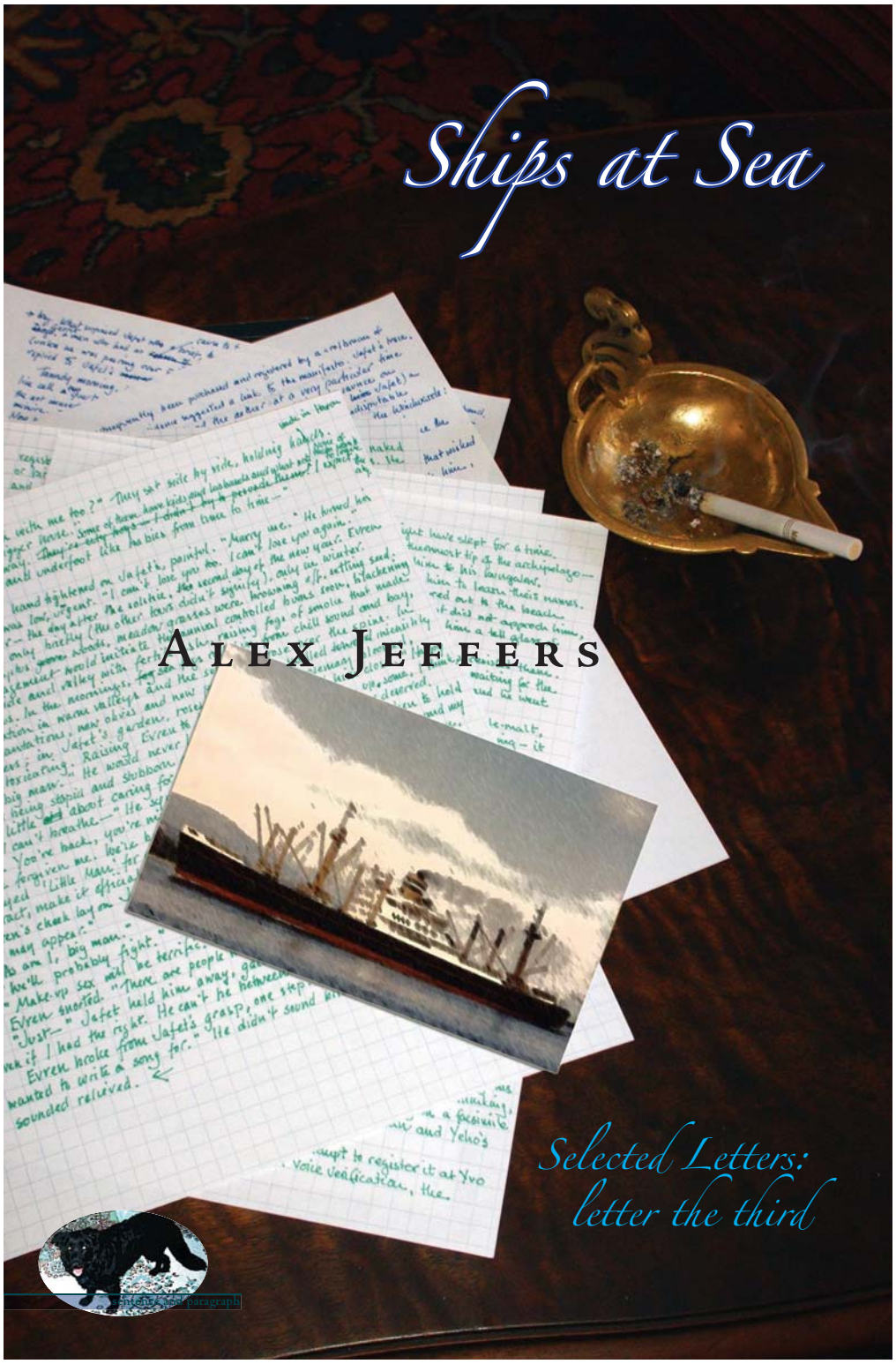
# Ships at Sea



Alex Jeffers

Selected Letters:
letter the third

"I always think religion's like collecting beetles.... One person has a passion for black beetles; another hasn't; it's no good arguing about it. What's your black beetle now?" 1

—Virginia Woolf: *The Voyage Out*

*South End, 2 September 1992 (3:00 am)*

*Dear Ethan:*

Someone once said that if God had intended us to sleep at night He wouldn't have given us the electric light bulb. Boston Edison turned out the lights on my block at 9.00 to do some kind of work and won't turn them on again till 7.00 in the morning. Naturally I can't sleep. Without power for the computer I can't work on the book either – I could as well be with you. The book is why I'm not with you; the book is why I can't sleep – keeping Dracula hours for months screws up your internal clock. I told Robert he'd get the manuscript next week and I don't wish to tell him otherwise until it's sure.

