that I could be proud of by the time it was finished. I can only hope you enjoy reading it as much as I enjoyed writing it. Thank you.

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Chapter One - All at Sea

“Good afternoon, everyone!”

Henry was jolted from his sleep. The sound of a man’s voice echoed around the cabin as Henry struggled to open his eyes.

“This is the Captain speaking,” the voice continued. “I’d like to wish you all a warm welcome aboard Queen Mary 2 and trust your evenings last night were enjoyable.”

The Captain’s voice sounded like the kind that oozed through the corridors of private schools back home in England. The ones where the teachers wore long black gowns, and the students had double-barrelled surnames. To Henry, the Captain hadn’t been born with a silver spoon in his mouth, but a whole cupboard-full of cutlery, instead.

He listened as the Captain began detailing their journey across the Atlantic, and what remote land was nearest to the ship. Henry didn’t have a clue where he was. He had stayed in his room the moment he boarded the ship late yesterday afternoon, ordering room service that now sat dejected under an askew silver dome by the corner of his desk. He spotted the dark smudge of his reflection in the curvature of the plate cover, before it disappeared around the back of the metal bubble.

Henry pulled himself out from under the covers and stood on the bed to look out through the porthole. Water foamed in ripples, drifting towards a horizon blotted with the silhouettes of islands. Henry didn’t hear the Captain identify them, but he pictured people on the coastline looking out at the ship edging past their day. He wondered how many times they’d seen this ship pass their home or whether they waved at it as it bobbed by. Henry lifted his hand up and waved briefly, his eyes still heavy with sleep,

before allowing his fingertips to rest on the cool pane of glass that separated him from the water.

Fingertips from outside the glass met his, their pads melting into one, as the length of his fingers disappeared into the slate sea behind them. Henry could make out the layout of his face in the reflection, his eyes matching the colour of the leaden ocean that simmered in the background. He focused on them for a second, the waves that rippled in the depth of his pupils. Henry counted them back to the horizon, imagining each one forming from some distant land before finally lapping up against the side of the ship and dissolving into nothing.

“Don’t forget to put your clocks back tonight, ladies and gentlemen!” the Captain announced. “This will be the first of five hours that we gain during our voyage. The clocks will go back at one in the morning every evening.”

Henry reached groggily for his phone. It was 12.05pm, later than he had hoped. He had tried to wake up earlier, but always surfaced in a fog of sleep, before rolling over and diving back into slumber. Now he was left counting the hours the day still had for him. There were thirteen until the clock change, which seemed like more than enough time to spend with people he didn’t know on board a ship he had barely explored.

“Oh!” the Captain exclaimed, as if forgetting something important. “Tonight is also our first themed night! A masquerade ball awaits you in the ballroom this evening, so I do hope you will all be donning your masks.”

Henry groaned and slumped back onto the bed. He had never been to a ball. He always imagined them to be reserved for an exclusive crowd, where people hid behind

long beaks or masks snootily held up on a stick. He didn't even have his own mask, and the thought of wearing one didn't appeal to him in the slightest.

Henry glanced over at Emily's letters piled up on his bedside table. He had read the first one once he'd boarded the ship yesterday afternoon. She had written one for each day he would be on board the ship, counting down the days until they were together. Emily had wished him a safe but quick journey in her first letter, with neatly drawn hearts and glittered squiggles decorating the margins of the soft lined paper. Henry reached out for the second and tore it open, before reading it to himself.

Dear Henry,

If you've opened these in order, you should be starting your second day aboard the ship!

If only you were waking up to me and not these letters, but I guess it's the next best thing!

We're all so excited for you to get here and welcome you into our family! I won't know what to do with myself once I've got you in my arms, but I know I'll just keep squeezing and squeezing just to make sure it's real. That this is really happening.

I know you must be thinking all kinds of things now you've left home, but you've made the right decision. Really. It was fate that we were meant to meet the way we did, and that I can offer you everything you need here, in America. This can be your new home, now. Away from all the grieving back home. Where your mind can be free and you can choose to start again with people who care about you, and won't ever hurt you.

I know it must be hard for you, leaving home. It was difficult for me when I did it. When I told my parents that I wanted to travel across the country and help others in need. But we made it work.

And even though we can't see each other or hear each other during this next week, know that I'm thinking about you, and praying for you. You're always in my thoughts, Henry, and in all of our thoughts here at the commune, too.

Have a super great second day on the ship my handsome man, and I'll talk to you tomorrow. Don't open any of the letters early!

With all my heart,

Emily

P.S. I love you.

Henry smiled at the letter. He could smell vanilla on the paper and assumed Emily had sprayed her perfume over the page. He wondered if this was how she smelled all the time as he traced over the heart etchings, their glittered surface crusting over and rising from the paper. He wished she was with him.

“And before I go, I wanted to leave you with this quote,” the Captain finished. “A little tradition of mine.”

Henry could hear the Captain smiling as he spoke, before the rustle of paper being brought closer to the microphone crescendoed throughout his cabin.

“Ocean is more ancient than the mountains,” the Captain began. “And freighted with the memories, and the dreams, of Time.”

Henry found the lunch buffet at The King's Court, on Deck 7. Hundreds of people shuffled over white tiles, in pastel sweaters and blanched trousers, carrying trays of food for one, or two. Their faces were furrowed with the creases of age and Henry felt their curious eyes on him whilst he slalomed in between them in search of lunch.

For the plethora of food that was on offer, Henry decided to stick to what he knew, and opted for bangers and mash, before setting out to find a table. The ones by the windows were taken, set in little alcoves that jugged out from corridors running through the buffet area. He was about to resign himself to a less scenic seat until he spotted a couple getting up from their sea-view table. He darted towards it, snatching it from a man who hovered with a glass of orange juice in one hand and a book in another. With a sour face, the man moved on from the table as Henry tucked into his lunch.

He watched people walk past him on the boardwalk outside. Some jogged, others walked briskly, powering through the strong headwind that made their raincoats billow. The sea behind them bubbled. White caps popped up from the surface, like peaks of mountains bobbing up from the grey, below. The sky matched the sea as puffs of white clouds thickened the light blue that bled into the ocean. A trawler boat hugged the horizon, the vessel barely sitting above the waterline. Henry looked up at the boat as a point of reference to see how far they'd moved whilst he ate, but the ship never seemed to change position.

The same people had started to pass him by the window, and Henry checked his watch to time their laps. A jogger in neon pink was clocking in at eight minutes, whilst the couple in the blue raincoats made it in fourteen. Henry thought he'd time himself later when a large, shaggy dog walked past.

It was an Alsatian, with thick black fur, barrelling along the deck. Its tight leash pulled a tall man along, whose curly blonde hair flickered in the wind. His green coat seemed two sizes too big as it hung loose over his hands. His jeans were in tatters,

the bottom of them fraying around the scuffed trainers that stumbled along the boardwalk.

“I didn’t even know dogs were allowed on board!” a wrinkled-faced woman scoffed, sitting at the table adjacent to Henry. A scarab brooch clung to the lapels of her cream blazer, its bulbous body tugging the woman’s torso down towards her soup.

“There’s a kennel upstairs for them,” the grey-haired woman sitting opposite her replied, her royal-blue hat dominating the alcove. “Must be a service dog.”

“Dirty looking thing,” the woman sneered, before returning her withered lips to her spoon. Henry thought she had the face of a woman chasing frantically after a bus that she would never catch.

“The dog or the man?” the other replied, as both women creaked with laughter and Henry scraped the last of the mashed potato off the blade of his knife and into his mouth. He looked across at them, clanging his cutlery together on the plate. The scarab brooch seemed to turn its head to Henry, as if daring him to say something to the two women who sat stubbornly beside him. Instead, Henry got up, not smiling back at either of them as they looked up and considered him, their teeth - like their soup bowls - ceramic and stained orange from the lunch they suckled from their spoons.

The boat swayed a little as Henry wandered along Deck 2. The ship’s opulence staggered him. Golden murals plastered the walls as lights, like diamonds, winked at him from every angle. The tinkle of a piano played out of sight as Henry walked wantonly around the atrium.

A large floral arrangement dominated the space as an old man sat and read a brochure by a vacant harp, peering over his glasses as two young children chased each

other up a spiraling staircase. Bar-staff carrying bottles of champagne waltzed along the carpet, as haughty laughter echoed from above. Henry looked up and saw balconies jutting out over the space, whilst two glass elevators glided up and down the length of the wall, filled with people pointing at the exuberance around them. It was in complete contrast to the outside of the ship, where plates of dark metal were riveted together, spanning the length of the ship's body. Its darkness swallowed the gangway Henry was on as he stared up at the ship yesterday, the sterile surroundings of halogens and metal rails dimmed to a dull grey that paled the skin on his hands.

The floor bounced back against Henry's feet, nudging him along the hallway to a mess of people waiting for the elevators. They were mirrored with gold, their gilded surface distorting Henry's astonished face as the delicate bong announced the elevator's arrival. Henry had never seen such excess. He could only liken the gilding to the desolate shopping mall in Drifffield town centre back home, its faux-gold trim deteriorating to a rotten yellow, where scores of grubby hands had called for elevators that only went up one floor.

He passed the Golden Lion Pub, filled with men supping beer from glasses, watching golf ebb along on TV screens. Along from the pub were a string of boutique shops, where a gaggle of women inspected the items on sale. Henry pondered whether he should buy Emily a gift, but worried he couldn't afford anything in those shops, and avoided looking at them as he headed down towards the front of the ship.

Small tables lined the wall adjacent to windows overlooking the Atlantic. Board games were set up on each table, and Henry recognised *Scrabble*, *Guess Who* and *Monopoly*. Words were spelled out on cream tiles on the Scrabble board, their stillness juxtaposed to the waters that swelled beside them. Henry read the words 'Answer' and

‘Watch’ as he passed the *Scrabble* table and continued down the corridor. A couple sat piecing together a jigsaw puzzle. Henry watched them working in unison as he recalled his mother’s love for jigsaws. They would put one together every Christmas. ‘Start with the corners’ she would instruct Henry, as he sifted through hundreds of pieces to find the four with smooth edges. Henry was given the detailed part of the jigsaw, as his mother worked on the sky. She was always able to pick out the different shades of blue, matching them to his eyes to make sure she had got the right piece. The last jigsaw they did together celebrated the millennium, with a street scene full of historical figures watching the ball drop in Times Square. It was one of the first places Henry planned to go when he arrived in New York.

It seemed strange to Henry when he considered he had only said goodbye to his father yesterday. Their farewell was something that Henry had anticipated for years, as most children do when flying the nest and leaving their parents. But this was different - the nature of their conversation - because his father had told him the truth about his mother, just six months before.

“I don’t know why you’re doing this,” his father had said, sitting in his car at the Southampton docks, yesterday morning.

Henry didn't respond. He stared out the window as ripples of rain cascaded down the glass. Henry watched the ripples tumble. People in raincoats blurred past, their silhouettes ebbing through the droplets that collected in front of him as umbrella crescents floated along Henry’s eyeline until wilting and disappearing from view.

“It was the right time to tell you,” his father said.

“The right time?!” Henry snapped. “You waited eight years to tell me!”

“You were never old enough to understand!”

“How old do you think I had to be to understand that my mother committed suicide?”

Henry felt the words sting his throat. It was the first time he had ever said it out loud, as his chest tightened and his hands began to shake. His father shrunk in the seat next to him, picking at the lint caught under his thumbnail.

“You have to understand,” Henry’s father strained to say. “How was I supposed to tell you what happened? It was impossible for me.”

“You should have told me.”

“When, Henry? The day it happened? When you were sixteen? Eighteen? When was it ever the right time?”

Henry didn’t have an answer. He felt betrayed by his father, that he had been told for all those years that his mother had died of cancer, only to find out six months ago that she had committed suicide when he was twelve. Henry felt he deserved to know from the very beginning, even if he may not have understood it. But when would he have ever understood? All he knew was that he was starting a whole new grieving process now, at the age of twenty.

“Henry, please.”

They faced each other for a second, before Henry shook his head and returned to his window. The blood inside his veins hissed as he gripped the arm rest’s plastic veneer. He didn’t feel its coolness under his fingertips, but rather the thump of his pulse instead.

Henry pulled the handle to unlock the door. A rush of cold air blew into the car as the winter rain singed the skin on his hand.

“Please don’t leave me!” his father shouted.

Henry pivoted in his seat. The rain dotted his jeans, spots of navy stamped onto denim, as he looked over his shoulder at his father's crumpled face.

"Why is it always about you, Dad?" Henry asked. "Why do you have to manipulate everything so it's about you?"

"Henry-

"How can you possibly expect me to stay? Did you just think we would keep on living our daily lives in Driffield?"

"I've been grieving this whole time, Henry!" his father said, angrily. "I'm the one who's known this whole time!"

"Then you'll understand why I'm leaving," Henry said, without looking at his father. "Now that I know."

"Please, just stay," Henry's father pleaded. "Just stay with me, stay home. We can grieve together."

Henry paused. He tasted the salt in the air as the crisp breeze whipped around him, filling the car. He didn't know when he would see his father again, or when he'd be back in England. He didn't know anything about America, apart from what he'd studied at school or seen on the news. And he had never met Emily, the girl who had introduced him to the commune and had bonded with so quickly afterwards. But, still, he knew he was doing the right thing.

He turned to his father.

"You've already grieved, Dad. I haven't. She abandoned us. She abandoned me. End of story."

Henry stepped out of the car and shut the door on his father's silent protest. He dragged his bags from the car boot and walked past the car, the hunched figure of his

father's profile blotting his periphery. He heard his father open the car door, shouting after him, but Henry didn't stop. He glanced up at the stretch of water ahead sitting serenely, snaking into the horizon as it disappeared into the Atlantic.

Henry knew his father was watching him leave. He imagined how he now looked, walking away, spilling through the cloudburst captured on the car window, just like the people he had watched so many times before him do the same thing. In and out of focus they went, until they became nothing more than a dot, dwarfed by the hull of the ship that rose from the Solent. And now, like them, so had he.

Henry wandered down the narrow corridor on Deck 8 back to his cabin. The room was immaculate, its vast bed - at least twice the size of his own bed back home - neatly made. Above it a single porthole shuttered grey light into the room. The rest of it upheld the ship's decadent motif. The desk where Henry's rucksack lay sat jammed in the corner with a stiff chair anchored opposite it. Last night's room service was gone, and a floor lamp stood tall in the other corner as Henry rifled through the literature welcoming him on board and detailing instructions for dinner, television and room service. The name *Joseminoh* was written on a card by the phone, introducing himself as Henry's cabin attendant. Henry picked it up and studied the name just as there was a knock at his cabin door.

Alarmed, Henry walked to the door and glimpsed through the peephole to reveal a round face smiling at him.

"Hello, Mr. Thomas!" the man said as Henry opened the door. "I'm your cabin attendant, Jo!"

Jo stuck out his hand. He was neatly dressed, Henry noted, with a bald head that glistened under the corridor lights.

“Is everything ok with your room?”

“Better than I could have imagined,” Henry answered. “Thank you for making it up.”

“Not a problem, Mr. Thomas,” Jo beamed back. “If you need me, there’s a button on your phone you can press.”

“Thank you, Jo,” Henry smiled.

“Have you sailed with us before?” Jo asked.

Henry shook his head.

“Well, just so you know,” Jo said, “There is obviously a time difference between here and New York. So instead of you being on British time during the crossing, the ship adds one hour to the five days you’re on board. So when you arrive in New York, you’re on their time. The first time change is tonight.”

Henry was confused. He felt it was hard enough dealing with daylight savings twice a year, let alone this.

“It’s ok, Mr. Thomas!” Jo laughed, seeing his face. “The captain announces it every day, like he did today. And it happens at 1am in the morning, meaning you get an extra hour every night the clocks go back. I hope I’m being clear for you.”

Henry nodded.

“You have dinner 8.30 tonight,” Jo instructed. “Don’t be late!”

With that, Jo turned on his heel and left. Henry closed the door behind him and sat down on the bed. He thought about the extra five hours coming up over the week. He thought of the additional sleep he could have, that special hour in bed he enjoyed

when the clocks went back in Autumn. Perhaps he would simply do that, he thought, as he collapsed down onto the soft duvet that enveloped him, the smell of vanilla still lingering by his pillow.

Emily was so far away, her and the commune he had decided to join. Henry had told Emily that his mother had died, but not how. He had stuck with his father's lies of cancer when speaking to her, but he was grateful for how supportive Emily had been when she heard the initial news. Perhaps he would tell her one day in America, Henry thought to himself, as he pictured the two of them sitting around a campfire by a lake, the fire's embers crackling and disappearing into the night sky, where his mother watched over him.

At 8.15 Henry made his way down to Deck 3 for dinner. A jumble of people lined up in twos outside the Britannia Restaurant, and Henry took his place at the back of the queue. He told the maître d' his name and stateroom number, who then told a waiter, who then told another waiter, who then smiled at Henry and led him to his table.

The restaurant expanded over two floors, with a grand staircase joining the two. Waiters in suits zipped around, carrying mountains of menus and napkins from table to table. The restaurant was half-full, but already the sound of conversation filled the area as two violinists played on the staircase overlooking the restaurant.

The waiter took Henry to a round table. At one end was a couple sitting together in animated discussion, and at the other, an elderly man on his own. Henry positioned himself between the two of them.

“Good evening,” the couple said in unison, as the waiter pulled out Henry’s chair for him to sit in.

“Good evening,” Henry replied, relieved by their hospitality. Henry now recognised the older man as the one he’d seen by the harp. He looked up from his menu and studied Henry for a second, before smiling and returning to his reading.

The table was set for six, and had on it more cutlery and crystal than the kitchen in Henry’s house had ever held.

“Quite a sight, isn’t it?” the woman leaned over and smiled at Henry.

“Yes,” Henry replied. “I’ve never seen anything quite like it.”

“Me neither,” chimed in the man sitting next to her, a grin on his face.

It became quickly apparent to Henry that, not only were the couple Australian - for their accent was unmistakable - but that the man was, in fact, blind. For when he spoke to Henry, he looked further past him, as if he was sitting three tables away.

“Oh, Phil,” said the woman, trying not to laugh.

“I can’t help it,” replied the man with a heavy Australian twang. “You gotta laugh about it!”

Henry smiled at the couple. He watched the man’s eyes float under his eyelids, searching around the room for something to focus on but always missing their cue.

“I’m Phil,” the man said. “And this is my wife, Rosie.”

“Nice to meet you both,” Henry replied. “I’m Henry.”

Henry glanced over at the elderly man sitting on his own, who had been listening.

“I’m Srdan,” the man spoke. “My pleasure to meet you, Henry.”

Henry thought Srdan's accent originated from Eastern Europe, but he couldn't be sure.

"Looks like we're two guests short," Rosie said.

"Fuck 'em," Phil burst out. "I'm starvin'!"

"Phil!" said Rosie. "Language!" Rosie rolled her eyes and looked over at Henry.

"Are your parents not with you, Henry?"

Henry fiddled with his fork on the table, rolling it between his thumb and forefinger. "No, it's just me," Henry finally replied.

"Are they waiting for you in America?" Rosie continued.

"No, but my girlfriend is," Henry answered.

"Oh how romantic," Rosie beamed. "Travelling across the Atlantic for your true love! How did you both meet?"

Henry wondered how to answer the question without hitting all the connotations that went with his reply.

"We actually met online," Henry began. "We've never really met in person."

"And you're making the trip to see her now?" Rosie asked, lines beginning to furrow in her brow.

"Yes, it's been the best part of a year," Henry said. "We think it's time I made the move. She's part of this retreat group that tours different states in America and she invited me to join. So that's what I'm doing. It's come at just the right time."

"So this is a permanent-"

"Alright, Rosie," Phil interjected. "I think the boy's had enough of the interrogation."

Henry smiled at Phil before looking down at the menu. His eyes were met by a smorgasbord of fantastical dishes, all of which tempted his palate. The waiter arrived, his squid-ink hair slicked back as beads of sweat pearled on his forehead. He walked around the table, taking everyone's orders. Henry glanced over at Srdan, who sat back in his chair with his fingers suspended against each other in front of his chest. He wore a pink spotted bow tie that brought out the rosiness in his cheeks and contrasted with the grey checkered suit he was wearing.

"What did you order, Henry?" Phil asked. "It's hard to hear when we're so far apart."

"I went with the salmon," Henry answered.

"Good choice," Phil nodded. "I went for the duck. I love a good duck, me."

Phil nudged Rosie's elbow as they giggled with each other.

"It's our fortieth wedding anniversary," Phil announced. "And we've been on this boat for months enjoying ourselves."

"Congratulations," Srdan smiled, raising his glass and Henry repeated, in kind.

"We plan on celebrating at the masquerade ball this evening," Rosie said, waving the mask she'd brought with her to dinner. "Going Henry?"

"I haven't got a mask," Henry replied, forgetting all about the ball.

"Well you can borrow mine!" Phil said, reaching into his jacket pocket. "Can't see through the bloody thing anyway, even if I wasn't blind."

Henry took the mask from Phil. It was purple, and flimsy, the type you'd get at a joke shop or the ones people wear when dressing up as a cheap Zorro.

"Thanks," Henry replied, half-heartedly.

“They’re a lot of fun!” Rosie said. “I think it’s our seventh themed night so far this trip! And we love them!”

“Yeah, Henry,” Phil agreed. “Good place for a young guy like you to get involved in the ship. Trust me, you won’t regret it.”

Henry felt the pressure of his tablemates. Perhaps it wouldn’t be such a bad thing after all, he thought to himself.

“I’ll be there,” Henry said, with a smile.

“It is the first clock change tonight,” Srdan reminded Henry, with a twinkle in his algae eyes. “Why don’t you join me on the promenade this evening before you go to the ball?”

Henry accepted Srdan’s invitation, pleased to be included in someone else’s plans.

“So why the ship, Henry?” Rosie asked, smiling sweetly. “I think a plane would be much better for you. It saves you so much time!”

This was the question Henry had been dreading, more so than describing the commune or telling people how he and Emily met. The answer made him feel ridiculous. He took a sip from his water before sliding the glass along the tablecloth and looking over to Rosie.

“I’m actually afraid of flying.”

“Well, there’s nothing wrong with that!” Phil clamoured.

“Perfectly normal!” Rosie responded, as Henry felt the tension lift from around his chest. “We haven’t flown in years!”

“And, if I might add,” said Srdan, “the ship truly is a much better way to travel.”

Phil slammed his hand down on the table in agreement. A couple of heads from neighbouring tables turned towards the source of the noise as Rosie raised her glass again.

“To us four sailors!”

The buzz of chatter grew louder in the restaurant as Henry looked around and saw the men in their tuxedos and the women in their bejeweled gowns. Henry’s rented tuxedo fit him quite nicely, he thought to himself, even if the clip-on bow-tie around his throat tightened whenever he turned his head.

The waiters were resplendent in white tuxedos, with gold buttons on their sleeves dazzling as they glided around the restaurant. A harpist played a tune on a balcony, her fingers plucking at the taut strings that cascaded down from the curves of the harp.

It sounded to Henry like a lullaby, like the mobile that orbited over his head as a baby. He drifted away for the moment, imagining the blue curtains that fluttered in the evenings back home and how the thumping pipes in the wall kept him up at night. He remembered his mother waking him up for school each morning, driving him to the station for the 07.31 train. They would listen to the radio for a few minutes whilst waiting for the signal lights to change from amber to red. Henry always kept his eyes on the lights, even when his mother was talking to him. The moment they’d go red he’d be out of the car, his mother wishing him a good day and that she’d see him when he got back from school. Henry couldn’t begin to imagine how much time he wasted staring at those red bulbs instead of looking at his mother’s ocean-blue eyes. Now, whenever he looked in the mirror, those eyes were all he saw. It made him miss her even more.

Henry followed Srdan to the boardwalk on Deck 7, his silver hair and full-moon spectacles catching the reflection of lamplights that hummed on the deck. He struck a match down by his side, shielding the red flash of phosphorus behind his hand. Henry watched the amber glow flicker between the creases of Srdan's fingers before he brought it to the mahogany bowl of his pipe. He puffed for a while, clouds of smoke billowing from his mouth before drifting out across the Atlantic. Henry followed the plumes as they faded into the inkblot ocean, wisps of tobacco and vanilla swirling in the winter air before fading into nothing.

"Have you ever smoked, Henry?" Srdan asked, looking out into the blackness.

"No," Henry replied, certain he'd disappoint him.

"That's good," he nodded. "I did not think I would ever smoke because I was always with people who did not like it. Now, I find myself spending more time on my own. And so, I smoke."

Srdan smiled to himself, cradling the curve of the pipe on his thumb's padded flesh. Henry leaned against the wooden deck railing, looking down over the edge where the toes of his shoes poked out. He couldn't tell which way the boat was going, but he felt its steady chug churn beneath his feet. He noticed a couple walking further up along the deck - a tall man and a shorter woman with his dinner jacket draped over her shoulders. They moved slowly, their feet in unison, stepping together over the slats that floated in the air above the evening swell.

"So what do you plan to do with your extra hours?" Srdan asked, turning towards Henry.

"I think tonight I'll go the ball, but after that," Henry trailed off.

“You must use them wisely,” Srdan advised, remonstrating with his pipe. “It is very rare to have such a luxury.”

Henry didn’t understand the importance that was being pinned to these extra hours. For him, an extra hour at night meant an extra hour in bed, but his time with Srdan, Phil and Rosie made him feel like he was missing out on something.

“Why do you come out here?” Henry asked.

Srdan took a long draw from his pipe. His lips crept up into a smile as the lines around his speckled algae eyes splintered.

“Well I am here every night - extra hour or not,” Srdan said. “But isn’t this beauty your answer?” Srdan opened his hand out to the dark void that existed in front of them.

Henry looked out ahead of him and saw nothing. He heard the waves rush by the ship and felt the spray of saltwater sting his face but he couldn’t see a thing.

“There is nothing this beautiful waiting in your room,” Srdan said. “Unless of course you make friends on board.”

“She’s waiting for me in New York,” Henry replied, with a grin.

“Of course, my mistake,” Srdan nodded. “Then this is what I do. I look out over the water, I smoke like a chimney and, if I’m lucky, I get some time back I lost many years ago.”

A ball of smoke rolled out into the darkness. Henry watched it float for a second, its greying vapours orbiting itself before dispersing out into the night air. He had some idea of wanting to reclaim lost time. His mother seemed like a stranger to him ever since he had learned the news of her suicide. She wasn’t the woman he recalled when he was a child, her laughter seemed more poignant now in his mind, her

moments of silence more damning. He wished for those eight years of falsehood to be given back to him, where Henry's memory of his mother was fresher. He wished he'd been given the chance to replay every instance with his mother, recall any signs that he should have seen, to maybe prevent what happened. But he could only recall memories in clumps. Puzzles and car-rides, days at the beach, and Christmas.

"I hope you don't feel summoned," Srdan continued. "I just wanted you to see this. Not many people decide to come out here during sea days. They prefer to stay inside and drink."

"It's all very black," Henry said.

"Yes, very black, very quiet," Srdan agreed. "But I will tell you this. You can speak to her, tell her anything, and she will always take your words."

"Speak to who?" Henry asked, feeling that Srdan had read his mind.

"The Atlantic. She is a wonderful listener, but only at night."

"Why not during the day?"

"Because there is no intimacy," Srdan answered. "There is nothing private during the day. But at night, it is just you and the ocean. You should try it, perhaps, during your week. It can be very therapeutic."

Henry considered Srdan's invitation. He was reminded of the lonely hours he'd spent alone in his room, in the family house on Green Lane. He would perch on the corner of his bed and play videogames until his eyes hurt, the off-white walls stained with the colours emanating from the television. His father would always go to bed early, but Henry never thought he slept. It was as if Henry could hear the shallow breathing rattling from his father's lungs, echoing around the empty bedroom that his parents once shared. Then in the mornings after Henry's mother had died, his father

would be downstairs, waiting to take him to school. A thirty-minute walk to the station, around two miles, each way. An hour a day, for several years, along the same pavement, past the same houses, in the same uniform.

Eventually, his father stopped walking with him when Henry left school at 17, no longer needing to protect him from the locals throwing rocks at him as they walked past, Henry's bottle-green uniform a target for the teenagers from the local comprehensive school, who resented everything the uniform stood for. But in truth, Henry felt exactly like them, trapped in a system within Driffield he couldn't escape. His father had told him he was man enough now to make his own decisions and look after himself. Yet Henry wondered if that really was true. Every time he made it back to the house from work, he would still spot his parents' bedroom curtains flicker, where his father kept watch until Henry had made it home. Now, he'd left his father nothing to look out for through the gap between the curtains.

The ballroom was packed. A chandelier hung from above the dancefloor, its crystal cascading light down onto the dancers floating beneath it. The band played under an arch as Henry stood by the main entrance and surveyed the dancing couples. A variety of masks were on display. Some like Henry's knock-off Zorro mask he now wore, others feathery creations that adorned the faces of women shrouded in tapestries of velvet and lace. Henry already wished he wasn't there. He much preferred being alone in his room, or the quiet surroundings of the buffet with the alcoves where he could hide. In the ballroom, Henry was isolated, surrounded by people enjoying the moment with one another, reveling in their companionship.

He looked over at the metal saloon doors flanking the stage. He surmised they were the entrances to the nightclub, and was hoping he may find Phil there, as he joined in with the applause for the band. But as the applause ran out, Henry found himself shrinking in a room full of strangers, his significance disappearing with every clap. He quickly slipped between tables and through the swinging doors of the G32 club, just so not to be alone.

The club interior was shrouded in purple light. A DJ played music Henry thought he recognised, as a handful of people bopped along. Large portholes decorated the walls, and fake rivets were bolted into the ceiling. Tables were dotted around the bar as couples too shy to dance held hands and swayed in their chairs. Thankfully, Henry recognised the large frame of Phil sitting at the bar and went up to him.

“Henry!” Phil exclaimed, recognising Henry’s voice. “I knew you’d show up. Good choice! I’ve only just got here myself - Rosie’s retired for the night, too much dancing.”

Henry pulled out the stool next to Phil and sat down. Fewer people were wearing their mask in the club, and Henry felt comfortable to slide his off.

“There’s a girl here called Beatrice,” Phil grinned, his searching eyes looking for Henry’s face. “Been looking after me all trip.”

Henry looked behind the bar and saw several bar-staff busily making drinks. They wore maroon jackets with golden name tags that dazzled under the club lights. Columns of bottles filled with liquids towered over them as the bar staff reached instinctively up to them as they made their drinks.

“She sounds like a real corker,” Phil continued. “So you’ll have to let me know if my ears aren’t deceiving me.”

“I’m a taken man,” Henry replied, waving an imaginary ring to Phil, before realising he couldn’t see what he was doing.

“On land you’re taken, Henry,” Phil chuckled. “But at sea-”

“Good evening, Philip!” interrupted a woman from behind the bar.

Henry recognised what he thought was a German accent. It seemed to add extra letters to words that didn’t need them, as the woman’s dark eyes sparkled from behind her thick-framed glasses. Her lips were full, their gloss catching the glimmer of the disco ball that rotated slowly above the dance floor. Her teeth were a brilliant white - even within the dark confines of the club - and her brown hair was tied up in a bun so tightly that Henry was sure he could count every strand of hair on her head.

“Evening, Beatrice!” Phil replied, his head facing over her shoulder. “I’ve brought some company with me tonight.”

“I can see that,” Beatrice smiled. “And who is this fine young man? And does he know it’s ok not to wear the mask here?”

Henry hastily removed the mask from his face. Her bronzed skin radiated and her cheeks pinched up into two orbs when she smiled, lifting her glasses ever so slightly as Henry caught his reflection in the smeared lens of her frames. She was, by far, the closest person to his age Henry had seen on board, and he gazed at her youth as he introduced himself.

“Usual for you, Phil?” she asked.

“Yes please, my love,” Phil answered. “And whatever Henry’s having.”

Henry paused. He had no idea what to order. His usual drink was a pint of nondescript beer, but as he watched the bar-staff serve up colourful concoctions in conical-shaped glasses, he felt as if ordering a beer would be too predictable.

Henry asked Beatrice for whatever Phil was having, as she took Phil's room card and rang up the order.

"So," Phil, began eagerly. "How does she look?"

"She looks alright," Henry responded, hiding his initial reaction.

"Alright?" Phil spluttered. "Don't you be coy with me. She sounds like a real minx."

The way Beatrice's eyebrows arched and her mouth curved when she spoke was alluring, Henry thought, and the sway of her body underneath her uniform was hard to ignore. She seemed comfortable in her skin, and exuded a vibrancy Henry hadn't seen so far on the ship, as she joked with her colleagues and cackled behind the bar. He assumed she must have be in her late-twenties, and her voice alone had made him feel very welcome.

He distracted himself and looked around the club. An upstairs area overlooked the dancefloor, marked off by a rope partition that stood at the bottom of the staircase, manned by one of the bar-staff. Henry watched as the man inspected passengers' room cards before letting them upstairs. He glanced up and saw the backs of passengers' heads, as they reclined in their seats, blowing smoke into the spotlights.

Beatrice returned with two green drinks that sat high in martini glasses. She set the drinks down in front of Henry and Phil and passed Phil his card back and touched his arm to signal where it was.

"Don't drink it all at once," Beatrice said, winking at Henry.

She turned and served another passenger as Henry replayed the wink in his head.

"Thank God I'm blind," Phil said to himself, before taking a sip from his drink.

“I didn’t have you down as a green-drink kind of guy,” said Henry, trying to make light conversation.

“They’re green?!” Phil laughed. “Well if I’d known that I’d have stuck to my beer. But Beatrice recommended it, and she’s got a voice like butter. She could tell me to jump overboard and swim home and I would.”

“Rosie doesn’t mind you being here?” Henry asked.

“After forty years?” Phil responded. “She knows me too well not to worry about any of that nonsense.”

Henry took a sip of his drink. It was cold, and sweet, with a licorice aftertaste that clung to the back of his throat. He coughed a little, trying to free it from his tonsils, before placing the drink down.

“That’ll be the Sambuca hitting you,” Phil laughed. “It got me, too.”

Henry returned his attention to the people at the club. Although the crowd was younger than that in the ballroom, it wasn’t by much, and he still felt like he had been given an invitation to the wrong party. Not as many people wore their masks, and it was clear to Henry that the club was for a more different clientele than the one waltzing in the ballroom. Here passengers seemed to be clinging onto their youth, as fake tans and faded tattoos revealed themselves under the dancefloor lights.

“Not many young people on board,” Henry remarked.

“What did you expect?” Phil snorted back. “Cruises are for old fogies like me to have everything taken care of for them whilst we eat, drink, sleep and travel the world. Nothing to worry about in the middle of the ocean, I can tell you that much. No bills, no job, no nosy neighbours. You’ve got all the time in the world to do nothing, or everything. Pure fuckin’ bliss.”

“I don’t know if I could spend three months on board like you,” Henry muttered.

“Well of course not!” Phil replied. “You’re young! You’ve got a whole life ahead of you, and the energy to match it. I’m done with my life now. This is like the long goodbye.”

“You’re not that old!” Henry said.

“Sixties aren’t the new forties!” Phil laughed. “But when you get to my age, your life takes meaning from other people. My daughters, my grandkids. It’s not about me anymore. And that’s great. But on this ship, I can reclaim some of my life back, get some control. Look back on everything before I forget it all and live in the moment, too.”

Henry felt a hand on his shoulder that quickly brushed down over his back to the middle of his spine.

“Can I get you guys another drink?” Beatrice asked.

“You’re attacking from all angles!” Phil laughed. “And yes, same again please! I’ve finished mine and I’m sure Henry is nearly done with his.”

Henry had barely touched his drink after his first taste, but didn’t want to let Phil down and took a big gulp of it, ignoring the anis that stung his mouth.

“I’ll be right back,” said Beatrice, as she disappeared into the throng of people now massing in the club. Henry found his eyes lingering on her as the shiver she ran down his spine slowly melted away.

“She walks me to my cabin every night,” Phil said. “She’s like an angel.”

“You can say that again,” Henry said, voice low, as he finished his first drink.

“I told you,” Phil smiled. “She has a way about her - and I can’t even bloody see.”

Two more green drinks reemerged from behind the bar as Beatrice placed her hand on Phil's arm again. Henry looked up at Beatrice, who gave him another grin before returning to her work.

"Well that extra hour will be upon us soon," Phil announced, raising his glass. "Might as well be ready for it!"

Henry slammed down his drink onto the counter as Phil cheered.

"Sounds like we're propping the bar up, Henry," Phil garbled.

Henry looked around the club and saw that it was emptying out, 80s music echoing around the hollowed out room.

"Best tell Beatrice I'm heading out," Phil continued.

"I'll take you, Phil," Henry stammered, impulsively. "If you don't mind."

"Not at all!" Phil answered. "Very good of you, Henry, saving me from my sins."

Henry watched as Phil grasped for his drink and finished it. Beatrice appeared at the bar, leaning over it eagerly.

"Time for me to escort you, Philip?" she asked, playfully.

"Not tonight, Beatrice," Phil rumbled. "Henry is doing the honours."

"Oh, such a gentleman," Beatrice flirted. "Not just a pretty face."

Henry felt his cheeks turn a violent shade of crimson. He wished he was wearing his mask, but tried his best to smile confidently back at her.

"I thought you only had eyes for me!" Phil laughingly protested.

"But of course, Philip!" Beatrice smiled, squeezing her body over the counter and placing her hands on Phil's face. "You're my favourite!"

Phil laughed as he stumbled out of his stool.

“I can sleep easy now,” he bellowed, as he fumbled for his cane.

Henry stood up with him, helping Phil’s hand find the stick. He placed his hand on Phil’s back and guided him between the chairs.

“I’ll see you tomorrow, Beatrice,” Phil said over his shoulder.

Henry turned and smiled at Beatrice. She looked at him with a raised eyebrow and started acting out an unfathomable charade that Henry struggled to decipher. Eventually, it became clear to Henry that she wanted him to return to the club after he had walked Phil back to his cabin. Henry felt his heart bob up into his throat as he nodded, subconsciously. Beatrice winked again, her sizable eyelashes fanning Henry as she returned to her work at the bar.

Henry led Phil out of the club in a haze. The ballroom was empty, the lights blaring from the ceiling. He must have had too much to drink, Henry thought to himself, as Phil hummed a tune that matched the mild music playing from the speakers. A crew member vacuumed the patterned carpet whilst Henry played back Beatrice’s actions in his head.

She wants me to come back, Henry thought. He entertained a plethora of scenarios, each one quickening the pace that led Phil towards the elevator.

“In a rush, Henry?” Phil asked, concerned.

“Sorry Phil,” Henry replied. “Need the bathroom.”

“Goes straight through you doesn’t it?” Phil laughed.

Henry watched the deck numbers slowly ascend as the elevator clicked along to Deck 11. He was just going to go back and talk to her, Henry told himself, giving an

excuse to quell the images of Emily in his head. Emily probably spoke to guys all the time, Henry rationalised with himself. It was natural.

“I appreciate you taking me back, Henry,” Phil said. “I know it isn’t the coolest thing someone your age could be doing on a Friday night.”

“Don’t worry about that,” Henry said, not having realised it was a Friday. “I’ve enjoyed it tonight.”

“Me too, my lad,” Phil agreed.

Henry wondered how long he’d been away from Beatrice. Perhaps she’d changed her mind, he thought, as he hurried Phil along to his cabin. The corridor seemed to oscillate in front of him as they sidestepped from left to right, stumbling towards Stateroom 11005.

“Is the boat moving more?” Phil asked. “Or are we just drunk?”

“A little bit of both,” Henry answered, feeling Phil’s hand squeeze the crook of his elbow. He could smell the alcohol on Phil’s breath and imagined he must have smelled the same. He thought of Beatrice’s wink and her hand on his back, how her lips framed her brilliant teeth that shone like pearls under the purple light. He wondered how he looked to her, glad he was so much younger than everyone else on board. She must have been around twenty-eight, Henry thought to himself, wondering how old she imagined Henry to be. She probably thought he was older than twenty, as he promised himself he’d start acting older in front of her.

“Are we there yet?” Phil groaned.

Henry looked up and saw 11013 muddle by.

“Almost,” Henry responded with relief.

Henry guided Phil to his door and swiped the key card through the slot.

“Same time tomorrow then, Henry?” Phil asked.

“Same time tomorrow,” Henry replied, as he wished Phil a good night. He waited to hear Phil’s door close before his walk hastened a jog, as he made his way back to the elevator.

The crew member vacuuming the carpet was now in a different area of the ballroom as Henry slowed his breath and tried to walk calmly towards the club. He pushed open the saloon doors, trying desperately to look cool. He imagined how James Bond walked into a bar and imitated his movements, one hand in his trouser pocket, the other swinging confidently by his side as Henry leaned on the bar looking for Beatrice.

The club was empty. The DJ was packing up his equipment as bar-staff cleaned the tables. Henry was worried he had missed her until he felt a familiar hand at the small of his back.

“You came,” Beatrice purred.

“Of course,” Henry answered, as suavely as he knew how.