I went to a late movie. I hadn't been to a movie once in seven years without you. I thought of spending the night at your place even though it would be easier to miss you in your own bed; but 1) your computer can't digest my disks, 2) I'd turn on the TV. I have two fresh candles here; they should last through

till daylight, and though reading by candlelight is a bad idea, writing – by hand perforce – is feasible: writing for you (not at this point for Robert) is pleasure. The Walkman has new batteries; I have plenty of cigarettes and thought to grind a supply of coffee before the millennium. Thank the good Lord He also gave us gas cookers.



You would have written *gas stoves* (you see: I miss you). Nearly thirty years later and I still think (and often spell) in British.

I did try to sleep. When I got home from the movie, in the dark, both cats were curled up in a fur pie on the bed (it was midnight) and I climbed in with them. Across the street Boston Edison did *not* strike, so my windows were (are) full of light, and a bad, loud band was playing in the bar on the corner. I mentioned to Enkidu how unfair it was that cats could drop off in an instant. He only purred. I turned over several times, unable to find a comfortable position, knobby knee against knobby knee, ankle against ankle, elbow punishing my ribs, and punched the pillow, told Element it was unfair the feline body was designed for reclining, unlike mine. She barked and pushed her skull into my palm. A car alarm started shrieking. I stared at the dimly visible ceiling for ... two and a half hours. I thought of you, at the Jersey shore with your family, hearing surf through the screens instead of traffic. We didn't go to the beach together even once this summer, Ethan. (The book! The book! How you must despise the book. But wait till you read it.)

# Ships at Sea



I was a child of the chilly Pacific coast – that is, the ocean was irresistibly present, within earshot, but you never thought of swimming in it. The beach wasn't someplace you went to visit: it was there. My first encounter with an ocean one could give oneself to was on the same trip to the East Coast as my first encounter with you, which neither of us can remember: I was six, you not two. I don't remember Philadelphia at all. I think I remember Central Park, when my mother took me north to New York, but it could well be London's Hyde Park, a year later: radio-controlled yachts on a stretch of glassy water, swans. I do recall the combers on the Atlantic shore of Long Island. I had learned to swim in a pool. Nor does Carmel Bay often boast proper waves, if one cared to go in, and there's a nasty undertow. My mother and I stayed two weeks in a house above the beach at Amagansett, a beach whose sands were tawny and granular rather than white and powdery, and I recall no kelp. In my memory, I spent every waking hour in the ocean: a scrawny, pot-bellied little boy in knit trunks tumbled end over end in the warm surf. As I remember, I swam alone – but the crashing waves were over my head and, although I could hold my breath for a long time, I wasn't strong. Surely my mother didn't trust me alone. Our hosts' son, who was perhaps twenty, may have been my lifeguard and playmate. Do I remember being lifted to broad shoulders and tossed? I must have had a lovely tan that summer, my hair must have bleached to blond, doubtless my eyes were constantly red and my throat and nostrils raw from salt.

But these are very old memories, and particular, specific, in the manner of old memories. No doubt I was allowed only a half hour in the ocean on any day; we may have stayed in Amagansett only one week.

The following summer, my father leased our house in California to a lawyer and his family and we went to live in Ireland. The day after my seventh birthday – the precise center of July, 1964 – we climbed into the black Studebaker wagon and drove to San Francisco to board our ship. Again, these are particular memories, which I can't always make sense of. It would be fifteen or twenty years before I figured out why my father decided to move his family to County Waterford and join the Anglo-Irish landed gentry, where his two younger sons would pick up a brogue that would subject us to ridicule when we came home, and I, at least, would be permanently marked by the prose of British children's books. At the time I thought it was a birthday present just for me.

Over five years, the Jefferses would make the crossing twice over, twice back – three times on the same ship, the SS *Diemerdyk*, a freighter of the Holland-America Line. Bits of one voyage get mixed up with the others. It was on one of the return trips that my sister brought her little white whippet: you couldn't import pets into Ireland, but could take them out and back to the States. We had always had dogs, so my special gift the day before we departed was an Irish terrier: six inches tall at the shoulder, a stuffed toy. He wouldn't need to be walked around the decks when it stormed, nor to sit in Irish quaran-

tine for six months. My little brother and I each had our own tiny valises, mine red, his blue, but the dog was too big to fit. He and several other stuffed animals were placed in a paper bag, which somehow got left behind for the lawyer's children. They, I believe, were too old to appreciate my terrier. (Perhaps it's in his memory that I refuse to countenance a dog. I raised my first kitten in Ireland.)

That first sea voyage we were four: my father, mother, little brother, and me. I seem to think my sister had flown over ahead because she was to enter boarding school in Waterford City; I seem to think my older brother was in college in Los Angeles – although he would have been barely seventeen and it was the middle of summer. A mystery. In any case, we were four. On other trips there would be other children aboard (two little girls, once, who had Barbie dolls: I sewed clothes for Barbie, and the girls thought me clever) but not this time. The *Diemerdyk*, as I said, was a freighter: it boasted, I think, ten staterooms, two of them filled with Jefferses (while the Studebaker and four or five huge trunks were in the hold, buried under tons of California onions). I can't figure out who the other passengers were: they were adults. Some of them may have been appalled by the Goldwater for President buttons my mother had pinned to her sons' chests, but we were the only game on board. We were sweet children, in any case, indoctrinated to display a faintly Edwardian courtesy; because there were no other kids in our neighborhood at home and our siblings were much older – and because we were horribly precocious

– we got along with grown ups. (Is it any surprise all my boyfriends and lovers, until you, were older?) None of the adults – least of all our parents – knew how viciously my brother and I fought in private. We were sweet children: because my father was a twin and my mother had always wanted twins we were dressed alike despite the three years between us. My brother was blond, but my hair went pale in the sun; he was big for his age, I small. One of the trunks under the onions, by mistake, was the one that held all our summer clothes: for the first four days we had to wear the same increasingly grubby wool sailor suits. (When we reached Los Angeles, the captain provided what my mother considered a paltry sum for a new summer wardrobe. In Ireland everything had to be fiercely laundered, and the car still smelled of onions months later.)

Some of my worst childhood memories are embodied in those machine-knitted wool sailor suits. The year before, my brother and I had sat for a double portrait wearing them – an heirloom I hope never to inherit. They had shorts with elastic waists; the middy blouses had little triangular pin-striped dickies that you snapped into the V-neck. When you pulled the blouse over your head the snaps were cold on your chest, because you didn't wear an undershirt. (For some reason undershirts were uncouth.) Because you didn't wear an undershirt and the elastic of the shorts rode higher than your underpants, the navy-blue wool scratched abominably, and the suits always seemed a size too small, and as we sailed down the coast into warmer waters of course they

were much too heavy. One night in the middle of the ocean (it may have been that trip: I don't remember the incident but it was one of my father's favorite stories, which he told repeatedly – he enjoyed humiliating his children), we were invited to sit at the captain's table for dinner. It was decided the boys should wear their sailor suits in acknowledgment of the honor. I refused, flat-out. I was told I would get a spanking. I was spanked. I was told I wouldn't be allowed at the captain's table – worse, wouldn't be allowed dinner at all. Still I refused. (It must have been that trip: as he got older my brother became the stubborn one, while I turned sly.) When the dinner gong rang (a four-note, hand-held xylophone that one of the stewards paraded throughout the upper decks – my brother or I were sometimes allowed to play it at tea time) I was left behind in – locked into – the cabin, where no doubt I raged and howled.

Until someone knocked on the door, and turned the lock: the stewards had pass keys for all the staterooms. Twenty-eight years later I can hardly remember my own name: I'll call him Ismail – the stewards were all Indonesians, Muslims. He stuck his dark, elegant head around the door and beckoned to me. "Quietly, quietly," he said. "Wash your face and then come with me."