“Look, you’re not meant to be here,” Beatrice whispered, nodding towards her fellow bar-staff who looked suspiciously over at them. “But why don’t we chat more in your cabin?”

Henry froze. Beatrice’s voice made his bones vibrate and he was sure she must have heard them shudder under his rented tuxedo.

“I finish here in an hour,” she murmured, leaning into Henry.

He felt the warmth of her breath against his cheek as a bead of sweat rolled down his back.

“Write down your cabin number on this napkin,” she instructed Henry.

He clicked the pen several times, before writing down his cabin number. He reread it over and over again, making sure not to get it wrong.

“Ok I’ll see you in an hour,” Beatrice smiled. “And make sure you’re wearing the mask.”

She slipped the napkin into the deep envelope of her cleavage. Henry thought his mouth must have been hanging open as Beatrice squeezed his arm and returned to her colleagues. He floated out of the club and towards his stateroom.

Henry felt alive. His body tingled as he strode down the corridor towards his cabin. His back straightened as he walked, his legs pistoning him towards his room. Never had he felt this confident about himself, so red-blooded, as his father would say when he’d complain when Henry didn’t watch the football with him. This sort of thing never happened in Driffield. Henry rarely went out, and the few times he did, the women brave enough to come out were always circled by men - like vultures - desperate to make something of their night.

By the time Henry had made it to his cabin, his mind was in overdrive. He was grateful for Jo having made the room look presentable, but Henry still triple-checked everything to make sure it was inviting. He fluffed pillows and smoothed out creases in the bed. He checked the trash to make sure the tuxedo tags had been taken out. He flushed the toilet several times and ran the water in the sink to remove any stray hairs or toothpaste stains he thought might turn Beatrice off. He experimented with the lights to find the right mood setting. Henry had only ever had sex in the dark - on just two separate occasions, with two separate girls - but the idea of Beatrice opening the door to a pitch-black room didn’t strike him as being sensual.

Henry spotted Emily's letters on his bedside table. The third letter sat at the top of the pile, a purple heart adorning the vowel in his name. She will never know, he told himself - allowing the drink to take over - as he bundled the letters and shoved them into the top drawer of the bedside table. They hadn't even met in person yet, Henry told himself, as he whispered sorry and slid the drawer shut.

Henry returned to the corner of the bed and looked in the mirror. He slipped the mask over his head and positioned it over his eyes. It was a fluorescent purple, and it sat awkwardly on his nose. His eyes didn't match up with the holes, and the plastic partially covered his nostrils, making it difficult to breathe.

She must be into this sort of thing, Henry thought to himself, as he ruffled his hair to give it that not-bothered look he heard women liked. He straightened his bow tie and sucked in his stomach, puffing up his chest as he twisted in the mirror to look at his profile. Finally, he sat on the corner of the bed and waited, staring at the door.

Henry played out the possibilities in his head. How he would open the door to her, how she would saunter in and press him against the wardrobe, biting his lip with her gigantic teeth. The feel of her soft body spilling through his fingers as she undressed him, save for the mask she clearly loved so much. Perhaps she would wear a mask, Henry thought, but not the long-nosed one, for he imagined it would get in the way.

Henry checked his watch. It was 2.10 in the morning. His first extra hour on board the ship, and he couldn't believe what he was doing. He hadn't set it back to the new time on board, but worked out that Beatrice should be on her way. He twisted the dial on his watch to restart the hour. This had been his grandfather's watch that he'd worn during the war. His grandfather had always told him that the watch saved his

life. Not because he was late or anything, but because a bullet ricocheted off the face of the watch and went up the nose of the soldier standing next to him in a trench in France. Henry smiled to himself at the story, whilst running his finger along the scar of the watch face between seven and eight. He'd replaced the leather strap a few times, but didn't want to fix the watch itself. He thought it gave it character, and considered it something of a lucky charm, especially now as he waited for Beatrice.

Henry tiptoed to the front door and placed an ear to it, expecting to hear a knock any second. He heard a room service trolley rumble above him as he checked his watch again. Surely she was caught up with work. He sat back down at the corner of the bed and waited, with his hands knotted together between his legs, and his mask askew on his face.

He again surveyed the room around him, making sure it looked both hygienic, and sexy. He didn't want to give off a student vibe. He imagined Beatrice was breaking all sorts of rules, but then again, so was he. It only added to the eroticism of it all, as Henry prescribed himself to Phil's way of thinking - a life at sea is separate from a life on land.

Henry began pictured several more illicit rendezvous across the next five days, spending each extra hour scattered around the ship in unauthorised areas like the captain's bridge or the engine room. But ten minutes became thirty and Henry found himself sinking into the bed. Maybe she was given an extra job to do. The doorway to his room blurred in and out of focus as the silver hands of his grandfather's watch chased each other around Henry's wrist. He was too scared to fall asleep and miss Beatrice's gentle knock at the door. So he sat hunched over on the corner of the bed, with his tuxedo clinging to his body and his mask drooping from his face. But the mask

softly crept down over his eyes, as Henry's head lolled into his chest and his breath became steady.

Chapter Two - The Storm

The church was at the end of a graveled pathway, flanked with trees uprooted from the ground. A line of black cars slipped out from behind the church, rumbling out of view as Henry gave chase. His legs were slow to respond. Henry's feet barely moved, as if swimming through treacle, whilst the black cars shrunk to ink blots staining the horizon. Harder Henry pumped his legs until the gravel rolled underneath him and he was rocked out of bed and out of his dream, feeling the coarse fabric of the cabin carpet sting his hands.

Henry looked around. The room was steady, amber light from the bedroom lamp droning above his head. He felt the bleak confines of his tuxedo wrinkle against his body. He wondered if Beatrice had stood on the other side of his door and knocked a handful of times before leaving, shaking her head at Henry's ineptitude. The thought stayed with Henry, until the room swayed again, and he was sent head-first into the side of his bed.

He finally understood what was going on. He heard the walls creak as the room dipped in a different direction, the generic paintings swinging from their nails. Henry tried standing up and was grateful to find his sea legs hadn't given way under him during the storm the ship had found itself in. He clambered onto the bed and peered through the porthole, hoping to see the intensity of the waves. All he saw was his own reflection staring back at him, coloured by the faint darkness outside suggesting dawn was soon approaching.

Henry lost his balance again as he got down from the bed. He took off his clothes and the mask and flung them over the chair before pulling back the covers and lying down to sleep. The edges of the bed seemed to sprawl away from him, as Henry

felt its emptiness. He leaned over and fumbled for the handle of the bedside table drawer, pulling it open slightly as a waft of vanilla filled the room. Yet he couldn't bear to reach in and touch the top letter, as his hand slipped from the drawer handle.

I'll read it later, Henry told himself, as he felt the ship roll around him, cocooning him under the duvet. Henry peered over at his watch. It was 4:48am. Too early to wake up, yet too late to get any decent sleep before breakfast. He turned onto his side and felt the coolness of the pillow comfort his face. Slowly he drifted, until the Atlantic's waves lifted him above the surface then dragged him down, into slumber.

By the time Henry closed his cabin door behind him, there was barely still time for lunch. The corridor yawned in front of him, swinging like a pendulum as he tried to keep upright. He used a woman far ahead of him as a point of balance, but when she went one way Henry went the other, and he felt forced to use the barriers for support as he moved forward.

The buffet was deserted, save for a few hungry souls who meandered around searching for food. Most of them seemed to be hardened travellers, the men sporting baseball caps labelling themselves veterans, and the women wearing neon leggings and stiff windbreakers that matched the stoicism etched in their faces.

Henry watched as the less-initiated - like him - stumbled across the floor, spilling cups of tea that splattered down onto the shining white tiles. A man's cheeks bulged before he grabbed his stomach and rushed away from the kitchen. Even the table-staff struggled to keep their balance, taking big strides, then lots of little ones, to counteract the rolling of the ship.

Parsnip soup and chicken sandwich in hand, Henry glanced across the room. Empty seats filled the space, with only the very brave dotted around, nursing glasses of water and nibbling club sandwiches. Henry assumed the bulk of the passengers were confined to their cabins struggling with seasickness, something he was surprised hadn't struck him down yet.

He sat down in a different alcove than he had yesterday, but still positioned himself by the window. The boardwalk was empty. The wooden slats were stained a darker shade of brown now that they were wet and the rigging for the lifeboats undulated violently in the wind. Salt-water lashed against the window as the ocean bubbled beyond it. Henry watched as great white stallions crashed into the molten-lead water as the horizon bobbed up and down, disappearing beyond the railings of the boardwalk.

Henry reached for Emily's letter in his back pocket. He unfolded it, and placed it next to his tray. He stared at it for a while, the encrusted rhinestones dulled by the shadow of the alcove. With a sigh he opened the letter.

Dearest Henry,

Day Two of your crossing! I hope you had a great night last night and the waters are calm!

I keep thinking about all the different places I want to take you to when you get here! Times Square, the State of Liberty, the Empire State Building. Oh, and my favourite burger spot in NYC! So delicious. I feel like I have to squeeze everything in so you get to see it all, but then I remember that there's no rush to do any of this. We've got forever.

We'll be going to Connecticut after you arrive in New York. We'll spend a few days in Manhattan first, but then onto the retreat! There's a busload of us going, and we'll stay at the Mercy By The Sea for a couple of weeks, before moving on to Massachusetts. I can't wait to explore America with you! You're going to love it and the message we spread here, and the work we do. You're going to meet some amazing people and, of course, you're gonna fit right in! There are people like you here who have had the same experience as you, who have lost a loved one. You can really grow here, and I think you're going to really enjoy being around us and feeling the love and support we can give.

Nearly coming up to the halfway point of your journey! Three more days until we're in each other's arms. I hope you recognize me! I'll have a flower in my hair. I really hope it doesn't rain - it would be such a bummer! But I'll still be smiling, and so will you, and I'll introduce you to everyone and it's just going to be great.

Counting down the hours until we're together.

With all my heart,

Emily

P.S. I love you so much.

Henry massaged his temples, wincing at Emily's words. The fold of the paper carved a valley down the middle of the page, distorting the letters that slipped into it. The letter tilted from side to side, following the sway of the ship, as the words swam in Henry's head. Not only had he made a fool of himself with Beatrice, but he was willing to go behind Emily's back with a complete stranger. Henry had never so much as looked at another woman since meeting Emily online but for a moment last night Henry had felt so alive, vindicated in his decision to leave Drifffield, and England.

The ship heaved through a wave, as Henry tried to fix his gaze on his food. With his spoon hovering between his mouth and his bowl, he saw the shaggy German Shepherd appear in the seating area. The dog bustled down the corridor, apparently unperturbed by the ship's movements. Not far behind him was his owner, and Henry was eager to see the man's face and catch his eye in a show of approval for his dog, though he wasn't expecting the man to look the way he did. The man's face appeared skeletal. His cheekbones and brow jutted out, his eyes sunken into the recess of his skull. Scars scattered across the man's left temple, running down the side of his sallow skin to his jaw, which seemed clamped to his ear lobes. The man bore a grin that spread across his face, carved into the bone above his chin. He walked with a lollop, as his dog dragged him down the corridor towards the buffet.

"Good afternoon, everyone!" the plummy voice rang out from the speakers, distracting Henry. "It's the Captain here, with the midday announcement on this, the second day at sea."

Henry's soup tilted in its bowl as white seafoam sprayed against the window.

"As I'm sure you're all aware," the Captain said, "We've hit a patch of choppy waters, and we'll most likely be caught up in it for the entirety of the day. And I'm afraid with that brings some cancellations of the on-board activities that I'm sure you were all looking forward to."

The Captain listed off the shows and events cancelled as Henry watched a handful of people gingerly make their way to their tables. He kept his eye on one man who walked like a trapeze artist, precariously balancing his tray of food as the ship pushed and pulled him about. He eventually made it to a table near Henry, cursing under his breath the serving of soup on such a day.

“My apologies, of course, for the weather,” the Captain continued. “But I do hope you’re all able to salvage the day and enjoy what little we have on offer.”

“Fat chance,” the man across from Henry muttered.

“Don’t forget the clocks will be going back again at 1am this evening, so you’ll get another hour of this wonderful weather,” the Captain joked.

Henry much rathered not having these extra hours at all, wanting to get to America as quickly as possible, and be with Emily as he finished his soup.

“And before I go, I must leave you with another quote,” said the Captain.

Henry heard the now familiar rustle of paper and the clearing of the Captain’s throat before the day’s wise words echoed around the ship.

“The fishermen know the sea is dangerous and the storm terrible,” the Captain began. “But they have never found these dangers sufficient reason for remaining ashore.”

The boat was like a ghost-ship, Henry thought, as he saw only staff members and the most dedicated passengers - and curious ones like himself - milling around and bumping into walls. He heard no music playing in the atrium, no laughter resonating from the bars. The TV still broadcast golf in the pub, but to an empty room - the hollow sound of dreary commentating floating out into the void. Yet the shops were thriving, and it was a wonder to Henry that people still had a thirst for shopping even when they couldn’t walk straight. Perhaps there was a sale on, enticing passengers to venture out of their cabins into the unsteady grounds at the back of the ship.

Henry didn’t know much about ships, but he did know the worst places to be during a bad storm were at the back, the front and the top. His father had told him this

during a bumpy ferry crossing atop the English Channel. Stay down low, his father had said, and remember that storms come, and storms go. It was a saying that Henry had long kept with him, finding it more applicable than ever right now.

Henry hedged his bets and chose to wander around Deck Four, in the bowels of the vessel, away from the immediate effects of the raging seas. Huge placards were plastered along the walls, detailing the famous passengers that had sailed with the fleet. Some Henry recognised, others he didn't. Members of the Royal family looking out from the boardwalk waved at him from the black and white pictures. Stars from a vintage era in Hollywood - Cary Grant, Humphrey Bogart - smiled at Henry from their dinner tables, and singers that once graced the ballrooms with their dulcet tones looked fondly at him as he walked past.

He felt the prick of Emily's letter in his back pocket. He wondered what she'd wear when she'd collect him. She always wore hoodies during their video calls to one another - pink ones, black ones, burgundy ones - all emblazoned with fashion labels she liked or colleges she wasn't enrolled in. Henry always teased her about that, but she said it was a fashion statement and that everyone did it, anyway, much to his derision. Her blonde hair was always tied back neatly in a ponytail, and she'd tilt her head to the side whenever Henry said something she liked hearing. They'd talk to each other daily, yet Henry was surprised how much he missed hearing her voice and seeing her face. It was all he looked forward to back home. He'd stay up late to catch her after her day, whispering in his bedroom so his father couldn't hear him across the hallway. She'd tell Henry about what state she was living in at the moment, what New England is like, how funny that sounded "New England", the people she had met at the commune, how one elderly lady she had met called her the most important blessing in her life and

how empowered and satisfied it made her feel. It was everything Henry needed in his life. A sense of belonging and self-fulfillment, with a woman who cared for him and gave him a comfort he hadn't felt in such a long time.

Suddenly, Henry heard the unmistakable panting of the dog, followed by the pitter-patter of paws coming from around the corner. It was too late for Henry to turn around, nor did he have a museum poster to steer his attention towards, so he waited for the dog, and the man, to come. Sure enough, the German Shepherd led the way, pausing briefly to consider Henry, before continuing along. The man soon followed, as Henry prepared himself for some form of interaction. He smiled uncomfortably at the man, who was startled to find Henry around the blind corner.

“Oh, sorry,” the man said. “Didn't see you there!”

“No worries,” Henry said, smiling nervously.

The scars were much more vivid close-up. Like lightning bolts, they forked down the side of his face, leaving a vivid purple discolouration. The man's eyes were impossible to see, like two pebbles rattling around in a pair of shoes, refusing to come out. His face seemed haunted and, for Henry, it was as if he was staring Death in the face, and a future he couldn't avoid.

“You are brave, being out in this weather,” the man spoke quietly.

Henry recognised what he thought was a Nordic accent.

“Yes, I guess it is,” Henry shuffled. “Your dog seems fine with it, though.”

“Yes, Gunnar isn't affected by much.”

At the sound of his name, the dog's ears perked up and his tail flickered. In an instant, Gunnar started leading the man down the corridor.

“I guess he doesn't want to stop,” the man shrugged. “Enjoy your day.”

“You too!” Henry called after him.

Now, Henry’s curiosity about the man was piqued. As intriguing as the man’s obvious scars were, it was his unknown story that Henry found the most interesting. Where was he going? Was he alone? Did he have someone to travel to, like Henry, himself - a loved one or, rather, someone who loved him? The dog seemed to be the man’s only companion, constantly having him on the move, never letting him stop. Perhaps he should have had a dog back home, Henry thought to himself.

“Henry!” a voice called out.

He turned around to see Srdan, striding along to catch up with him.

“I see you too are not perturbed by the weather!” Srdan said, grinning and shaking Henry’s hand and patting him on the shoulder.

“I felt worse staying in my room.”

“So you come down to one of the lower decks,” Srdan said. “Very clever of you. And of course, the museum is wonderful.”

Srdan started along the corridor, as Henry walked alongside him.

“I would expect them to not serve dinner tonight,” said Srdan. “The furniture is not bolted down, and the food will go everywhere.”

Henry smiled at the image of such a mess created in the restaurant.

“Which means,” Srdan continued. “That there will be more choice in the buffet tonight. Unless of course the weather gets any worse.”

“I’ll be there,” Henry said.

“Yes,” Srdan smiled. “More fun that way. Better than staying alone in your room.”

Henry couldn't agree more as Srdan began giving him a personal tour of the museum. There were no artifacts or exhibits trapped behind glass cases. Instead it was wall after wall of placards and posters, curving around the lower decks detailing the origins of the transatlantic crossings, and the variety of passengers that had taken the journey.

Henry liked how relatable the museum was, reading the stories of those who had taken the same journey as him and the reasons they had chosen to do so. Some chose to emigrate to the States, others were stowaways, smuggling themselves on board and pretending to be part of the crew. Henry felt like he had smuggled himself on board in some ways, feeling so different from the majority on board the ship, hiding in his room away from everyone.

"I was actually on the maiden voyage," Srdan revealed. "In 2004, not 1839. We went to Florida from Southampton, my wife and I. I've never had such fun, or so many scones."

It was the first time he had heard Srdan mention any family members, Henry noted. He joyfully listened to Srdan's anecdotes and facts, marveling at the amount of food served on the ship, or how many swimming pools could be filled by the amount of tea served during each crossing, or how the ship was the same height as the Empire State Building, if it stood on its end.

"I have always wondered if my face will ever appear on one of these," Srdan said, stopping by one of the placards.

"How long have you been on board?" asked Henry.

“Do you mean this journey?” Srdan asked. “Or in total? Because if you are asking in total I cannot give you an accurate answer. But if you mean this journey, then I can tell you I have not been home to Montenegro for a year.”

“A year?!” Henry exclaimed.

“Yes, I know, quite a while,” Srdan smiled, softly. “Roughly five percent of your entire life, if you think about it.”

“Why so long?”

Srdan turned back towards the poster. It was a photo of a ship leaving harbour and setting sail for some unnamed destination. Henry watched him look at it, as if searching the passengers waving from the ship for a face he might recognise.

Srdan sighed. “If I can be honest with you, Henry, It is an escape, a place to hide. My wife, Georgiana, died a year ago and I boarded the ship to get away.”

“I’m so sorry to hear that,” said Henry. In an instant, he felt a bond with Srdan. He understood why he was traveling, escaping from a life that was in turmoil back home. He wondered if Srdan had any children or close friends questioning where he was, or whether he had told them he intended to be gone for so long. He didn’t feel comfortable enough to ask, though, as he watched Srdan shuffle his shoes in front of him.

“You know,” Srdan said, “I have been around the world twice in a year on board this ship. And not once have I told someone why. Until now.”

The ship shuddered, causing Henry to lose his balance and stumble into the wall. He considered telling Srdan his own story for a moment, that he was on board for similar reasons and that he could understand, in part, what the Montenegrin was going

through. But he decided to keep quiet. Not yet, he thought. I want to tell my girlfriend first.

“Thank you,” Srdan smiled, interrupting Henry’s thoughts. “It is nice to be a bit open.”

Srdan placed his hand affectionately on Henry’s shoulder.

“Now,” Srdan started as he began walking down the corridor. “There is an excellent exhibition on Deck Two about how they made this ship in the first place. It was built in France by the way, but the British don’t like you knowing that. And did you know there are two thousand bathrooms on board? And yet I can never find one when I need it most!”

Henry laughed and followed Srdan, who glided serenely along the walkway, unaffected by the wild waters that shook the ship.

The weather had gotten worse. Henry had taken a nap after his time with Srdan, but now awoke abruptly.

Henry’s watch told him it was 9:23pm, much later than he would’ve liked. He grunted and fumbled out of bed as he heard the sea rushing by the porthole window. It was becoming increasingly difficult to stand, so he sat at the edge of the bed and gathered himself. The ship continued to convulse, as Henry felt the contents of his stomach swish around in the basin of his hips.

Henry heard a voice groan outside of his bedroom door, and a short laughter soon follow it. He wished he wasn’t afraid of flying, so he could have arrived in New York by now. Seven hours in the air seemed much safer than five days at sea,

particularly when the ship was being battered and Henry was left alone with thoughts of his mother.

England seemed so distant. All he could imagine was the ship pulling into the Brooklyn harbour, the bright lights of Manhattan's skyline dusting the night like glitter. It was only three sleeps away, Henry thought to himself, three sleeps until he was in an entirely different continent with Emily, heading towards a retreat that would give his life new meaning.

The ship jerked again. Henry considered going upstairs for a late-night snack. He didn't have to put on a suit in the more-relaxed confines of the buffet and he'd be hungry in a couple of hours, long after anything substantial would be served. Henry convinced himself to go, slipped on his shoes, and made his way to Deck Seven.

A few more people were hovering around the buffet than had been at lunch. Henry assumed they'd simply gotten sick of the insides of their cabins, or indeed their company, for many of the passengers sat eating alone.

He made his way to his usual spot, the alcove that offered him both a hidden nook away from the masses and a view of the outside. Not that he could see anything. There were no lights out on the water, no moon in the sky illuminating the waves that erupted from below. It was just darkness, a thick slate that absorbed both sea and sky.

Arriving at his table, Henry put his tray down, only to see he was not alone. There, sitting in the drab corner, was the man and, at his feet, Gunnar, the shaggy German Shepherd. Henry froze. The man hadn't seen him, and Henry considered for a second whether to grab his tray and move somewhere else so not to disturb him. Yet, Henry realised he had had little to no interaction with anybody on board the ship.

Except for Srdan and Phil, he hadn't spoken to a soul about anything remotely meaningful. No one knew him.

"Oh," said the man. "Good evening. A late dinner?"

"Just a little peckish," Henry said, pulling his chair back and resigning himself to his seat.

"You British always have these funny sayings," the man, said chuckling. "We're not as creative in Denmark."

Henry smiled, not knowing how to respond. He had never been referred to as 'you British' before.

"My name is Torkild," the man said. "You already know Gunnar."

Henry introduced himself to Torkild before looking down at his own dinner.

"Do you travel alone?" Torkild asked, looking out of the window.

"Yes, just me," Henry said, in-between mouthfuls of root vegetables.

"You must be the youngest person on board traveling alone," Torkild remarked.

"By quite some distance."

"Yes, I think I am," Henry chuckled. "Are you traveling alone?"

"Yes, just me and Gunnar, here." Torkild rubbed the back of the dog's head, ruffling its thick black fur. "But you are much younger than me, I am sure."

Gunnar looked up appreciatively at Torkild before lowering his face down by his paws. He wore a faded beige cable-knit sweater, its design knotting down in ropes. Torkild's left hand rested in front of him, gnarled knuckles bursting through the taut skin that gripped the corner of the table. He again looked out of the window, the rain beating down onto the glass, as Henry saw Torkild's reflection stare back at him.

"You're probably wondering what happened. To my face."

“No, sorry, I-” Henry stammered.

“Don’t worry,” Torkild interrupted. “I am not offended. I do not mind telling you.”

“No, it’s ok,” Henry said, flustered. “I really don’t need to know, it’s none of my business.”

“Henry, perhaps it would be nice for me to say,” Torkild said, softly. “I have not had many conversations aboard this ship so far.”

First Srdan, now Torkild. Henry started to wonder if these men came on board to find someone to confide in, as well as to escape. The ship seemed to Henry as good a place as any to disappear, away from the problems on land, and he could see how easy it would be to do the same thing. Maybe the men were attracted to his youth, recognising a time gone by that they longed to rekindle.

“If you’re sure,” Henry started. “Please don’t feel like you have to.”

“No no, it’s ok,” Torkild said, raising his hand. “It would be good for me to talk.”

Henry swung his seat out from the table to listen intently. A spray of water lashed against the window, causing Gunnar to raise his head and watch the droplets ebb down the length of the glass.

“Eight months ago,” Torkild began, “I was driving my friends home from a music concert. They had been drinking and I’d had a couple, but nothing too crazy. Everyone was having fun, we were playing music in the car. It had just been a great night.”

Henry watched Torkild fiddle with the stem of his water glass.

“We came up to an intersection,” Torkild continued. “It was very quiet, late at night. And then, out of nowhere, this big truck came fast around the corner and struck the side of the car. I just remember the noise of the metal hitting, and then I woke up in hospital some time after, unable to move.”

Henry sat in silence. Gunnar yawned, his jaw craning open before snapping shut as his eyes disappeared behind clumps of fur.

“The doctor tells me bones are broken, my eyesight is weaker, and I have nerve issues in my face and neck,” Torkild said. “My face will always look like this. It was terrible to hear. I am a young guy, you know?”

Torkild shifted in his seat. He took a gulp of water and put the glass back down on the table shakily. Henry couldn’t tell if it was the storm or Torkild that caused the water to ripple.

“Then the doctor told me none of my friends in the car survived,” Torkild said.

Henry felt the air suck out of the alcove. He didn’t know what to say. They both sat in silence for a little while, the barrage of rain pelting against the window and the reeling of the ship the only sounds heard.

“So, now I go to America for my face,” Torkild said, breaking the silence. “They say the US may have skin-grafting capabilities that we do not have in Denmark. So I go to see what they can do. And Gunnar gets to come along, too, which is nice for him.”

“Is Gunnar for your eyesight?” Henry asked.

“Oh, no,” replied Torkild. “I can see ok, now. He is a therapy dog. For when I have the seizures and the nightmares.”

Henry felt his insides knot and a wave of sympathy crash over him. He was so saddened by Torkild's story, and couldn't imagine bearing the same burden as the Dane did, grateful that he had his whole life ahead of him.

"I know," Torkild sighed. "It is not exactly a happy story, but it is my story to tell."

Henry struggled to come up with the right words to say. Sorry didn't seem enough, yet it was all he had.

"I'm sorry to take you away from your dinner," Torkild said, nodding toward Henry's plate of mostly untouched chicken and vegetables.

"Oh, don't worry," Henry said. "This weather doesn't go well with food."

Torkild laughed, his mouth opening like a wound, stretching the scars that snaked along the side of his face.

"Why didn't you fly?" asked Henry.

"Ah," Torkild responded. "Gunnar is not too fond of flying. He gets very upset, and having a depressed therapy dog does not much help me with my issues."

"I know how he feels," Henry said, smiling.

"So what is your story, young Henry? Why the ship? What waits for you in America?"

Gunnar was fast asleep by his master's feet, as Torkild turned to face Henry, fully engaged with him.

"Well, there's this girl," started Henry, feeling foolish.

"There's always a girl," said Torkild, sitting back in his chair. "And you're traveling to see her."

Henry nodded.

“The things we do for love,” smiled Torkild, finishing his water. “She must be very special for you to leave home, and risk your life on this ship!”

Henry looked down at his food. Liquid from the tomato sauce had drained to the edge of his plate, pooling in bubbles of orange, and red. Its oil-slick surface shimmered under the spotlights above Henry, before the ship lurched once more and the liquid slid to the other side of the plate, smearing the ceramic with grease.

“She’s not the only reason I left,” Henry answered, swallowing the lump that formed in his throat.

“You are seeking new surroundings?” Torkild asked.

“She’s part of this commune,” Henry answered. “I was in a bad place at home, and I needed something new. We met online. You could call it fate, I guess. She told me about who she was, what she did, that she is part of this community that travels around America and it appealed to me. So I’m coming over to see what’s it like, and what we’re like together, and then I’ll take it from there. ”

Gunnar whined as a flash of lightning exploded out of the corner of Henry’s eye. He couldn’t hear the thunder like Gunnar could, but he knew it was there, rumbling in the dark for no one to listen.

“This sounds like a big risk,” Torkild said, catching Henry off-guard. “For sure, I understand why you are doing it. But I don’t know if you’ve thought this through properly. Do you want to be part of this community, as you say? Or are you just trying to escape home? Europe is a very accessible continent, you could have traveled much closer to home.”

“I guess I just wanted to push myself,” Henry said, sheepishly.

“Tell me, had you had any other ideas?” Torkild asked. “Or was this your first one?”

“It was my first ticket out of there, yeah.”

Henry started to feel stupid. He pictured the ship carving through the darkness. He wondered how the Captain could plot a course through such nothingness, or if he really knew where he was going. All he had to do was head West, Henry thought. There was no dotted line to follow.

“You have three more days until we arrive in New York,” continued Torkild. “There will always be other ships going back to England, if America is not for you.”

“I’m not going back,” said Henry, shaking his head, fighting back tears that welled in the valley of his eyes. “There’s nothing for me to go back to.”

“Well that only leaves you another two hundred countries,” Torkild said, reaching down to scratch under Gunnar’s chin. “One of them you will enjoy - maybe Denmark!”

Henry smiled at Torkild’s comment.

“Henry, let me say this,” said Torkild as he got up from his chair. “I am very envious of your current situation - a young man, traveling, ready to start a new chapter of his life. But I have regrets. Regrets over choices I made. To tell you the truth, I shouldn’t have even been at that concert the night my friends died. I told my parents I wouldn’t go, but I did. And now, this.”

Torkild angled his face so Henry could see his scars clearer.

“It is easy to make mistakes and learn from them,” Torkild continued. “But to not make mistakes in the first place, to not make such permanent ones, requires a lot of thought. And I’d recommend you do that.”

Henry looked up at Torkild as Gunnar yawned and stood up, stretching his front paws out before waiting for his master to move.

“Goodnight, Henry.”

“Night, Torkild,” Henry said.

Henry felt Gunnar brush against his leg before the man and the dog were gone and Henry was left alone in the alcove. He saw his reflection staring back at him. A pale blurred face, with dark shadows where his blue eyes should have been. Henry looked small in his surroundings, empty chairs filling the space as his food sat discarded on the plate in front of him.

Torkild’s words of caution had given Henry even more resolve. Leaving England was the right thing to do, Henry told himself, as the outside lamps shone on the boardwalk, illuminating the rain that lashed down from the Atlantic. For all the sympathy Henry had for Torkild, he was determined not to live a life of regret like the Dane had done. Emily, America - they were exactly what Henry needed as England floated further and further away from the ship. He was heading to a new home now, a place that accepted him and allowed him to be the master of his own decisions.

Henry left the alcove and made his way to the boardwalk. He wanted to experience the storm outside, and talk to the Atlantic like Srdan had suggested the day before. He smelled the ozone in the air, the grit of land that lingered after lightning had scorched the earth. He heard the faint rumble of thunder, tens of miles away, as he counted the seconds between the flash, and the noise. He wondered about all the storms that happened at a sea that no one ever experienced. Torrents of rain, collected from the ocean, moving in great swathes over nothingness, void of any contact with anyone who would never see the power they possessed.

The sound of a distant door slamming snapped Henry out of his daze. He looked along the boardwalk and saw a figure stagger around the corner and disappear from view. Henry looked down at his watch. He was well into his extra hour as his wet hair clung to his scalp, the salt of the water seasoning his lips. He didn't think the Atlantic would listen to him tonight. Instead, it seemed to scream at him, howling into his ears, ripping through his bones. He couldn't move his legs, like in the dream he had that morning, trying desperately to catch up to the procession of cars that left the crematorium.

The storm continued to thrash against him. He wished his mother was with him, holding his hand. His father had told him, finally, that she had hung herself in the bathroom one day when Henry was at school. Henry knew she had been ill beforehand, and his father said it had been cancer, but looking back, Henry realised that didn't make sense. He remembered her being withdrawn, and distant - as if her body was vacant and the world moved slower for her than it did everyone else. He had felt the same way after she died and throughout his teenage years. Isolated from everyone, seeking solace in his bedroom when he didn't want to face the world. Yet here he was, alone in the middle of the Atlantic, and never had he felt more alive. Or more alone.

His mother would have been proud, Henry thought. She had always wanted him to travel, making a point of telling Henry it was the only way in which the mind could broaden. To experience different worlds away from Driffield, and to make a home in one of them. He knew she would have loved to have visited him in America, as a sheet of lightning crackled across the sky. With every fork of lightning, the horizon revealed itself. In that instant, Henry saw the edge of the world, the point where the ocean dropped off into oblivion. It seemed so close to him. So near, so reachable. As if he

could climb the railings and step out into the void, onto invisible steps that would lead him to where the sky kissed the sea. To the place where all ends meet.

Chapter Three - Man Overboard

“This is an announcement for all crew. Would Chef Maxim Gonzalez please report to his muster station. Would Chef Maxim Gonzalez please report to his muster station. Thank you.”

Henry woke up to the noise of the speakers coming through the walls. He only caught the end of the message, but it wasn't a voice he recognised. It was a woman's voice, and an officious one at that, Henry thought to himself. It hadn't played in his room but outside in the corridor, though loud enough to wake him up. He rolled over and struggled to grip the leather of his grandfather's watch between his slumbering fingers.

It was a little past seven in the morning. He could see the daily pamphlet poking out from under his cabin door. He had ignored it the last two days, not interested in the mundane events offered on board to keep the passengers mobile. Today, however, he felt compelled to not spend a second of his day alone. He was invigorated, especially after his encounter with the storm last night.

The pamphlet showed Henry's whole day mapped out in front of him - a plethora of events to attend for every hour of the day. There was even something at seven in the morning, a pilates group meeting at the gym at the front of the ship. Henry scanned the list for something a little later and found the *Nautical Olympics*, starting at 10.00am in the Solarium.

He considered attending. He needed something to occupy his time with, to make America come along quicker. He put the pamphlet down and rifled through his suitcase, having not fully unpacked since he boarded the ship. He found some exercise

shorts and his trainers and felt confident enough to get involved with the morning Olympics.

Emily would be proud, Henry thought to himself, as he enjoyed the new wave of energy that coursed through him. He was determined to make the most of his time on board the ship, already past the halfway mark to New York. He would have breakfast, attend the Olympics, meet new people, have lunch and see where the rest of the day took him, Henry told himself, as he jumped into the shower.

The shower was so small that Henry kept banging his elbows against the walls whenever he turned. The knocks on the wall caused the complimentary soaps and luxury body washes to tumble from their ledge, and Henry had to contort himself into a knot to pick them up again. He felt the sting of the hot water needle into his back as he crouched down to collect the array of soaps he never used. It massaged his skin, digging in between his vertebrae and along the breadth of his ribs. He stayed crouched for a moment. His wet hair dangling in front of his eyes as he rolled his back so the water could beat down all over it.

Henry enjoyed the strain he felt in his calves, how tight his thighs were as they held his weight. He bounced a little on the balls of his feet, the pitted shower floor nipping against the hardened skin on his soles. He watched the ripples pop under him, drops of water cascading down from the end of his nose and the cleft of his chin into the shallow pool that burst beneath him. He thought of home, how quickly he would shower before school, or work, never enjoying the moment to himself where he could study his own body.

No one had ever seen him naked. The two times he had sex, it was always in the dark, with his shirt still on, and his trousers hastily pulled down around his knees.

He preferred being held instead of stroked, always refusing massages from the few girlfriends he had or pulling away from light touches on his arms, or legs. He enjoyed the intimacy of being with a woman, provided he was the one doing the touching, and massaging, which was infrequent at best.

Yet Henry found himself at ease with his body now, in the shower. He admired the curves of his own legs, the mound of muscle that bulged in his calves, behind his knees. He liked the way his shoulder blades glided under his skin, catching the spray of water that simmered against his back. He followed the veins around his ankles sprawling into his feet, thick like cables and the colour of a healthy blue. He traced them with his finger, feeling the soft twine melt under his fingertip. He saw the same veins in the back of his hands, etched into his wrists and along his slender forearms before disappearing into the hollow from where his biceps sprouted.

Henry slowly rose from his crouched position. The water pooling across his shoulders flooded down over his chest and abdomen. He found himself taller than before, the bite of the shower water centred on the nape of his neck. Henry brushed his soaked hair back with his hands. He inhaled the steam that revolved around him, feeling his skin glow in the heat of the simmer. He turned the shower off and stood in the cubicle. The metronome of water dripping from Henry's extremities slowed to a silence, before he drew the curtain back and let the cold air from his room rush around him.

Henry didn't know what to expect at the Olympics event. If it was anything remotely physical he imagined he would win by default, considering the average age of his fellow passengers. He walked into the solarium on the top deck of the ship where

the event was supposed to start. A wall of hot air hit him, as the gentle splash of a swimming pool whispered in the distance. Some passengers lay flat on sunbeds, whilst others sat upright, folded over the edge of their sun loungers reading the daily brochure and taking sips from coffee cups that sat on nearby tables. Staff members carrying piles of towels meandered around the room, as an elderly gentleman sent ripples through the water. His cupped hands propelled him from one side of the pool to the other, as two women bubbled in the jacuzzi adjacent to the pool.

Henry observed the man swimming. Aqua-blue goggles were pressed firmly into his face, as the man kept his head above the surface of the water. The distortion of his body underneath him fluttered like a flag, his legs seemingly too small to push him along, and his torso too big to stay afloat. Henry tried to remember the last time he went swimming, and assumed it was during a school class, when he was fifteen. He had sprouted chest hair by then, as if blossoming from the line of hair that rooted from his abdomen. Henry's hirsuteness had made him a target of sniggering and disgust from his classmates - not least the girls - and his enjoyment of swimming was cut short by crippling anxiety.

He noticed a group of five or six passengers milling around by a ping-pong table - elderly men adorned in vibrant polo shirts and dark swim shorts - and assumed those were the Olympic athletes he was to be competing against. Henry approached the group with a smile and they responded, in kind.

“Well we've all lost now!” said one.

“I thought there was an age limit!” laughed another. “Sixty five, and over!”

Henry laughed along with the men, who introduced themselves. He recognised London accents as the men spoke and was reminded of his Grandfather, who was born

and raised in Battersea, in the South West of London. His was a hardened accent, as if his vocal cords had to rev up before speaking, and it created images in Henry's head of a yesteryear in London - of gangsters, and football firms, of men with shovels for faces, and jet black hair that was always slicked back after a fight.

Not long after Henry started mingling with the men, the event coordinator arrived. A short man with spiked hair and thick black glasses, seemingly too cheerful to truly enjoy what he was doing.

"Good morning, athletes!" the man announced. "My name is Tommy and I'll be taking charge of you all today."

Tommy's voice had a squeak to it, Henry thought, like the one new shoes give off when walking down a linoleum corridor.

"So there are several events," Tommy continued. "A heptathlon of sorts! And we're going to start off here playing ping pong. Now if you wouldn't mind signing this sheet so I can keep a track of your scoring."

Tommy passed around a clipboard that Henry and the men began to sign before ping pong paddles were assigned and the games began. The tick-tock of a table tennis game ensued, as Henry watched the men battle it out. The occasional table tennis ball popped his way, and he deftly caught it and gave it back to the players, happy with his reaction time and feeling quietly confident of his success at this event.

Henry was set to play Roy, a man Henry thought to be in his late 70's and who, tragically, looked days away from death. His white hair was faded and his hands and arms were covered in liver spots, dark brown splotches of age that stained the man's leathery skin. Henry spun the paddle in his hand as he held the ball in the air, ready to serve. Tommy signalled to start and Henry tossed the ball up, before sending it onto

the table and over the net for Roy to return. Roy was hunched over in a ball as Henry served, like a tortoise asleep in his shell. Yet as the ball bounced over the net, Roy's body started to unlock. His right hand emerged from the vice grip by his stomach. His spine straightened and his chest bellowed outwards, as Roy began cocking back his arm. By the time the ball bounced on his side of the table, Roy was lying in wait, ready to pounce. He whipped the paddle from his hip as it cleaved through the air, before connecting with the plastic of the ball and sending it racing past Henry, who stood motionless.

“One-nil to Roy!” Tommy exclaimed, with a smile.

Henry was left bemused and felt his dreams of a podium finish slip away. By the time the game was over, Henry had lost 11-4. He shook hands with Roy afterwards, whose feeble hands belied the ping-pong prowess he had just showcased moments before.

“Don't feel too hard-done by, son,” said Roy. “I was ping-pong champion for the Navy back in the day.”

The group moved on to shuffleboard, which was outside, at the back of the solarium. Two long streaks of chalk painted out the shuffleboard court, as the boardwalk slats stretched out into the Atlantic. The wind swirled around Henry, as his jeans billowed around his legs, and his hair flapped from the crown of his head. He tasted the salt in the air, its grit scrubbing against the side of his face. It was much calmer than yesterday, yet still Henry felt uneasy being outside again, after his encounter with the storm last night.