The ship was in choppy, sloppy waters – a fair storm would blow up later that evening. As Ismail hustled me down corridors and companionways, I careered from side to side, fending off the bulkheads with my hands. We were heading down into crew's quarters, where passengers weren't supposed

to venture. When you stepped over the doorsill it was as though you were boarding a different ship. The passages were narrower, the bulkheads painted grey-green instead of, as aboveboard, being panelled with polished mahogany and brass (in lounge, bar, and dining cabin) or teak (staterooms) or marble-patterned plastic sheathing (the *Diemerdyk* must have been built in the fifties, when plastic was novel and chic). You could hear, not just feel, the engines throb. We came to the stewards' dormitory, a narrow cabin only a little bigger than the one I shared with my brother, with three sets of narrow one-over-one bunks that folded into the wall. The portholes here couldn't be opened: they were barely above waterline. Ismail lifted me up to see, and a wave crashed against the glass. The other stewards were on duty in the dining cabin. Ismail set me down on one of the lower bunks. "No dinner, hey? Because you don't wear your uniform." He was unbuttoning his own white tunic. "Insubordination! Ha!" He laughed, showing two gold teeth, proud of the big English word. Underneath his tunic he wore a thin cotton singlet through which his teak-dark skin showed.

No, dearest heart, this isn't that kind of story: Ismail removed only the starched tunic, with its stiff stand-up collar and brass buttons. It was much warmer this far belowdecks – we were in the tropics – heavy sweat stains marked the tunic, but then he threw it onto what must have been his own bunk. Squatting down before me, Ismail grinned. "Cook prepared something special for you at the captain's table. Then – only one little boy comes to dinner!

He was upset, he was angry, he sent me to fetch you. Cook don't want his special dishes going to waste." He made one of those sounds represented as *tsk* and shook his head. "Little boy going to bed hungry? Not on Cook's ship!" Standing up, he took my hand, pulled me off the bunk. "Come along now."

My brother and I weren't the pets of just the (chiefly elderly) passengers: we were mascots for the whole ship. The pastry chef used to make miniature Heineken bottles out of marzipan for us; we never admitted that we didn't care for marzipan, but slipped them to our mother in exchange for sips of the real thing. I'm sure many of the crewmen had sons of their own back home in Rotterdam or Haarlem or Djakarta (I know the First Mate did: he showed me snapshots once when I visited the bridge), but they were at sea for months at a time. The *Diemerdyk* wasn't fast like its big sisters, the luxury liners *Rotterdam* and *Nieuw Amsterdam*, plunging over the Atlantic so that you'd hardly know you'd crossed an ocean. From San Francisco to Rotterdam or Ostend or Southampton aboard the Diemerdyk was a month's voyage, but in fact there were further ports at either end of the run and stays of three or four days in some of them. We were four days in Los Angeles when we spent one of them buying new clothes. My brother and I wanted to spend another at Disneyland, but it was as unacceptable to wish to visit an amusement park as to have delicate skin bothered by wool. (Somehow I have come to be of the same opinion.) My parents, however, weren't as stubborn as I – when the ship's medical officer volunteered to

chaperon us, they happily agreed. (Years later, my mother would tell me they did it more for his sake than ours: it was obvious he was dying to go, but felt self-conscious about going alone, a grown-up man.) (He might have been twenty-eight.)

I can't remember my friend the doctor's name, either, something that upsets me, but I'll call him Jan – a good, solid Dutch name, for he was a good, solid Dutchman with a broad streak of goofiness. On the wild ride through Space Mountain he shrieked louder than anyone. He took us to Knotts Berry Farm too, while my parents dragged us to Marineland – a bore for boys of seven and four. I knew Dr Jan for a month: I adored him, even if I can't bring back his real name.

But I remember him. In his dress whites he looked ten feet tall (remember, I stood perhaps three feet); we were both young enough that he could pick me up and hold me against his starched chest. He had the tan a pale northerner gets in the tropics: a translucent, deep brown membrane through which the ruddy under layers glow, and in that warm darkness his eyes glinted the true green of Heineken bottles. Dr Jan was the first man whose mustache I noticed, and probably the deep memory I was emulating when I grew my own. In bright sunlight the individual black hairs of mustache and eyebrows, each hair on his head, glittered as though brindled with gold. This is all to say he was handsome, one of the ideals who shaped my vision of masculine beauty. But more than that he had a powerful, sweet personality and the kind of abashed confidence that

inspires respect, admiration (idolatry!), but not fear. More (this at seven I recognized but could not name), he was sexy, in a way that seems to me now peculiarly innocent or exalted, as if he were one of those glorious medieval paladins pledged to chastity, or a saint whose only lover is God. (Are you jealous yet, dear heart?) He called me Alecko.

On warm Tuesday nights, the stewards would rig a screen out on the promenade deck and set up rows of chairs for passengers and officers. The films were all old, scratchy prints, but we were a snobbish family who seldom went to the movies and had only acquired a television the year before. Engines throbbing underfoot, the wake swishing beyond and below the railing, the deep air full of salt, stars overhead: it was wonderful to watch movies on board. One week it was *The Swiss Family Robinson*. My parents disdained Disney's films as much as his amusement park (imagine: back then there was only one) – they stayed in the bar. My brother and I sat on either side of Dr Jan, as enthralled as we. When my brother fell asleep (the films had to wait until the sky was fully dark, long past sunset, long past our bedtime), Dr Jan spread his jacket over two seats and settled the sleeping child on them. I climbed into his lap. He squeezed me tight during the (mildly) scary parts.

Ismail was leading me further through the warren of crews' quarters. I had been down here before, once to meet a sailor's small green parrot that closed its claws around my finger in a tight but not uncomfortable grip, tilted its head when scratched, and cackled in Dutch. But I didn't know where I was

being taken. Any reasonable child – any child of the nineties – would have been nervous or suspicious, but not I. I hoped to see the parrot again. I may have half-wished to be kidnapped for a cabin boy, to travel from port to exotic warm-water port, parent-less except that all the crew would be my parents, and free. A real crewman's navy blues or dress whites I could wear happily, proudly. That I was a poor sailor prone to seasickness wouldn't have entered into it. Eventually (in all the stories it was inevitable) the *Diemerdyk* would be wrecked on the island of the Swiss Family Robinson or the Coral Island. Or, in a crowded Arabian harbor or the lagoon of a coral atoll, Dr Jan and I in a small boat would be attacked by a shark, and I would thrust my oar deep into its gaping, toothy maw. (A precocious reader, I was especially fond of boys' adventure stories.)

We passed the doors of crewmen's cabins, some open to reveal cramped spaces festooned with pin-ups and postcards and gaudy knickknacks from ports all over the world; in one of them, a sailor sitting on the lower bunk in his underwear lifted his beer bottle in a salute and called, "Yo!" Ismail hurried me on, and then we went up another companionway. I realized he was taking me around a back way, where we would not encounter either passenger or officer, to the galley or the crew's dining cabin.

After narrow grey corridors, the galley seemed vast and white, glittering with stainless steel. The head chef, an enormous man in white with a tall toque who knew only a few words of English, grinned and

gripped my small hand in his huge one. Then Ismail led me through to the crew's dining room.

This was a cabin nearly as large as the passengers' dining room but much more austere. There were two long refectory-style tables that did not boast linens. Off-duty sailors enjoying their dinners welcomed me with a raucous recognition of conspiracy. Before my own dinner could be brought in (it proved to be an elaborate rijsttafel), I let go of Ismail's hand and ran to look out the long window that overlooked the cargo deck toward the stern.



Once the *Diemerdyk* had passed through the Panama Canal and was at sea again, a crew of sailors bolted together a huge box on top of one of the cargo hatches. Lined with waterproof tarpaulins and pumped full of sea water, this became our swimming pool. Illuminated by the lights on the promenade deck above, the pool glowed a deep viridian-blue, partly the color of the tarpaulins, partly the water, rolling in deep, fast swells that met each other coming and going, for the pool was nearly as deep as it was long. But because they were so confined, the colliding waves, large as they were, raised little spray or spume, although they wallowed nearly to the tarped floor and washed over the narrow platform onto the deck below. Indeed, earlier in the day a good third of the water had been siphoned overboard in anticipation of rough weather, curtailing my afternoon swim.

You see how water and swimming and summer keep coming to the surface. Damn the book. I've told you of course that the whole story takes place during

a snowy January, so that I have scarcely been able to appreciate the fine hot days of summer, few as they've been this year. They were a distraction as I tried by main force to transform muggy nights into frigid, blustery, dark afternoons. Even thunderstorms were no help, for the storms of winter are muffled, quiet. And now it is nearly Labor Day – little as that means to one with no regular employment, save that you will return Monday evening rather than Sunday, depriving me (my own fault) of one more day of your company. The extended forecast calls for a lovely long weekend: could I go to a beach by myself, say, take the bus or the ferry (when was the last time I boarded a boat?) out to P'town for a day, even two? What an idea. No: there's the book – my own and Robert's expectations, and just to get quit of it. Only two hours now till the lights come back on.