He watched as the men used long wooden cues to send the discs down the court, the sound of their plastic scraping against the wooden boards as they skated down to a

number painted white. Some of the discs even lifted off, veering off the court and rolling away to the glass screen by the edge of the boardwalk, such was the wind on the top deck.

Henry jogged over to the screen to collect the awry discs. He glanced out to the horizon and saw a haze emerge. It was as if the water was rising to the sky, or the ocean disappeared over an invisible lip and the sky fell with it. He couldn't tell how far away it was, but it seemed to wrap around the ship, a mist that collected at the edge of view and sat there, waiting.

By the time Henry turned around, the ship's foghorn blared, causing him to drop the discs and cover his ears. The group were standing underneath the funnels, and the foghorn must have been located nearby, for it resonated through the floor, causing the men to wince and turn their heads away from the sound.

"Sorry about that, chaps!" Tommy said. "Should have warned you, we're right by the foghorn!"

The foghorn blared out again. Henry was more prepared this time, but still the sound reverberated through his bones, as he brought the discs back to the group.

"Good job I'm deaf," said Roy, signalling his hearing aid.

"What?" joked Harold, another elderly man who had had the same ill-fortune as Henry had during ping pong. They were to face each other at shuffleboard next, as Henry collected his cue.

"This is an announcement for all crew. Would Chef Maxim Gonzalez please report to his muster station. Would Chef Maxim Gonzalez please report to his muster station. Thank you."

"That's the second time we've heard that," mumbled Roy.

“Here, Tommy,” signalled Frank, another ‘Olympian’ and winner of the ping pong event. “What’s going on with this chef?”

“I wish I could tell you,” answered Tommy, diplomatically. “But I really don’t know. Chefs and the kitchen aren’t part of my roster.”

The men mumbled to themselves as Henry fared better with shuffleboard than he did with ping pong, beating Harold and coming third overall.

“The comeback begins, Henry!” announced Tommy, enthusiastically. “On to beanbag throwing, next!”

Tommy led the men back to the solarium. Henry was grateful for the warmth the solarium offered after the Atlantic wind had battered against him, as the men waited for Tommy to set up the latest event. The pool was empty now, but more of the deckchairs were filled, and Henry noticed that staff were now serving out cocktails to go with the towels.

“So why are you on board this bloody big ship?” Roy asked Henry.

“I’m meeting my girlfriend in America,” Henry answered.

“Good for you!” Roy said, slapping Henry on the back. “A proper romance story there! Good to see old-fashioned love isn’t dead after all.”

Henry smiled in agreement. It was a romance story - albeit a modern one. Boy meets girl online, boy takes ship to meet girl and join commune said girl is part of in America. *Pride and Prejudice* eat your heart out, Henry thought to himself.

Tommy finished setting up the scoring board. It was essentially a plank of wood with holes in it, each labelled with a different score. Henry had played something similar at primary school, throwing bean bags through hoops to win chocolate bars and school supplies.

“Right,” Tommy began, breathlessly. “This might look simple, but trust me, it isn’t. What you have to-”

Tommy was interrupted by a tannoy announcement.

“Good morning everyone, this is the Captain speaking.”

“It’s not lunch time yet is it?” Roy murmured to Henry, checking his watch.

“As some of you may be aware,” the Captain began. “We have been making several announcements all morning about the whereabouts of one of our crew members. We have still yet to find him and have been scouring through camera footage to determine where he might have gone. Having watched said footage, it has now come to light that this missing crew member has gone overboard.”

There was an audible gasp in the solarium. Henry watched as passengers turned to each other with shock written out on their faces, asking each other if they had just heard the same thing they did.

“It is my duty as Captain to ensure the safety of my crew,” the Captain continued. “And I have made the decision to turn the ship around to help locate Chef Gonzalez.”

Tommy still had the dusty bean bags in his hand as Henry tried to focus on something as he listened. He couldn’t comprehend what was going on. Someone had jumped overboard? A crew member? It didn’t make sense.

“I ask you all - passengers and crew - to head out to Deck Seven and see if you can locate our crew member,” the Captain continued. “Visibility conditions are only going to worsen as the day progresses but we could use every pair of eyes available to help us find our man.”

Henry watched as his fellow Olympians made a beeline for the exit, as passengers got up from their sun loungers, rolled up their towels and made their way out of the Solarium. Some took their cocktails with them. Others downed them before getting up, taking a step to balance themselves, and heading out towards the elevators.

“I’m sorry to disturb your day with such morbid news,” the Captain finished. “But the only right thing to do is for us to turn the ship around. I will update you all on the search and the subsequent affect this will have on our crossing. Thank you.”

“I guess bean bags are off, then,” said Roy, as the men followed the throng of people who were leaving the poolside.

“Yes, I guess we should all go to Deck Seven,” Tommy said. “So tragic. Olympics are postponed until further notice!”

By the time Henry had reached Deck Seven, he was hard-pushed to find any free space by the railings. Hundreds of people filled the boardwalk - passengers and crew members, alike. All of them peering over the edge, pointing at what they saw, but couldn’t know for sure.

The foghorn continued to boom from the front of the ship. Its echo trembled into the Atlantic, as Henry felt the ship slow to a gentle chug. There was a silence along the boardwalk. People were already in mourning, it seemed to Henry, and he felt as if he was walking along a funeral procession, like when he followed his mother’s coffin down the long aisle between the pews of the crematorium. Then, all the heads turned to see him, offering sorrowful glances and looks of support that never materialised. Now, everyone looked the other way.

A space opened up under a lifeboat near the back of the ship. Henry squeezed in between passengers and looked out to the water. The mist had moved much closer to the ship, so much so it was as if the ship was flying. There was no distinction between sea or sky. Instead, a grey mass stirred, undulating around the ship, so thick that Henry felt he could climb over the railings and walk on it - the same feeling he had last night.

Henry looked down past his feet to the Atlantic, but couldn't make anything out. The occasional rasp of sea foam would emerge from the surface but then dip under again, into nothingness. How anyone is going to find this man is beyond me, Henry thought to himself, as he tried to distinguish where the fog stopped and the sea began.

The orange lifeboat above Henry's head swayed quietly as the ship came to a standstill. Henry felt like he was floating towards the edge of the earth. The ship seemed like it was thousands of feet in the air and he found himself in an ethereal space, floating between sea and sky, through clouds the colour of salt and shaded pearls.

"It's like something out of an Agatha Christie novel, don't you think?" a woman's voice said.

Henry turned his head to see a young woman standing next to him, staring out to the Atlantic. He took in her profile. She must have been in her early twenties. He regarded her brown hair that fell down from her black beret in tussles, and a nose that was delicately pointed, accentuating the curve of her lips, and the length of her eyelashes.

"Yeah I guess you could say that," Henry answered, looking back to the water. "Like something out of Poirot."

“Yes I was thinking Poirot, too,” the young woman agreed.

Henry found the woman’s presence unusual, and an affront to the daydream he was enjoying looking out across the fog.

“Guess he didn’t want to be found, jumping into weather like this,” she piped up.

“You think he jumped?” Henry said confused, looking back to her.

“Why else would a chef be out on the boardwalk?” she questioned, incredulously. “For a midnight walk?”

Henry hadn’t considered that the chef might have jumped, as he faced back out from the ship. It put a different perspective on things, and now the whispers he heard from the passengers and crew were suspicious ones, wondering the same thing the young woman had said to him.

The image of his mother hit him like a train. The finality of death was so jarring, Henry thought, and he was struck by how selfish it was, to take one’s life and leave loved ones behind, with no explanation. His mother hadn’t left a note, according to his father, but he wished she had. Henry wondered how long it would be before the chef’s mother was informed of her son’s death? And how long until her grief would subside to something more manageable? Would she ever be able to look at the ocean again? Henry had never felt comfortable going into his parents’ bedroom after his mother’s death, where her portrait hung above the mirror, her blue eyes following him around the room. Now he wondered, what were they doing together in those final days when she’d already decided to take her own life?

He recalled the jigsaw puzzle they completed, the one with all of history’s iconic characters celebrating the ball dropping in Times Square on New Year’s Eve. He had

asked who some of the people were, and she had explained each one, as he watched her put the puzzle together. He remembered her telling him about the fickleness of history. How there were two ways in which people were remembered - the good, and the bad, and that you could never truly control how people perceived you. Just as long as you could perceive yourself, and know in yourself, what was good and bad. It was a lesson that had stuck with Henry, as he wondered how his mother defined her good and bad qualities, and how the latter must have overpowered her in those final moments.

“Still,” the mystery woman said, breaking the silence. “It is good of the Captain to look. I would expect no less from a British captain.”

“Really?” Henry asked.

“Wouldn’t you do the same thing?” she asked Henry, still not looking across to him. “If you were captain of this ship, wouldn’t you turn it around?”

“Are you asking because I’m British, or just asking?” Henry pondered.

“Both.”

Henry thought about the question.

“I would turn the ship around,” Henry stated.

“Because you’re British,” she nodded.

“Because I’m the Captain,” Henry corrected her.

“Oh,” she said, intrigued. “So you don’t think we should be doing this, searching for a desperate man in need.”

Henry had walked into a trap.

“That’s not what I’m saying,” Henry stuttered. “What I’m saying is I agree with the Captain’s decision but-”

“But if you weren’t the captain you would say the suicidal chef has made his decision and we should all just move on,” she interrupted, with a smile. “Very absolute of you.”

“French?” Henry asked her, recognising her accent and trying to change the subject.

“Parisian,” she answered.

“There’s a difference?” Henry questioned.

“It would be like comparing a puddle to the Atlantic,” she said.

“And I’m guessing Paris is the Atlantic,” Henry asked, turning towards her. “In your analogy.”

She turned to face Henry. Her brown eyes sparkled, even in the fog. Her skin caught dew drops from the ocean spray as her eyebrows arched suggestively above her eyes, fading as the hem of the beret that ran across her forehead. Spirals of brown hair cascaded from her hat, brushing against cheekbones that accentuated the angles of her face. A nose ring hung from her septum - cradling glittering jewels above her soft, pink lips that puckered into a pout.

“Yes,” the young woman responded. “Paris is the Atlantic.”

Henry stared at her for a moment, taking her in as she brushed her hair out of her face, and turned back to the water.

“There’s something beautiful about this, no?” she asked. “The fog, the ship, the death. It really is something.”

“It’s certainly something,” Henry muttered, as he looked out across the Atlantic. What was his mother thinking, as she stepped up on the chair, looking at the light fixture that hung from the moulded ceiling in her bathroom? He shook his head to

get rid of the image of her hands knotting the noose, wrapping it around her neck. It made him shudder, as he peered down to the clouds of vapour below him, the same space the chef had sunken into.

“What are you thinking about?” the young woman asked, breaking Henry out of his stupor.

“How grey everything is,” Henry lied.

The fog seemed even denser now, swelling around the sides of the ship as the clouds bled into the sea. Henry tried to spot a shape, or a colour, anything to break up the swarms of grey that swirled before him, but he couldn't. Everything was muted.

“Would you like to know what I'm thinking?” she asked.

“Go ahead,” Henry said, nervous of her response.

“I am thinking here I am,” she said. “Standing in the middle of the Atlantic, with a guy whose name I do not know, and he does not know mine, looking for a dead man that we are not going to find and how totally fine I am with it. It's what I needed in life.”

Henry felt strangely comfortable too, even with this young woman and their morbid surroundings. It certainly made a difference from the monotony of Drifffield.

“Well if you'd like to know,” Henry began. “My name is-”

“No I don't think we need names just yet,” she interrupted. “It'll ruin the mystery. For now I will tell you that I like drinking in the Commodore's Club, on the ninth deck, after dinner.”

“I've never been,” Henry said, playing along with her game.

“I know,” she replied. “I would have seen you. But maybe you'll finally make an appearance tonight.”

With that, she left. Henry watched her walk away down the boardwalk, shielding herself from the gusts of wind that rushed against the ship.

Henry shook his head before returning his gaze to the Atlantic, and the fog that was already enveloping him. She seemed interesting, Henry told himself, looking forward to getting to know someone new in the evening, particularly someone his own age. He wondered what her story was and why she was on board the ship, as he tried to fix his eyes on something ahead of him. But there was nothing to look at, nothing catching his attention, or drawing his view. Every shade of grey, like a haze, hovered in front of him - a shapeless mirage that swallowed him whole.

The Commodore Club was a dimly-lit space, situated at the very back of the ship. It sat in a semicircle, with one entrance either side of the bar that faced out to the passengers. Floor-to-ceiling windows made up the back wall, as amber candles flickered on the small tables that were dotted around the bar.

Henry looked around the room. He couldn't spot the French girl, and checked his watch to see if he was early, but it was only a little after ten thirty in the evening, just after dinner as she had stated. It was an intimate space, Henry thought, with couples hunched over the table whispering to each other. It was very 'French' Henry smiled to himself, and he could see why the girl had chose to spend her evenings here.

Henry was excited about the evening ahead. The people he had interacted with on a meaningful level so far - Srdan, Phil, Torkild - had been intimidating in the experience their ages had brought. With the girl he had just met, Henry already felt an ease with which he could speak to her, and he was pleased with himself for how productive his day had been so far.

The door opened on the other side of the bar. Through it, she swept, adorned in a little black dress, shimmering by the candles that quivered when she walked past. Henry gulped as she came closer to him, smiling and leaning in to kiss both of his cheeks, resting her hand on the sleeve of his jacket as she did so. Henry breathed in her perfume, a blend of jasmine and musk, that swam in his head long after she pulled away.

“So lovely to see you here,” the young woman said. “I wondered if you wouldn’t come.”

“I’ve been trying new things all day,” Henry said. “Can I get you a drink?”

Henry ordered the pair of them a drink and turned back to her. Her hair fell down in long open curls, and her eyes seemed darker than before, swimming in the smoke that painted her eyelids. Her lips were a blood-red colour, and the same septum piercing hung from her nose. It twinkled off the candles in the bar - a row of charms and studs - delicately strung along a thin metal wire that disappeared into the darkness of her nostrils.

“It’s nice isn’t it?” she asked. “My piercing. Everyone else seems to hate it on board. Even my grandmother doesn’t like it. But *j’aime ça*.”

“I think it’s lovely,” Henry said.

“You can tell me your name now,” she said. “If you’d like.”

“The mystery’s gone already?” Henry mocked.

“You could always tell me a fake name,” she said, taking a sip of her drink. “A *nom de guerre*.”

Henry enjoyed hearing her speak French.

“Henry,” he answered. “Henry Thomas.”

“A very British name,” she nodded. “Like Henry the Eighth.”

“But thinner,” Henry added. “And with less wives.”

“You’re married?” she asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Not yet.”

“But you’re traveling alone?”

“Yes, just me.”

“I’m with my grandmother,” the girl said.

“She didn’t want to join us?”

“No, she enjoys the ballroom dancing too much,” she smiled. “Why don’t we sit down?”

She took her drink and led Henry to a table to the side of the bar. An older couple smiled approvingly of the two of them, as Henry sat opposite the young French woman, looking out to the water.

“Do I get to know your name?” Henry asked.

“Lea Rivoira.”

“A very French name,” Henry nodded.

“A very Parisian name,” Lea corrected him.

“Of course,” Henry said. “You’re from the Atlantic, not the puddle.”

“Exactement,” Lea said, reaching out for her cocktail glass.

“So what brings you on board?” Henry inquired.

“Well believe it or not,” Lea began. “I’m actually on a world cruise with my grandmother. It’s her eightieth birthday and she wanted me to come along with her. I had nothing else going on with my life so I decided to join her. I think this is our fiftieth night.”

“Wow,” Henry exclaimed. “Fifty nights. Aren’t you bored yet?”

Lea smiled. “It’s fun meeting interesting people, seeing different places,” she said. “I can see why people do it. And what about you? Why do you travel?”

Henry picked up his drink and looked at Lea.

“I’m meeting my girlfriend in New York.”

“Meeting? Like you haven’t met her yet?”

“Yeah, we met online.”

“Ah,” Lea said, nodding. “Are you sure it’s going to be her and not some fat man in a t-shirt waiting for you?”

“I’m pretty sure it’s her,” Henry laughed.

“And what does she do over there, this cyber girlfriend of yours?” Lea teased.

“She’s part of a commune,” Henry said. “She travels across the country, on like a spiritual, peaceful mission to help other people and expand her own enlightenment.”

Lea raised an eyebrow.

“You don’t seem to be that sort of person,” she said.

“I’m not,” Henry said. “But I’m at a place in my life where I could use community and enlightenment.”

“How so?”

“Perhaps I’ll tell you another time,” Henry said, taking another sip of his drink.

How mysterious.”

“Just trying to keep this Agatha Christie thing going.”

“You’re doing very well,” Lea said. “What with the ship and the death and the weather, and now here we are in a bar. You in a suit, me in a dress. You joining some

sort of cult, me on a world cruise with my eighty-year old grandmother. Agatha would be proud.”

Behind Lea, there was only darkness beyond the window as Henry looked past her whilst she rummaged through her clutch. He made out his reflection, his bow tie sitting wonkily under his chin, the recognisable outline of his head staring back at him. He looked different, Henry thought, more adult, more put together. Perhaps it was the suit, Henry thought to himself, as he fixed his bow tie.

“Oh,” Henry remembered. “I forgot to tell you something.”

Lea looked up from her drink.

“I think I was on the boardwalk the same time as the chef was.”

“Wait, really?” Lea asked, surprised. “How do you know?”

“Well I was out there last night,” Henry said. “Late at night, and I saw a guy stumble around out there too.”

“No way!”

“But it was only for a second.”

“That’s kinda creepy!” Lea said, excited. “What were you doing out there, though?”

“I guess I just needed some fresh air,” Henry said. “And someone on board told me the Atlantic was a great listener.”

“I don’t think she would have listened much last night.”

“No, she wasn’t in a listening mood.”

“How does that make you feel?” Lea asked. “That you were out there with him?”

“It made me feel helpless,” Henry said.

“How were you to know?” Lea said, reaching for her purse. “I wouldn’t think about it, if I were you.”

But Henry had thought about it all afternoon. He had been unnerved about being out there at the same time as the chef. He wished he had been closer to the man when he appeared, to show him some sort of support when he needed it the most. But fate had led the chef to appear three doors away, at the very end of the ship, and he was gone before Henry could say anything. Once again.

“You don’t smoke do you?” Lea asked, pulling out a cigarette lighter.

“I’m not that mysterious, I’m afraid,” Henry said. “And I don’t think you can smoke here.”

“No, but you can smoke next door,” Lea said, nodding over Henry’s shoulder. “In the cigar room. But if you don’t smoke I won’t abandon you here, alone.”

“I don’t mind.”

“No, I shouldn’t really,” Lea frowned. “I keep telling everyone I’ve quit but it is becoming a bit of a habit. Have you ever?”

“It’s never really appealed.”

“You look like a smoker,” Lea said, with a smirk.

“I don’t know whether that’s a good thing or not.”

“It’s a good thing,” Lea said. “For me.”

Henry shuffled in his seat.

“What are your plans for tomorrow?” Lea asked.

“Nothing, really,” Henry answered. “I haven’t read the daily pamphlet yet.”

“Tomorrow is our day-trip in Halifax, remember?” Lea said. “Because of the dead chef!”

The couple sitting next to Henry and Lea looked across at Lea's apparent excitement at the passing of Chef Gonzalez. Henry had completely forgotten about the extra day. The afternoon had been a blur ever since he had met Lea, as the suicide of the chef struck him more than he had anticipated. He remembered leaving the boardwalk and grabbing lunch before hearing the captain announce a few hours later that he was calling the search off and adding an extra day to the crossing to refuel. Henry vaguely remembered the name Halifax being mentioned as the place they would stop, and its relationship to the *Titanic*. Apparently, it was where the bodies of many of the *Titanic*'s passengers were taken after the famous ship struck the infamous iceberg. Henry imagined it to be a ghost-town like Drifffield, weighed down by its history, haunted by its past and the lost souls who had taken the same crossing as he had.

"Why don't we make a day of it?" Lea asked. "It would be nice to have some company on dry land."

"I'd love to," Henry said. "Your grandmother won't mind?"

"She's not much of a walker," Lea reassured Henry. "Have you been to Canada before?"

"Never."

"How about France?"

"Yes, a few times," Henry began. "Normandy, Brittany, Paris."

"Not for Disney, I hope."