Swimming in the makeshift shipboard pool was unlike swimming in either the ocean or the Olympic-size pool at Rancho Del Monte in Carmel Valley. The water was salt but contained; contained but rocking with the motion of the sea and the ship. There was no shallow end, the water was always over my head, so that if I wanted to rest I had either to cling to the rope strung around the walls or climb out, and the walls themselves were slippery with the sheen of rubberized canvas, like a rain slicker, not the rough plaster of a real pool. My little brother – who would much later become a heroic surfer, going wet-suited out into the chill Pacific in any season – tired easily and turned fretful; my father never swam; the other passengers might take a sedate dip but could not be

considered playmates; my mother was, I imagine, as patient as could be expected with a boisterous child who believed the pool had been built solely for his pleasure and wished to spend whole afternoons in the water. Still, what I really wanted was for the sailors to join me at play, but there were lines not to be crossed.

The sailors were allowed the use of the pool in the late afternoons when the passengers were having their tea in the lounge or on the promenade deck. I would drag my deck chair to the railing and drink my tea (even at that age I took my tea black, to my father's horror and, a little later, that of my friends in Ireland), watching the sturdy young men as they cavorted hilariously in the pool below, whipping up a quick bout of water polo or simply splashing each other hugely. Disappointed, I would dunk a cookie into my tea and sulk, until one of my elderly gentleman friends challenged me to a game of shuffleboard.

In the crew's dining room, the cook and Ismail and the sailors watched proudly as I ate my rijsttafel, hungry, yes, but it was excellent too. A tall glass frosted with condensation held Coca-Cola and crushed ice, the indispensable accompaniment, which my parents never allowed at meal times. I cannot imagine now that I wasn't wary of my parents' discovering my escape, my playing hooky – worse, perhaps, the conspiracy among the crew to subvert their discipline. But a seven year old's memory and attention-span are too short for punishment to signify past (or before) the immediate outrage. Further,

it was a bingo night: part of my punishment was to miss that entertainment. My flight might not be discovered at all. Truly, I was enjoying myself: I was the center of attention.

A well trained and ravenous child, I cleaned my plate, then pushed it aside, replete. Ismail took it away. And then the pastry chef brought dessert: on one saucer a metal goblet in which nestled a perfect scoop of vanilla ice cream stuck with two fan-shaped gaufrettes as though they were wings, on the other saucer two plump birds of pink and beige meringue.

As I licked ice cream off the spoon and crunched gaufrette and meringue – two distinctly different crunches, different flavors, different degrees of sweetness – someone came in and threw a long leg over the bench, straddled it beside me. It was Dr Jan. "You're a naughty boy," he said in his clear, clipped, expert English, but he was smiling. He set his white cap with its celluloid visor and gold braid on the table.

"They wanted me to wear my sailor suit," I said, indignant. "I hate it. It itches."

"Ah, but after two weeks at sea aren't you a sailor?"

I moved my eyes around the table, gazing pointedly from one crewman to another. "Real sailors don't dress like that."

Laughing, Dr Jan clapped his cap onto my head, where it flopped down over my nose. Confiding, he whispered into my ear: "I was not given a meringue bird for dessert, Alecko."

Happy to please him – he had a sweet tooth – I offered the second bird from my own plate. In exchange, he reached into his pocket and passed me one of the strong, almost bitter Dutch coffee candies he was never without – and for which I feel a sudden craving. Surely I can find them somewhere in Boston? I'll go out and search Newbury Street later today. They come in a white and gold enamelled tin, and each is individually wrapped in two layers of paper printed with the same black and gold seal and legend as the tin. You'll like them, Ethan.

Trying to look stern – a vain attempt, with crumbs of meringue clinging to his mustache – Dr Jan said that now I'd had my dinner I must go back to the cabin and try to be a good boy.

"Oh, not yet." Cunning, I said, "They're going to play bingo tonight. They won't come to put me to bed until late." I put my hand on his arm. "I want to stay with you."

"Oh, but I am going to play bingo as well."

"But aren't you my friend?" This was my trump card.

Placing his hand on the back of my neck, Dr Jan squeezed, ungentle but fond. "So. What is it you wish to do with me, naughty child?"

Triumphant, I waved toward the broad window. "It's almost stormy out there – I want to go out on deck."