Henry felt his cheeks glow red. He had gone to Paris for Disney, as a young child with his parents. Henry remembered the monorail throughout the theme park, the ride with the teacups and how heavy the rain was. Henry's parents hadn't prepared for

such rain and, when taking him to the gift shop for a kagool, the staff presented Henry a Minnie Mouse one instead of a Mickey Mouse one, because they mistook his long dark hair, bright blue eyes and button nose for that of a girl. What's more, upon meeting Minnie Mouse, the large rodent bent down and gave Henry a kiss, which caused him to blush the same colour as Minnie's dress. His mother took a photo of that moment, which still stood on her side of the bed, by other photos of young Henry that had gathered dust throughout the years.

"Oh my god, it was for Disney," Lea remarked.

"I was young!" Henry defended himself, laughing. "It wasn't my choice!"

"And you've never been since? It's only a couple of hours away from London."

"I just haven't gotten round to it," Henry shrugged.

"Yet you'll get on a big ship on your own to America," she teased.

"Touché."

"You just said that because I'm French," Lea laughed.

Henry laughed along with her as the table between them seemed to shrink and the two of them got closer. Henry could almost make out the fine intricacies of her piercing, the jewels that sat in the middle of the row of charms. He wondered if it felt heavy, or tickled the arch of her upper lip as she smiled.

"Can I tell you something?" Lea asked. "It might sound a bit weird."

"What?"

"I don't know how to say it," Lea began. "But it's like I was expecting to meet you ever since we left England. I just felt like someone like you was going to get on board the ship during this cruise, and here you are."

"Sure this isn't an Agatha Christie novel?" Henry asked, with a smile.

“I don’t know what type of novel it is yet,” Lea said, curiously. “But I look forward to finding out.”

Lea grabbed her clutch and slipped it under her arm, before touching Henry’s knee and standing up.

“I’ll see you tomorrow morning at the gangway, Monsieur Thomas,” she said. “Dix heures du matin. Bonsoir.”

Henry watched her leave, her dress sparkling though the bar. He replaying the last thirty seconds in his head. He still felt her touch on his knee, and her perfume still lingered on his shirt collar as he wondered what kind of book she had in mind, and what made her say the things she said.

The bar was emptier now, as Henry checked his watch. It was coming up to midnight. For Henry, he felt like his night had only just begun as he walked up to the bar and asked the barman for another drink

“What time do the clocks go back tonight?” Henry asked.

“The clocks don’t go back tonight, sir,” the barman said, making his drink. “It’s a normal night, tonight, because of the extra day tomorrow.”

Henry was relieved to have some normalcy back in his life, even after the dramatic day had unfolded. He didn’t think he could manage another hour of it, as he sat back down at the table. The same couple were still sitting next to him, as the woman looked up to him and smiled as he came past. Henry spotted Lea’s lipstick stain stamped onto the rim of her cocktail glass as the man next to Henry leaned over to him.

“I say,” he said. “I hope you don’t mind me saying, but that girl of yours is quite something.”

“You make a wonderful couple,” the woman added, agreeing.

Henry allowed the words to linger in the air before shaking his head. “We’re just friends.”

Chapter Four - The Viewfinder

It was strange seeing land again, Henry thought. He had seen nothing but blues and greys for so long he felt as if the ship had been circling the same patch of water. So the pointed roofs of fishing huts lining the Halifax dock appeared like a mirage. The reds and oranges of the huts greeted him like a sunset, as the water lapped softly against the wooden poles jutting above the surface. From the boardwalk, Henry watched a handful of people milling about the dock. They walked casually, some pointing up at the ship whilst others with newspapers folded under their arms, starting their day by the water.

The town looked like a picture on a postcard, ones his Aunt would send him during her travels to British seaside towns like Blackpool, or Skegness. Old beach huts sat in a row of fading colours, adorned with broken seashells and fake starfish hanging above the entrance like a crucifix. Striped deckchairs with sagging bottoms seemed rooted to the sand as children built sandcastles and buried their siblings alive.

Henry checked his watch. He had another half hour before meeting Lea by the gangway. He was looking forward to getting onto dry land. He'd never before been on board a ship for so long, and was tired of seeing the same shades of blue sit stagnant around the vessel.

Henry made his way down the decks to the gangway. A long line of passengers snaked around the atrium, waiting to disembark from the ship for the day.

“Henry!”

Henry spotted Lea waving at him near the back of the queue.

“I thought I’d get here first, seeing as you were at the bar first last night,” Lea said, smiling.

She wore a purple floral dress with a leather jacket hanging off her shoulders, and a large-brimmed hat balanced on the top of her head. Large retro sunglasses sat on the brim, reflecting the chandelier that shone from the atrium, and a clunky-looking camera hung from around her slender neck.

“I feel underdressed!” Henry said, signalling to Lea’s clothes.

“I like dressing up,” Lea shrugged.

“Well you look lovely.”

“Ever the British gentleman,” Lea said, stepping to the side to allow Henry in.

Henry could smell the same perfume on her from last night. It danced inside his nostrils as Lea’s plum-coloured lips pouted perfectly from her face. She looked like the kind of girl who smoked a cigarette to its end, until there was nothing left but filter paper, and ash.

“Oh!” Lea exclaimed. “Have you heard the news?”

“What news?”

“Well since we’re near land we have access to wifi,” Lea said. “And I’ve been doing some digging into our missing chef. There’s a whole story about it online!”

Henry reached for his phone in his pocket. He had almost forgotten about it during the trip, rendered useless by the remote surroundings out on the water. Emily must have texted him when she saw the news, Henry thought, as a photo of her blowing a kiss at him lit up his screen before he quickly connected to the wifi.

A flurry of vibrations rang out in the palm of his hand as Lea glanced up at the constant hum.

“Someone’s popular,” she said.

Henry watched as Emily’s name appeared at the top of his phone, again and again. He waited for the texting to subside, before opening her messages.

Her texts revealed the timeline of her worries. At first Emily had sent him something cute, but then clearly the news of the man overboard had reached America, and she had begun to panic.

“I know you probably can’t get these,” the text read. “But please, if there’s any chance you get wifi, text me straight away. I’m really worried, Henry.”

Henry scrolled through the rest of the messages, as the man overboard had been identified as the chef, and her alarm had tapered off.

“Just saw the news,” Emily’s last text read. “Can’t believe it happened, so awful. Glad you’re okay though, I was worried for a second. If you do get wifi in Canada please call. It would be lovely to see your face and hear your voice. I’m missing you like crazy, and we’re all thinking of you. I love you so much, Henry.”

Henry quickly texted Emily back, as the line of people disembarking began to edge closer to the gangway.

“Hey. Everything is ok, don’t worry. Getting off at Halifax to refuel. Making friends on board the ship! See you soon.”

Henry clicked send. He watched his words turn blue as they bubbled up to the surface of the messages.

“So it turns out, the chef threw himself overboard because his girlfriend broke up with him,” Lea whispered, leaning into Henry. “So sad, right?”

“This is all online?” he asked.

“Yup! Apparently he was drunk too, so all the crew have been banned from drinking for the rest of the voyage.”

“How did this get out?”

“The article said one of the crew members released it,” Lea said, as the pair shuffled forward in the line. “They get wifi, it seems.”

It seemed more tragic now to Henry, the man jumping overboard. He was sure now that the chef must have been the blurred figure he saw that night on the boardwalk, the one that staggered out of view. The two men were all alone that night, and Henry realised he was the one who made it out alive, and not the chef.

“So I was right,” Lea said, interrupting Henry’s thought. “He did jump overboard. He must have been in a really bad place. I couldn’t imagine how that must feel.”

The weather outside was cool. A breeze ran across the docks from the water, and the sound of small-town life echoed down cobbled-streets that disappeared around corners behind local fishmongers, and butchers. It reminded Henry of home, though Halifax, on first viewing, seemed an altogether cleaner and less monotonous place than Driffield.

“Is there anything you’d like to do here?” Henry asked.

“I thought we could just walk around,” Lea said. “It seems quite nice here by the water. And obviously I would love to take some photos.”

“We’ve spent all week by the water,” Henry scoffed. “Surely you’ve got enough photos of it.”

“The water looks different from land. And I’d like to document all the different places I arrive at.”

Henry looked across to the water in the harbour. It glittered in the morning sun and seemed much calmer and controlled by the docks, unlike the violence shown in the middle of the Atlantic.

“This is a very British town, don’t you think?” Lea asked Henry.

“I was just thinking that earlier, actually,” Henry agreed. “There’s a quaintness to it.”

“I like it,” Lea said, beaming from behind her sunglasses as she surveyed her surroundings. “It’s like no one has touched it in hundreds of years.”

Henry and Lea continued to walk along the pier, stopping by the local shops that littered the area. There were no tacky souvenir shops or rusting ice cream trucks like back in England, Henry thought. People seemed happy to be in Halifax, happy to help people with directions and generally happy with their lives. They walked with their heads up, actively looking to make eye contact with people to wish them a good morning. It was nothing like Drifffield, where people seemingly walked with hunched shoulders and a limp.

“These will come out really nice,” Lea said, taking photos with her vintage camera. “Lots of inspiration here.”

“Is that the end goal for you?” Henry asked. “Becoming an artist?”

“Yes,” Lea smiled. “I would like it very much. It’s something to dream about.”

“Do you just photograph things?”

“No, I paint, too,” Lea answered. “I’ll have to show you some of my work. That’s one of the reasons why I’m excited to stop at New York! To paint the bridges and the buildings. I think it will be very good for me.”

Henry watched her take more photos of the scenery as people wandered by.

“Is it mostly landscapes you do?” Henry asked.

“And faces, sometimes,” Lea said, over her shoulder. “If the face interests me.”

“And what makes an interesting face?”

“A face with a story behind it,” Lea said, putting her phone away and turning towards Henry, walking closer towards him. “I can tell straight away if it does.”

Henry watched as Lea lingered on him. He felt as if she was already sketching him out in her mind, starting with his eyes and then down the bridge of his nose to his lips, and his jaw.

“Why don’t you take some photos?” Lea said, taking the camera off from around her neck.

“Me?”

“Yes, you, silly!”

Lea held out the camera for Henry to take.

“I don’t want to break it,” he said. “It looks expensive.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Lea said. “Here, let me put it over your head.”

Henry froze as Lea looped the camera over his head, her arms resting on his shoulders. She straightened out the strap as he felt her breath against his cheek and the weight of the camera tugging around his neck.

“There. Just point and shoot. Très facile.”

Henry brought the camera to his face and peered through the viewfinder. The corners were marked, framing the scenery ahead of him. A small orb floated on the water, as Henry positioned the camera and tried his best to make something of a picture. He fumbled for the button with his index finger before clicking it.

“That one might be a bit blurry,” he said to Lea, unsquinting his eye.

“I have plenty of film!” Lea said, pulling another camera from her bag. “Maybe this camera would suit you better.”

Lea pulled her camera off of Henry’s shoulders and passed him the Polaroid.

“You’ve used one of these before, no?”

“No, I haven’t,” Henry said, looking down at the camera. “But I’ve always wanted to. It’s a Polaroid right?”

“Oui!” Lea said. “They’re a lot of fun. Why don’t you take a photo of me in front of the water.”

Henry watched Lea move to the edge of the boardwalk. She took her hat off and ran her fingers through her hair, before putting it back on and repositioning her glasses.

“I don’t really have that many photos of me,” she began. “I’m usually the one holding the camera.”

Henry brought the camera to his eye.

“Do you want to say cheese or something?” he said. “Fromage?”

“Fromage isn’t a very smiley word!” Lea laughed. “Just take the photo!”

Henry looked through the viewfinder. He saw Lea’s figure in the foreground of the photo, her slender body silhouetted against the morning sky. Clouds skimmed around the peak of her hat, as the small spirals of her hair danced softly in the breeze.

The faint laps of water behind Lea mirrored the ripples in her dress, as her leather jacket shone a brilliant black and her plum lips parted to reveal a smile Henry focused on.

“How do I look?” Lea called out.

“Stunning,” Henry said, as his finger pressed against the button and the camera clicked in his hands.

“Now this is the best bit,” Lea said, skipping up to Henry. “And we can see if you have potential or not.”

Both of them gathered around the camera as they waited for the Polaroid to print. Slowly it ebbed out, the white card framing a rectangle of ink and shadow.

“I’ll let you shake it, Monsieur Thomas,” Lea grinned, as Henry carefully gripped the white frame and shook the Polaroid in the Halifax air.

The blue sky appeared through the haze first, bleeding between grey clouds and down to the horizon where it met the sea. Lines of waves were carved into the water, separating the closer they got to the wooden slats of the boardwalk, that disappeared into the white framing of the polaroid. Then Lea emerged from the cloud of film, like a dream.

“Not bad,” Lea said. “Perhaps you have potential, after all.”

Lea took the camera from Henry and placed the picture in her bag, before leading Henry along the pier.

“There are some nice shops down here,” she called after him, as Henry replayed the image of the Polaroid of his head, wishing to create a collection of them, tucked away in his wallet, or in the framing of a mirror, or by the side of his bed. She had the face of a woman missed, Henry thought, a ‘sweetheart’ from a foreign land you’d meet

once and never forget. Plus he enjoyed taking the photo, how tangible it was to see the Polaroid print out at the bottom of the camera after he had taken it. To keep on clicking again and again and again, creating new images every time, capturing what his eyes had seen, and giving it a permanence. It was that permanence that had suddenly inspired Henry. He could create a catalogue of everything he saw, everything that gave him meaning, and everything he could give meaning to.

“Where do you get a camera like that?” he asked Lea, rushing to catch up with her.

After several glances at various menus, Henry and Lea finally agreed on a seafood pub by the water. *Saltaire's* was a small homely spot, with wooden beams sagging from the roof, and old oak tables with the scars of meals long past etched into their dark thick frames. Fishing netting was draped over the bar, and various other shipping paraphernalia found itself nailed into the wood-panel walls that seemed to move in on the two of them as they sat down at a table by the window.

“Have you heard anything from back home?”

“I’m sure my father has seen the news about the chef,” Henry started. “He’ll know what’s going on now.”

“What about your mother?” Lea asked.

“She passed away eight years ago.”

Lea froze. Henry looked up at her as he finished his glass of water.

“It’s fine, you weren’t to know,” Henry said, reassuringly.

“I’m so sorry,” Lea said. “I feel terrible for asking.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Henry said. “It comes up all the time.”

“Eight years you said?” Lea asked, softly.

“Yes, when I was twelve.”

“That is very young to lose a mother. Were you close?”

“Very.”

“We don’t have to talk about this if you don’t want to,” Lea said.

Henry did want to talk about it, he just didn’t know how. He hadn’t felt comfortable telling anyone about how his mother had died ever since he found out. Perhaps it’s a sign, Henry thought, as he considered how at ease he felt with Lea. But he had to tell Emily first. It was the right thing to do.

“I know it’s not the same,” Lea said. “But my parents divorced when I was very young. And neither seemed to want to look after me. That’s why I’m with my grandmother.”

“That must have made you feel lonely,” Henry commented.

“I love my grandmother, so I’m fine being with her,” said Lea. “Perhaps when I was a teenager I was angry at my parents because it didn’t make sense to me, but I can deal with it now.”

“That’s good, then,” said Henry, noticing her face tighten, and wanting to change the subject. “Are you happy with your photos?”

“Yes, it’s very pretty here,” Lea said, visibly relieved with the change of topic. “Some of them will make very nice paintings.”

“So would you call yourself a photographer?”

“I think everyone calls themselves a photographer, these days,” Lea shrugged. “I just use them as a reference for what I want to paint, so I can remember places by.”

“I think it’s a shame that there aren’t many photos of you,” Henry said.

“And what do you mean by that?” Lea asked, leaning in against the table.

“Well you’re always behind the camera,” Henry paused. “But you look so good in front of it.”

“I am not really into about taking photos of myself,” Lea said. “What are they called again? Self-”

“Selfies.”

“Yes, selfies. I’d prefer to paint myself than take my own photo.”

“What if I took photos of you?”

“Oh?” Lea said, surprised. “You’re a photographer now?”

“Maybe you can use them to draw yourself, if you wanted.”

Lea narrowed her eyes at Henry.

“So I have my own personal photographer for the day?”

“And I get to try something new,” Henry, said smiling. “But I do have a price.”

“A price?” Lea raised an eyebrow. “Qu’est-ce que c’est?”

“I get to keep one of the photos.”

“To remember me by?”

Henry hesitated.

“To start a collection. I was thinking it might be a nice thing to do when I’m in America.”

“Yes, that would be nice.”

“So we have a deal?” Henry asked.

“D’accord.”

Henry assumed that meant yes.

“And for the record,” Henry said, moving his glass out of the way for their lunch to arrive. “It would be to remember you, also, if we ever fall out of touch.”

Lea looked up at Henry as he watched a smile slowly spread across her face.

“If you want to keep in touch with me, of course,” he added quickly.

Lea giggled as the waiter left their table.

“I’ll think about it,” she said. “If these photos are awful, then maybe we’ll be saying our goodbyes at the end of the week.”

“I hope not,” Henry said.

Lea took Henry to a vintage store, where she rifled through dusty records, occasionally pulling one out and humming songs Henry didn’t recognise.

“Of course you have a record player,” Henry teased.

“I actually brought it with me on board the ship!”

Henry laughed. “Agatha would be extremely proud.”

“I like my music, ok?” Lea said, pretending to be defensive, as she put the record back in the box.

“Looking for something in particular?”

“No, just looking for something new. Something different.”

Henry smiled and meandered around the store. He walked with his hands behind his back, like how he watched his father walk when he was young. He never liked how his mannerisms came from his father, but he had stopped fighting it, accepting that he was more like his dad than he would like to think. Henry wondered how he was doing, alone in the house. The chef’s suicide had made him slightly regret the way he had said goodbye, slamming the car door on his father’s anguish. He didn’t

know when he'd see him again, but wasn't surprised to not see a text from him amidst all of Emily's. And he had no desire to text his father. He still hadn't forgiven him.

Lea appeared in front of Henry, holding a white ball gown up against her.

"What do you think?"

She looked expectantly at Henry, pivoting on the balls of her feet behind the dress as he watched her float in front of him. The gown was satin, flowing down in folds of cream that lapped up against the length of her legs.

"Well?"

"Going somewhere nice?"

"For the ball tomorrow!" Lea said, draping the dress over her arm. "What are you wearing?"

"To the ball? I didn't even know there was one."

"Oh, there is. And you should definitely go. Don't you want the last night of your trip to go out with a bang?"

Henry hadn't allowed himself to think about the fact that tomorrow would be his last full day on board. He'd be in New York in just 48 hours. He imagined Emily waiting for him at the docks. This had been six months in the making - his father's news making the decision for him, pushing him across the Atlantic and into the arms of Emily, and America.

Tomorrow would also be the last full day with Lea, Henry realised, as he followed her to the counter. He wished he'd met her at the start of his journey, rather than at its end. Perhaps they'd keep in touch, he thought to himself, as she looked over her shoulder and smiled at him, whilst the shop-owner folded the white dress and slipped it into a brown paper bag.

It felt like he'd planned to bump into her on the ship all along. He could see why she had said the same thing last night - that feeling of familiarity, of the inevitability of their coming together. It had swelled within him throughout their entire day together. He could envision visiting other places with her, traveling to different ports and taking photos together of all the new things they saw. He had to keep in touch with her, he told himself, as he watched her pick up the bag and pass it to him to carry, before leaving the shop. The golden bell tinkled above her head as she stood in the doorway, taking her glasses off the brim of her hat and holding them casually in front of her.

"Want to go back?" Lea asked. "I don't want the ship to leave without us!"

For a second, that's exactly what Henry wanted. To be frozen in time with her. Stuck together in stillness on the cusp of the ocean.

"Come on!" Lea said, putting on her sunglasses. "We have a boat to catch."

"Can you pronounce that name there?" Lea asked, pointing to a red shipping container.

Henry looked out to the city of shipping containers built up around the Halifax docks. They had returned to the ship, and gone straight to the disembarkation party on the top deck.

"I'm guessing you mean the French one?" Henry replied.

"Of course!"

Henry squinted at the writing faded onto the metal of the container.

"Roubaix?" Henry said, in his best French accent.

"Very good!" Lea laughed. "Have you studied French before?"

“I dabbled in school,” Henry said, remembering the C he got in his French exam. “I can introduce myself, order a beer, and ask where the nearest library is. After that, it gets messy.”

“All important things,” Lea laughed, as she looked back out to the water.

Steel drums tinkled in the background as Henry looked over his shoulder at the party. Flutes of champagne caught the setting sun, whilst some passengers bopped to the cheerful sound of the steel drums. Everyone seemed happy, save for the crew members, who walked with anguished looks on their faces.

“It must be tough for the crew,” Henry noted.

“Because we’re leaving dry land?”

“No,” Henry laughed. “Because of the situation, the chef. Here they are surrounded by happy people and they’ve just lost one of their own.”

Lea turned around and looked at the party. A whip of wind rushed behind her, sending her hair past her face in spirals.

“I don’t think they’re happy much of the time anyway,” Lea said. “Serving these people.”

“How do you mean?”

“Look at everyone,” Lea said, signalling to the crowd with her drink as Henry turned around. “They have more money than sense. Everyone gives me funny looks because of my nose piercing. Can you imagine if I was a different skin colour than them? There’d be a mutiny.”

Henry hadn’t realised that the only people of colour he had seen on board, had been the crew members. There had been different nationalities, people from all over the world but, undeniably, everyone was coloured a shade of white.

“I don’t think they’re all bad,” Henry said, thinking of Srdan, Phil and Torkild.

“No, I don’t think so either,” Lea agreed. “But this is a generation of people that have caused a lot of problems and not solved them. And they view our generation not well. They remind me of my parents. That’s why it’s so good to find someone like you on board this ship.”

“Like me?”

“Yes!” Lea beamed. “Like you! Young, thoughtful, interesting, not happy with his place in life. That’s how you should be. That’s how we all should be.”

Lea turned back to lean on the railings, looking over the water. Henry still faced the party, and watched it play out in front of him. He was roused by Lea’s speech, how progressive and passionate she was about things. He felt small-minded for not recognising things sooner, or having the same dissecting outlook on life. He blamed Driffield, his upbringing, for not opening his eyes to bigger issues that existed past the four walls of his own home. Henry had only had to deal with the death of his mother, and received pity because of it, but he had never given thought to those who were shunned in life for reasons that occurred at birth.

“Good evening everyone,” the Captain’s voice interrupted. “I trust you all enjoyed your day in Halifax to refresh and experience a change of scenery from the ship.”

“I am glad you do not sound like him,” Lea whispered to Henry.

“That makes two of us.”

“I can see some of you out at the back of the ship enjoying our disembarkation party,” the Captain continued. “And we are about to disembark now that we are refuelled and replenished following yesterday’s harrowing incident. My apologies again

for the delay in your journey, but we are now back on track to New York, where we will be arriving in the next thirty-six hours.”

“Nearly there,” Lea squealed. “I am so excited to see the Big Apple!”

Henry wondered for a second if they could spend time together in New York before she got back on the ship, but he didn’t think it possible what with meeting Emily. Still, he let the thought linger in his head, and was surprised by how much he was going to miss Lea.

“The clocks will be going back an hour tonight, as normal,” the Captain said. “So I do hope you all enjoy your penultimate night here on board and I wish you all a very pleasant evening.”

“What do you usually do during the extra hour?” Lea asked Henry.

“Not much,” Henry answered. “Usually I find myself wishing I’d spent it better.”

“Yes I’ve felt that way, too. Maybe that’ll change now we’ve met.”

Henry felt his insides swirl. He wanted to spend every hour he had left on the ship with her. Every minute he could find, he wanted to make sure it was in her company. Anything to make up for the years he had lost beforehand and the years to come afterwards, where she wouldn’t exist in his life.

“I never asked,” Lea said. “What table are you in the restaurant? Perhaps I’ll spot you.”

“227,” Henry answered. “In the Britannia. You?”

“Ah,” Lea replied. “My grandmother and I eat at a different restaurant. We are, how you say, VIP?”

“Oh, wow,” Henry teased. “So this really is like the *Titanic*. You’re Rose from first class and I’m Jack from steerage.”

“But hopefully with a better ending,” Lea laughed. “I promise I’d make room for you.”

“On your VIP door?” Henry laughed. “I don’t think they’d let me on.”

“Stop it!” Lea giggled, nudging Henry’s elbow. “You’re making me spill my drink!”

Henry smirked and looked across at Lea. She really was beautiful, he thought, especially when she laughed. Her face seemed to radiate, blurring everything else around her. Whether it was the depth of her dark eyes, or the pendular swinging of her nose piercing, Henry knew he was becoming bewitched.

He looked out at Halifax slowly slipping away, beginning to miss it already. It was a town which he and Lea had made their own - a secret spot they’d return to in years gone by, he imagined, meeting by the docks on a Thursday morning by cargo ships that stretched out to the horizon. She’d wear the same extravagant clothing, and he’d look quite plain, yet she’d smile when she saw him and Henry would melt at the sight of her face.

“Give me your camera.”

“What? Now?” Lea asked.

“Yes.”

Lea fished through her bag and retrieved her Polaroid. Henry took a few steps back as he pointed the camera at Lea.

“I feel so silly!” laughed Lea. “Should I even be holding my drink?!”

“Just stay as you are,” Henry said, as he steadied the camera, took the photo and waited for the Polaroid to print out.

“This will be the one I keep,” said Henry.

“I should get dressed for dinner. Thank you for a lovely day.”

“Thank you,” Henry added. “I really enjoyed it. And thank you for letting me take all of these photo of you.”

“Thank you! Will I be seeing you tonight?” Lea asked, her hand lingering closer to Henry’s on the railing.

“Yes, you will,” Henry said. “Shall we say the G32 club around 10?”

“Yes, let’s say that,” Lea purred. “Enjoy your dinner, Monsieur Thomas.”

“You too, Miss Rivoira.”

Henry didn’t turn as Lea left, as she brushed against his shoulder. Her perfume hung around him like a haze, as he watched Halifax shrink from view. He looked down at the Polaroid that had developed. The sun began to set behind the pointed rooftops, and *Saltaire’s* sat like a speck of sand on the boardwalk. Ropes of seafoam jettisoned out from behind the ship, churning the water into a broth of salt and sediment as the steel drums continued to twinkle behind Henry. And there, in the centre of it all, was Lea, with one hand on her hat to save it from blowing away, and the other on her cocktail glass, laughing back at Henry and bringing the world, within its frame, to life.

Chapter Five - Shifting Tides

Henry flung his suitcase open. It still had some of his clothes inside, untouched during his week at sea. He hadn't worn much of a variety onboard the ship, relying on his trusted blue hoodie and grey t-shirt during the day, and the two rented suits he switched between at night. He wore the same button down shirt under his tuxedo that he used to wear at school. His body had filled out since then, but the shirt still hung off him, the sleeves in particular making Henry feel like he was auditioning for a role as one of the Three Musketeers.

He rolled up his already-worn underwear and socks and stuffed them in the corners of his suitcase. He patted down his trainers so they wouldn't take up too much room in his bag, and put away the array of ties he had brought with him, most of them being his father's. His father had been a successful businessman at one time, in charge of the import and export of fruit and vegetables into the country before the internet came along and made him redundant. Henry's father had had a tie for every occasion, but had little use for them as he got older and so passed them on to his son. Not that Henry had much need for them either, but his father had given him little throughout life as far as gifts were concerned, so he considered them heirlooms.

The patterned ribbons coiled within each other, snaking around the rest of Henry's clothing as he went over to his bedside drawer. He opened it, and was met with the faint smell of vanilla, wafting from the letters he had forgotten about. Henry's

stomach clenched. How could he have forgotten? He reached out to the letters and picked them up from the drawer, their manilla paper clammy to his touch. He read his name on the front of them, the way the 'y' in Henry curled out from under his name and corkscrewed down into nothingness.

He had been distracted by the events of the ship. The chef, Halifax - he had barely spent any time in his room; he let the letters drop from his hand and onto the pillow with a padded thud.

He couldn't believe he was finally meeting Emily tomorrow. He was nervous to see her, hoping their enjoyment of each other translated from the virtual to reality. It was something they had both spoken about, and had encouraged each other that their attraction was natural, and that it would definitely be apparent when they were together. She had even told him that she loved him, and Henry had told her the same thing. It felt right at the moment he said it.

He wondered about the people he'd meet in the commune. He and Emily had planned to stay a few days in New York first before getting a train up to Connecticut and meeting up with the group there. He had never enjoyed meeting new crowds before, but he hoped this would be different. From what Emily had told him, they were all excited to meet him, and were grateful for his joining of the group, something that put Henry's mind at ease.

Henry looked at his suitcase. It was nearly full, save for the things he needed before disembarking. He nudged it to the corner of his room, as he glanced around to make sure he had packed everything but the essentials. This time tomorrow he'd be in America, and Henry smiled at the thought of making it this far, of being away from

home, on his own. Just one more day to go, he told himself, as he slipped his room card in his back pocket and left his cabin room to explore the ship, one last time.

The puzzle tables by the windows were empty. Henry sat down at one and glanced over at a puzzle box to the image on the cover showing a mountain landscape, with a tiny village dwarfed by the snowy caps disappearing into the winter sky. Henry opened the box and poured out the pieces onto the table. He spread them out like his mother had taught him to, making sure no piece was covered by another. Placing the box upright against the window, he used the picture as a visual reference to build the puzzle, piece by piece. First he found the corners, the four pieces with smooth edges hidden amongst the rest. He placed them, one by one, in their respective positions, and slowly built up the image.

He pictured his mother's eyes as he tried to match the sky pieces to the box. Hers had always been lightning bolts of blue, whilst his were more of a distant storm at sea. She would have had this done in no time, Henry told himself, thinking of how adept his mother was at jigsaws. It was the last thing they had done together, he recalled, finishing a puzzle celebrating the millennium. Perhaps she had made her mind up by then, Henry thought, as he rolled the jagged parameter of a jigsaw piece between his thumb and forefinger.

The occasional person walked past and peered over Henry's shoulder to see how he was doing. He would stay here until he finished the puzzle, before wandering around the lower decks and taking in more of the museum, he thought. Perhaps he'd bump into Srdan again, as the puzzle began to take shape.

Henry finished the peak of the final mountain. There were a few empty spaces left in the sky, but he could identify them going by the shape of their cutouts, rather than their colour. It was this part his mother enjoyed least. She much preferred the more challenging aspect, of matching shades of colour to her son's eyes, and creating the picture from scratch. She would always let Henry finish the puzzle, making sure he put in the last piece, even if she had done most of the work. Henry would tap that last piece in, as he stood up with his mother and the two of them marveled at the jigsaw that spread across their dining room table. He remembered that he had banged his head on the overhead lamp that year, their final jigsaw together. He couldn't have imagined the next jigsaw he did would be alone on a ship on the cusp of New York City.

Henry gathered the final few pieces of the jigsaw and put them in place. He heard footsteps coming along the corridor, as he reached for the penultimate square and fit it in the base of the mountain. The last open space was in the village, where houses and markets were left unfinished, and orange lamps glowed without shadow by thatched roofs heavy with snow. Henry went to grab the final piece but found a hand holding it out for him to take, instead.

“Looking for this?”

Henry glanced up to the reflection in the window. He saw himself, hunched over the puzzle that he had almost completed. The sea swelled in his eyes, as an outstretched hand to his left held the final piece of the jigsaw he had spent a few hours on. The arm belonged to a woman, standing behind him, wearing a short black coat. The greying waves swirled in the shadow of her coat as her brown hair cascaded down from her beret, and her plum lips parted slightly in anticipation. Above her lips a nose

ring shone, as Henry closed his eyes and opened them again, to see the ocean simmer in ripples, and Lea standing on its surface, next to him.

“Be my guest,” Henry said, sitting back in his chair, excited to see her.

“I couldn’t possibly,” Lea said, sitting on the chair next to Henry. “I didn’t know you liked jigsaw puzzles.”

“It’s all I used to do as a kid with my mum,” Henry said. “Haven’t done one in a long time though.”

“You must really miss her,” Lea said, placing a hand on Henry’s arm.

“I’ve been missing her a lot more recently.”

“Well, of course,” Lea said. “You’ve only just left home. It must be very difficult.”

Henry watched a cloud glide by the window. He felt Lea’s hand squeeze his forearm, as the cloud drifted out view, past the metal frame that created a picture of the horizon ahead of him. It was as if just having her hand on his arm allowed him to be free, like she was guiding him out into the ocean. Not only did Henry want that, but he felt she wanted it too, and that was something he had never experienced in person, before.

“It’s not just that.”

“No?”

“I only found out recently how she died.”

Lea leaned in slightly from her chair, and waited.

“I thought my mother had died from cancer, but that wasn’t the truth.”

“So how did she die?” Lea asked, almost whispering, as Henry felt the words rising up from his chest.

“She killed herself,” Henry said. “Hung herself, when I was at school, and Dad was out.”

Lea gasped, bringing her hand to her mouth as she recoiled into her chair. Henry’s lips tightened. He couldn’t believe he had just told her, as he felt his chest loosen, the horizon dipping slightly in his field of vision as Lea squeezed Henry’s hand.

“Henry,” she murmured. “I’m so so sorry. That’s awful.”

Henry nodded and squeezed her hand back. It felt warm against his fingers, the soft pads of her fingertips pressed inside the palm of his hand.

“How did you find out?”

“My dad finally told me,” Henry answered. “Six months ago.”

“And that’s why you’ve left,” Lea said, almost to herself, as she tilted her head and looked at Henry. “You needed to get away.”

“Yes,” Henry said. “But also to see my girlfriend and to be with her and this community she’s part of, too.”

“So your dad kept the truth from you?”

“Yes,” Henry said. “It was kind of a fucked up thing to do.”

“You don’t think that maybe it was a little difficult for him, too?”

Henry knew she was right. Put in his position, Henry honestly couldn’t say when or how he would have told his son about what happened. He didn’t understand it now and, he imagined, wouldn’t understand it in five years’ time either. But his new grief felt foisted upon him. Henry didn’t anticipate having to grieve for his mother’s loss all over again, and his father, in that moment, bore the brunt of his anger.

“You know,” Henry said. “You’re the first person I’ve ever told.”

“Really?” Lea said, surprised. “I would have thought you’d have told your girlfriend, at least.”

“I was actually saving it to tell her after we’re together in America,” Henry said. “But.”

“But?”

“You just make it very easy for me.”

“Is that all I do for you?”

Henry felt Lea’s thumb stroke the side of Henry’s palm as she leaned into him. He looked at Lea. She brushed a coil of hair behind her ear, as her hand moved in his. The ridges of the finished puzzle felt smooth against Henry’s skin as Lea’s face was inches from his own. Her eyes swam in front of him, beckoning him closer. Her lips came to him like the surface of the ocean. Trembling, yet inviting. But she pulled away, falling back into the chair as she hid her face from Henry.

“Remember I told you how I thought this was some kind of novel, but I didn’t know what?” she said, behind her cascading hair. “Well I think I’ve worked it out now.”

“What do you think it is?”

“A romance,” Lea said. “But one without a happy ending.”

She stood up from the table. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t be doing this to you. I’ll see you tonight at the ball.”

Henry watched her leave before returning his view to the puzzle. He added the final piece.

“So then!” Phil announced. “Our last night on board this ship. And can I just say, you have been the best table mates we’ve had all trip!”

Henry smiled and raised his glass. He hadn’t anticipated how much he’d enjoy meeting new people aboard the ship, and his time with everyone at the table had been a fun one.

“I know the weather has been a bit off,” Phil continued. “But the food has been bloody brilliant, and I hope you all enjoy yourselves on the next legs of your journeys.”

Henry clinked his glass with the rest of the table. He felt at ease in the dining room. The atmosphere was jovial, with people making speeches at their respective tables, with laughter and spats of applause rippling out across the restaurant.

“You must be excited to see your girlfriend!” Rosie said to Henry.

“It’s been a long time coming!” he replied. “I can’t believe it’s finally here.”

“What’s the first thing you’re both going to do?” Rosie asked, excited for Henry.

“I haven’t given it much thought,” Henry answered. “Just enjoy the moment, I guess.”

“Exactly, my lad,” Phil chimed in. “Keep your feet on the ground.”

“And what are we all doing on this last night before New York?” Rosie asked the table.

“Club for me,” Phil said.

“Jazz bar for me, I think,” Srdan said. “I’d like to get an early night so I can be awake in time to see New York.”

“I’m going to the Black and White Ball tonight,” Henry announced.

“Oh very nice!” Rosie beamed. “It’s a lot of fun.”

“You know where I’ll be if it’s not,” Phil laughed.

“I’ll walk you back again tonight, if you’d like,” Henry offered.

“Very kind of you, young man,” said Phil as he raised his glass and took a swig from his beer. “You know where to find me.”

“And Henry, I’ll be by the buffet in the morning,” Srdan added. “If you’d like to say goodbye before you disembark.”

Henry would be sad to say goodbye to Srdan. He felt like he had only scratched the surface with him and, having told Lea already, felt obliged to tell Srdan the truth about his mother as well. To let him know that he understood what he was going through, and also for Henry to hear how Srdan had coped, grieving so far removed from home.

Everyone Henry had met on the ship had struck him as people he would never meet again. Srdan’s worldliness, Torkild’s trauma, even Beatrice’s seduction - seemed like fairytale moments that would never replicate themselves in America, or back home in England. It was as if the ship was a world of its own, a place where strangers met and said goodbye, having shared intimate moments with one another that they would never do on land. Henry looked around the restaurant to the tables of people saying goodbye to each other, reluctant to return to their lives that waited for them tomorrow.

Henry sat at a table in the far corner of the ballroom. A sea of black and white washed in front of him, as he tried to spot Lea through the crowd. He was nervous to see her after what had happened in the afternoon. It wasn’t that he didn’t want to be with her, but rather how much he wanted to be with her that worried him.

He had ordered them both a drink whilst he waited, and reclined in his chair, watching the couples dance to the music played by the brass band under the arch. His foot bopped along to the music, as Henry felt himself take up more room around him. His shoulders seemed broader, and his chest wider, as his fingers tapped on the armrest of the chair whilst a saxophonist blared a solo out to the raucous dancers. It was lively in the ballroom tonight, Henry thought. The heavy drums played out from the back of the band and those who danced kicked their feet out in front of them, in total unison with their partners. He even thought of asking Lea to dance, something he'd never done with anyone, ever. Perhaps tonight was the night, Henry thought to himself, as he leaned forward to grip the stem of his martini glass, and tasted the bitterness of the olive juice that stung the back of his tongue.

As he put the glass down, a white purse appeared at his side. Henry looked up, and there was Lea, resplendent in the white satin dress that glided along her body, creating silken curves that shimmered under the chandeliers.

"Bonsoir, Monsieur Thomas," Lea said, kissing both of Henry's cheeks as he stood up to greet her.

"It really is a beautiful dress," Henry said, as the two sat down.

"Merci," Lea said. "It was exactly what I was looking for."

She took a sip from her drink.

"It seems very festive in here tonight," Lea said.

"Yes, it must be because it's the last night."

"I know, I'm so excited! And you too, of course! Your last night!"

"I'm going to miss you," Henry said, looking at Lea.

She smiled and looked back at Henry. "I'm going to miss you, too."

Henry felt Lea's knee brush against his thigh as she shuffled in her seat, sending a bolt of electricity through his veins as he watched her sip the clear liquid that glistened in the glass.

"About earlier," they both said in unison before laughing at one another.

"You first," Lea teased.

"You didn't have to apologise," Henry said. "I was there with you, too."

"But it was wrong of me to start something," Lea said. "You're not free."

"I wish I'd known you for more than three days."

"It feels like more, no?"

Henry smiled, and nodded.

"Perhaps in another world, we are together," Lea said with a sigh, as Henry imagined that world was like the world he had created these last few days with her.

"Would you like to dance?"

"I would love to," Lea said, as Henry took her hand and led her to the dancefloor.

The two swayed rhythmically, back and forth, surrounded by couples intertwined with one another as a slow song played out to a ship full of souls suspended in time. Henry's hands poured into Lea's tiny waist, as her arms wrapped tighter around his neck. He stared at her for a moment, lingering on her velvet eyes, two pools of ink swirling in front of him.

"You're the most beautiful woman I've ever seen in my life."

Lea smiled, and rested her forehead against Henry's. There he drowned amidst a sea of strangers, stood under lights that waltzed around the dancefloor, as he felt her body breathe into his.

“We’re coming up to the last song for the night, folks!” the conductor announced. “We hope you’ve enjoyed listening to us as much as we’ve enjoyed playing for you.”

Henry realised it must have been late, as the crowd around him soared into a heavy applause. He had promised Phil he’d take him back to his cabin, and didn’t want to abandon him so late at night.

“You’re not going to believe this,” Henry said to Lea.

“What?”

“I kinda have to go and look after a dinner friend. He’s blind and I promised I’d help him back to his cabin.”

“You’re pulling a Cinderella on me?!”

Henry laughed.

“I’ll be ten minutes, I promise.”

Lea put her hands over Henry’s, by her hips.

“You’ll be here when I get back?”

“Of course,” Lea said. “Meet me in the club.”

Henry squeezed Lea’s arm before heading off to Phil. He felt as if he was in the same position he was that first night he met Beatrice, promising to rush back to a girl at the end of the night. Henry wondered if Beatrice was working, but after a quick glance he couldn’t spot her.

“Sorry I’m late, Phil.”

“Henry! Just the man,” Phil said. “You can’t see Beatrice can you? She hasn’t been in since that night I introduced you.”

“Can’t see her, Phil,” Henry said, barely checking behind the bar.

“Shame, it would have been nice for you to say goodbye. Anyway, are you here to pick me up?”

“Yes I am, if you’re ready to go.”

“I might as well, don’t want to put Rosie in a huff.”

Henry smiled as he passed Phil his cane.

“I don’t want to take you away from anything, Henry,” Phil said, as he got up from his chair.

“Don’t worry about that,” Henry said.

Henry felt Phil’s hand swim for the crook in his elbow before linking with it, his fingers digging in to the flesh around the bend in his arm.

“As slow as you like, Phil,” Henry said. “I’m in no rush.”

Henry and Phil shuffled along the plush carpet as people milled about the ballroom. Henry tried to spot Lea, but he couldn’t find her during his cursory glance across the room. He could still feel her body against him as passengers looked on and smiled at Henry, seemingly impressed by his support of Phil. They nodded in approval, as Henry kept his head down and helped Phil along the walkway.

“You’re a good lad, Henry,” Phil said. “You’re going to go places, I can tell.”

Henry thanked Phil as they turned the corner to the elevators. A few people were scattered about, but upon seeing Phil, they separated, allowing him and Henry through first as the gilded doors open. An older man with medals pinned to his chest smiled appreciatively at Henry, as Phil stared blankly ahead, his eyes lost under the drooping eyelids that sagged with age, and alcohol.

By the time the two men had reached Deck 11, the elevator had emptied. The couples leaving before had wished Henry and Phil a good night as the doors opened and snapshots of crew members piling up suitcases were revealed.

“Aren’t we there yet, Henry?” Phil asked, impatiently.

“Now we are,” Henry said, as the doors opened and the silence of Deck 11 greeted them.

Henry guided Phil around the corner, as he started to think about Lea again. He wondered how long they’d spend together tonight. He didn’t want to sleep before New York and waste any available time he could have with her before he left in the morning.

“Well, Henry,” Phil said, as they reached his cabin. “It’s been a pleasure, mate. I know our paths probably won’t cross again, but I’m very glad they did in the first place. You just keep doing what you’re doing. And enjoy being young. No pressure on you at all! Now’s the time to be making mistakes, trust me.”

Henry shook Phil’s hand, and watched him disappear into the darkness of his room.

The ballroom was thinning out by the time he made his way back down the ship. He walked through the saloon doors of the club, excited to see Lea leaning by the bar, or dancing to the music that boomed against the walls. But he couldn’t see her. He peered over heads and through the fogged dimness within the club, but her white satin dress was nowhere to be seen. Perhaps she’s in the bathroom Henry thought, as he lingered by the bar, expecting the familiar feel of her hand on his. But it never came. Had he really been that long with Phil? Henry looked for a note left on the bar, a scribbled message on a napkin, thinking Lea would have left him something. But there

was nothing but the damp rings of cocktail glasses stamped onto the napkins that littered the marbled surface.

Maybe she was still out by the ballroom Henry thought, as he nipped out of the club in search of her white dress and blood-red lipstick. But only a few stragglers remained, couples rotating slowly as the band packed away their instruments. Henry watched an old couple sway to music played from a speaker whilst the trombonist detached the brass tubing that made up his career.

Perhaps they were meant to be together in another world, he thought, defeated.

He returned to the club and waited for half an hour to see whether she would appear, but nothing. Slowly the club emptied out, as passengers hobbled away, wanting to get a good night's sleep before the morning came and New York appeared from the horizon. Henry didn't want to miss that either, but he was still hopeful Lea might emerge, her figure appearing from around the corner.

"Last orders, Mr. Thomas," the waiter said to Henry, who shook his head and finished his drink, before slipping his hands into his pockets and leaving the club.

Even the music in the speakers had stopped playing, as Henry muddled through the ballroom to the staircase. A couple of crew members wished him a good night as he passed them on the stairs, the men carrying suitcases down for disembarkation. Henry waded through the remaining suitcases sitting outside cabin doors as he finally made it to his room. He slid the card into the reader, as the door mechanics unlocked and the amber glow of his room engulfed him.

Henry stopped by the mirror and looked at himself. He seemed older, less wide-eyed than before, as he tugged at the clip-on bow-tie that was beginning to scratch at his neck. He couldn't believe he missed her. That she'd gone. he unbuttoned

the top two buttons on his shirt with a sigh. He watched his chest rise and fall as he inhaled, and exhaled, deeply. The muscles in his jaw clenched subconsciously, as Henry turned his head left and right, considering the angles of his face, and the pores on his skin. Maybe it was the light, but his eyes never seemed so blue as they did now, with shards of grey splintering from the edges of his pupils. He really did have his mother's eyes, he thought to himself.

He wondered if Lea was in her cabin, or if she had a balcony, and she was standing alone out there, waiting for New York to arrive for her to photograph, and paint. Perhaps he'd see her tomorrow morning out on the deck, Henry thought. He hoped so. His mind clicked back to Emily, and America, the reason why he had left home in the first place.

Suddenly, there was a knock at the door. Henry's heart leapt from his chest as he bounded towards it. He looked through the peephole, but it was covered, a dark smudge of flesh blocking his view. Slowly he opened the door, peering beyond the frame, to reveal Lea in a white satin dress, wearing blood-red lipstick, with hair cascading in curls over the crease of her collarbone.

She had come to him like a dream, floating across the carpet in his cabin, slipping the straps of her dress over her shoulders, and allowing the satin to spill down and pool around her ankles. In that moment, it was as if she walked on water.

"Turn the light off," she whispered, as Henry fumbled for the switch, not taking his eyes off Lea.

The cabin went silver. The porthole shuttered a spotlight from the moon, illuminating Lea's body. It was as if she was still wearing the dress, as the contours of her figure shone brilliantly in the dimness of his room.

She pivoted slightly, presenting the fullness of her hips to Henry, and the expanse of alabaster skin that seemed to pour down over her middle.

“Well?” Lea asked, arching her eyebrow and dipping her chin down ever so slightly. “Are you going to just stand there?”

Chapter Six - The Place Where All Ends Meet

Henry woke up alone. He felt the bed’s emptiness to his right, the creases in the sheets stretching down to the foot of the bed. He traced them out with the tip of his finger, sketching out the shape of Lea’s body that had filled the hollow space next to him. He could remember every inch of her. The two moles on the left side of her breasts. The way her shoulder blades rolled under her skin. The tuft of black hair that nuzzled against his thigh as she slept next to him, with her head resting on his chest and his fingers brushing against the valley of her waist that dipped between her ribs, and her hips.

He would have liked to have woken up to her. He had watched her fall asleep, felt her breath slow to a steady pace, and the weight of her body lean into him. But he wanted to wake up with her in his arms, for her face to be the first thing he saw at the start of his day. Instead, he was left with the sheets she had shed, tiptoeing out of the cabin and disappearing like she had done the night before.

Henry couldn't hear the familiar buzz of the engine in his room that he'd heard these last six days. He pulled himself out of bed and looked through the porthole above his pillow. Lights dusted the horizon as he rushed out of bed and threw some clothes on. He grabbed Lea's polaroid and slung it around his neck before seeing a note sticking out from an empty film canister by the side of his head. Henry pulled it out and unravelled it.

"Toujours."

Henry smiled at the note, and saw an address and phone number underneath the message, relieved with the knowledge that they had a way to keep in touch. He rolled the note back up and stuffed it into the film canister before slipping it into his pocket and opening his cabin door and striding down the hallway. A few other passengers appeared from their rooms along the corridor, wrapped up in thick coats with cameras in hand. They all headed in the same direction Henry was going, towards the staircase up to the boardwalk.

By the time Henry had made it to Deck Seven, more lights slowly ebbed by the windows. He saw the silhouettes of figures leaning along the railings like they had done to find the missing chef. Henry opened the door to join them, and was met with a blast of cold air, thick with a grit that clung around the rings of his nostrils and clogged the back of his throat. He could almost cup it in his hands, as he waded through the dense atmosphere to find an open spot to take photos.

The boardwalk was silent. The occasional camera flash popped from along the deck, but everyone stood in awe of the sleeping giant they crept up on. It was almost as if Henry's breath was stolen from him, as he watched the vapour expel from his lungs and swirl towards New York City.

The buildings created their own constellation in the night sky. Twinkling lights in the city smog blinked from a mound on the horizon, as Henry tried to make out the shapes of buildings he knew. The Freedom Tower, the Empire State Building, the Chrysler Building - these were spires he could recognise, as he spotted them reaching out to the mauve haze that sat above the city skyline.

He couldn't believe he was here. After months of imagining what it would be like to see New York glide towards him across the water, it was finally ahead of him. A toy town of neon lights, stacked together so neatly on an island that called everyone to it. In an instant, Henry wished he could get off the ship and walk under the skyscrapers that would have loomed over him. He would have heard the sound of taxis blare their horns, feel the rush of people surge past him to wherever they needed to be. Everyone looked like they needed to be somewhere, in the movies and documentaries he'd seen that showed New York. Everyone looked like they had a purpose.

The ship chugged to a standstill, as nearby boats came up to greet it, guiding it through illuminated buoys that bobbed on the water. Some had bells on, ringing with the sway of the tide as Henry saw them wink red, then green. It reminded him of the bells at his mother's funeral, the somber knell of bronze ringing out around the town, as he watched his mother's coffin being dragged out from a hearse by strangers. He was too young to do it, his father had told him, as Henry stood silently, picturing his mother in the wooden box that led him into the crematorium.

Sirens danced along a highway at the edge of the island, reds and blues chasing each other amongst a procession of golden white jewels, reflecting off the water. Henry tried to follow the sirens, but the highway seemed to disappear into the river, snaking around the skyscrapers that punched up through the earth.

Henry craned his neck up as the ship passed under a bridge. He imagined he could line up everyone from his entire town along that bridge, and still have room leftover for others. Large trucks heaved under the arches, their engines snoring past the ship as it continued its trawl to the Brooklyn docks. He hadn't taken a single photo yet, but he'd do so when he got closer, Henry thought, as the golden flame of the Statue of Liberty flickered on the horizon.

He leaned back from the railing to see if he could spot Lea along the deck. All he could see were the profiles of people hunched over and pointing at the city, ahead. Henry hoped she would come to him like she had done the first time they had met, but a sinking feeling bubbled away inside of him, that he would never see her again.

"It's beautiful isn't it," a voice said beside him.

Henry recognised Srdan's soft tone as he turned and smiled at the Montenegrin.

"It's better than anything I could have imagined," Henry said.

Srdan smiled and looked out to the city. The reflection of the Freedom Tower rippled across the water, the tip of its spire brushing against the hull of the ship.

"It's strange," Srdan started. "I can not count how many times I've seen this view, but it's always the same. Even with the new buildings going up, or the old buildings going down, it has always looked the same to me. And that is very comforting. I worry that the world is revolving quicker than I am, but when you travel, you see that things stay the same. It is the people who change, not the buildings, or the template of the city. And you will see that, too, Henry."

Henry watched the city blur through the lens of Srdan's glasses. It was getting closer every time Henry glanced at it. The buildings grew taller, and the lights brighter, even as the sun began to rise behind the Statue of Liberty. Her rusting statue

began to silhouette against the horizon and the lamp she carried filled with the amber glow of the morning sun. The city's shadows dissipated, as the gaps between buildings suddenly emerged, revealing Manhattan's depth.

“Remember this view, Henry,” Srdan told him. “This will be the picture you always remember when you come back. So take good care in capturing it.”

Henry felt the sudden weight of the camera tugging at his neck. He reached for it instinctively, pulling the viewfinder to his eye as he framed New York in the small rectangle. The city lights blurred in and out of focus. The mauve haze bled into a violet dusk that reflected off the skyscrapers, as if they were never really there. Henry pressed his forefinger against the clicker, waiting for the perfect moment to capture the city. Soon it arrived, as clouds peered from behind buildings and the sun rose from the sea, settling alight the sky that now blazed behind it.

The ship had gotten busier as the morning progressed. Everyone seemed keen to grab a hearty breakfast before disembarking, as passengers dragged small suitcases behind them, their wheels jumping over the grouting in the buffet floor tiles. Henry sat at a table in the middle of the seating area. He had hoped Lea might have walked past with her grandmother, just so he could have the chance to say goodbye as well. But he knew she would have wanted it to end on her terms, with the note, and the address.

“Good morning, everyone,” the Captain's voice rang out from the speakers. “And welcome to New York City. I trust you enjoyed the views this morning and you're all itching to disembark here and explore the Big Apple.”

Henry rolled his eyes at hearing the Captain's voice, happy to not have to hear it again.

“I know this has been a particularly unsettling trip, at times,” the Captain continued. “But I think you have all dealt with it wonderfully well, and certainly myself and the entire crew are very grateful for your understanding and compassion during the last few days aboard this ship.”

Henry took a gulp of his orange juice. The pulp stuck to the inside of the glass, as he watched nearby passengers stop mid-chew of their breakfast to listen to what the Captain was saying.

“It is always sad losing someone at sea,” the Captain said. “Forever, since man learned to sail, the phrase ‘Man overboard!’ has never been too far behind. So although we arrive at a bustling city like New York today, I can not help but think of the loss we suffered in the Atlantic, three days ago.”

Henry spotted a crew member wiping a tear away from his eye. They must have been a family of sorts, spending months and months on end together, traveling across the world, only to serve other people. He had seen them laugh with one another, joke around and show their true selves, away from the enforced courtesy that protocol demanded.

“But here we are,” the Captain said, filling the silence. “For some of you, this will be your first time in New York and I can assure you you’re in for a treat. One of the cabin officers will begin the disembarkation announcements shortly. For those of you staying on board, we look forward to your continued company as we make our way down to South America. But to all of you, thank you for choosing to sail with us across the Atlantic. We trust your stay with us has been a pleasant and memorable one, and we look forward to welcoming you on board the Queen Mary 2 again in the not too distant future. Thank you.”

Henry stood on the boardwalk, as more decks were called for disembarkation. His was to be called soon, as he took in more of the city. New York was more visible now, as Henry saw the lines of cars drive along the highways and across the bridges, hearing the faint sound of horns honking in the distance. Suitcases were being pulled out of the ship by the truckload, as Henry watched passengers make their way along the gangway and into Brooklyn. He could see the car park next to the docks and imagined Emily waiting around there somewhere, with flowers or a sign, or something just as thoughtful. They had gone from thousands of miles apart to mere metres, and his stomach dropped with the nerves of seeing her for the first time.

Henry turned away from the boardwalk and headed downstairs to his room to collect his suitcase. He half-hoped to hear his name called out in a French accent from a young woman hidden under a vibrant hat. He tried to get Lea out of his head, but he was expecting her around every corner, down every corridor, even in his cabin when he opened the door to collect his things.

He tried picturing Emily's face in front of him, as he felt the corner of her unopened letters stick into his ribs from his coat pocket. But he had only seen her skin in pixels. Her green eyes fluttering through bad internet connections that jittered whenever she moved around the hostels she stayed in. Her body was two-dimensional, without detail or texture, and her voice was auto-tuned to fit through the speaker at the bottom of his phone.

He wheeled his suitcases down to Deck Three. The ship seemed quieter now, like it had been the day of the storm. He could smell the same air that filled his nostrils

on the boardwalk, as the grit of New York wafted in through the open door that led to the gangway. He was so close now, he thought, as he joined the back of the line.

He reached into his pocket for the Polaroid of Lea as the line edged forward. It seemed like it was taken a lifetime ago, the film already ageing at the corners. Yet she still beamed back at him. He rubbed the tip of his thumb against her face, before putting the photo away and reaching for his passport. He must have been ten people away from the front. As he stepped through the partition that led to the gangway, he looked behind him. But the atrium was deserted and Henry, with a sigh, stepped forward to the passport officer and then out into America.

The metal echo rang out underneath his feet, as the gangway stretched out in front of him. Henry's suitcases followed closely behind, as the passengers in front of him stopped and marveled at New York. It was as if the whole city was on top of him, vast buildings blocking the sky from view, not allowing an inch of blue or grey to exist. It was in complete contrast to the last week Henry had spent on board the ship, where he had seen nothing but sky. He was already beginning to miss it.

Henry continued stepping down the gangway. He looked behind him to the ship, up at the people dotted along the boardwalk, leaning over the railings. He tried to spot a wide-brimmed hat, or a beret, but the ship seemed too far away now to pick out any features. It was just as big as New York, as Henry stood directly underneath it, hearing its metal ache as it sat anchored in the Brooklyn dockyard.

The clunk of Henry's feet continued as he reached the halfway point of the gangway. He looked ahead of him and saw the arrivals building where Emily was waiting for him. It was a flat-roofed metal box, with frosted-glass walls that obscured the definitions of people who waited for their friends and family to appear through the

door. Henry started scanning the figures, seeing if he could recognise Emily. It was all a blur of blues and blacks, as Henry edged along the white metal walkway that lowered him down to American soil.

He felt a buzz in his pocket; Henry reached for his phone.

“I’m sorry, son. I love you.”

Henry re-read the text. He was stunned. He wanted to text back immediately, to tell his father how sorry he was, how he didn’t mean to get so angry and that he understood how difficult it must have been to tell him. But he needed wifi.

The rest of Manhattan began to appear behind the skyscrapers as Henry realised how far back the city stretched. He had only seen the tall buildings by the water at first, and the spires of others squeezed between them, but now he could see the true dimensions of New York. Bricks and steel interwoven with one another, growing incessantly the further Henry looked past the glass towers that stood guard by the river.

He felt so small. On the ship, as he looked out over the Atlantic, he felt like he could see the end of the world. But here, Henry couldn’t even see where a block ended. He continued to look for Emily behind the glass, hoping the sight of her would calm his nerves as the sound of clanging footsteps crescendoed along the gangway.

Henry froze. He had spotted her. He was sure it was her. He recognised her profile, with the ponytail tied high behind her head, wearing a blue hoodie, and light blue jeans. She was holding something big, and she bounced on the balls of her feet to look over the crowd as passengers filtered through to arrivals.

More passengers slipped by him, as the sounds of the city wailed out from unseen streets. Sirens howled as he stared across to Manhattan. Henry took in the

view, certain all of America hid behind skyscrapers that blotted the sky, So vast and faceless, imposing itself on a land seemingly too small to fit all the buildings on it.

This wasn't what he'd expected. Seeing Emily bob nervously, seeing how bruising the city was, didn't match with how he had imagined this moment. He realised now how vague it had all been in his head. How he hadn't planned this, how impulsive it was to travel to the other side of the world, and do something without thought. Now, suddenly, Henry didn't want to be a part of it.

He turned around. Passengers stepped out of his way with odd looks on their faces, as he strode back up the gangway, back onto the ship, pulling the weight of his new and old life behind him. And thoughts of Lea, in front of him.

Epilogue

Emily,

By the time you've got this letter, I'll be en route to South America. We've just left the city docks, but I can still see the skyscrapers dotting the horizon. I wonder if you're still there, waiting for me at the port, even though the ship has gone. I hope that's not the case, but the thought of you staying and waiting for me will haunt me for years to come.

Emily, there's no easy way to say this. I had packed my bags, I had gotten off the ship and made my way down the gangway. I had even spotted you, your profile through the frosted glass at the docks. I knew it was you. You were holding something big, maybe a cuddly toy or a bunch of flowers. And behind you sat a sprawling city that I could never have imagined real. Everything, in that moment, overwhelmed me. The details of it all nothing like I had envisioned. So I am staying on board the ship, and traveling as far as I can, until there's nothing left to see.

You don't deserve any of this. That I have let you down, disappointed you, in the cruellest way possible, makes me feel horrible. And I am sorry. Truly. I can't begin to imagine the sadness I have caused. I am so desperately sorry.

I am not asking for forgiveness. I just want you to know why I've done what I've done. It has not been an easy decision. It's not one I've taken lightly. But I need to do the right thing for me. Joining the commune now, I would feel like life would just stagnate again. That I would tread water like I had done in England. Continuing this journey, staying aboard this ship and seeing the world is the constant refresh in life that I need. So that's what I'm going to do. See the world, and let it take me wherever it takes me.

Whether you rip up this letter or find some solace in it, I can only hope you live as fruitful and as incredible life as I strive to live, myself.

Thank you, Emily, for being the catalyst for my own change. I will always remember that.

Take care,

Henry