Dr Jan pointed out that we might be seen on the promenade deck and both get in trouble. Not the promenade deck, I said, that was too high up away from the waves, I wanted to be on the cargo deck. He

was dubious, but doubtless saw I was on that edge of unreasonableness where I would howl and carry on if balked. I believe Dr Jan would have (later probably did) made a good father, for his affection was tempered with stern good sense and that by a kind of wonkiness that was childlike but not childish, but he was not my father. He gave in, on condition I hold his hand. No condition at all, so far as I was concerned, but natural proof of our friendship.

I thanked Ismail and the two cooks as I had been taught, took hold of Dr Jan's hand and dragged him to the door. The floor rolled underfoot more strongly than I had felt, sitting down, but with Dr Jan at my side I felt secure, possessed of real sea legs. Clattering down a companionway with him, I confessed I had never been in a storm at sea.

"You aren't frightened, are you?"

A silly question: I would not have asked him to take me out on deck if I were frightened. "Of course not!"

Dr Jan threw open the door at the bottom of the stairway and a gust of hot, moist wind blew in, ruffling my hair, exhilarating, and we stepped out. With one hand he held onto me, with the other kept his cap from flying off. Outside, it seemed the pitching of the deck was stronger, a rollicking motion that went both sideways and from bow to stern. The winds were fierce and inconsistent, coming in roaring gusts from every direction, and overhead tatters of cloud raced across the dome of the sky, darker and purer than ever on land. "This is fun!" I yelled into the wind as we stumbled over to the starboard railing

– as much, I think, for Dr Jan to have something to hold onto, experienced sailor as he was, as to see the ocean. We stood there for a little while, I gripping one of the painted metal rods, Dr Jan the polished mahogany rail.



A deep and violent indigo, the ocean was laced with whitecaps that rushed past us toward the stern – the ship ploughed head-on into the seas. Suddenly it seemed a very small, frail craft in the wilderness of waves. Looking down, I could see how high up the hull they climbed – we had been warned that afternoon to close the portholes in our cabins. The deck rolled to starboard, the sea rose up, and a spatter of spray brushed my face. I shrieked, thrilled, and hugged my friend's leg.

"Do you want to go in?" He had to shout to be heard over the wind, so I could hear only the words, not the concern.

"No!" I shouted back. "Is it a big storm? A hurricane?"

That made him laugh. Pulling me along toward the stern, he said, "No, it's just a little storm. Next to a hurricane, it's as little as you are next to me."

"But not as little as my brother?" I asked, determined to have that distinction. Between excitement and an unsteady stomach, my big meal was beginning to make itself felt, but I tried to ignore it.

"Not as little as your brother."

We climbed the open stairway to the stern deck and went to the taffrail. Between clashing waves and the turbulence of the ship's great screw, the wake was a frothy, dizzying maelstrom below. I clung to Dr

Jan's strong, solid leg and gazed down, giddy, exalted, nauseated. "Dr Jan," I gulped, horribly ashamed. "I'm going to be sick, I think."



Immediately he crouched down and held me around the belly. "It's all right." There wasn't space enough between the railings for me to stick my head through and vomit over the side, but he supported me over the scupper as I brought up ice cream, meringue, and rijsttafel, weeping with shame and frustration and nausea. "It's all right," he said again, near my ear where he didn't have to shout. "Even old sailors get seasick." I didn't believe him. I prayed for rain or a huge wave to wash away the evidence of my weak stomach, and threw up again.

When I was done, he wiped my mouth with his handkerchief and lifted me into his arms. "We'll go to the dispensary and give you a pill. You'll feel better in no time."

A brass button on his chest, near my face, looked like a curative pastille, which I wanted to take into my mouth. Ashamed again, I saw that his dress whites were stained with my vomit. As he carried me back amidships, I could only wonder how he kept his feet.

In the dispensary, under the bright white lights, Dr Jan gave me a cup of sweet mouthwash to rinse out the sour taste, and then set me on the paper-covered examination table. He shook a pill into his palm, then glanced at me, concerned. "Can you swallow a pill?" he asked.

I had my pride. I nodded. He gave me a glass of water and the pill, which I swallowed easily, feeling immediately better.



Dr Jan looked down at his uniform and gave a wry little laugh. "I must change my clothes," he said, but his tone cast no blame. "Come back into my cabin with me. After that, I'll take you back to *your* cabin."

I could expect no more than to be got rid of, now, but I had never seen his private cabin, a privilege I felt ready to treasure. Jumping down from the table, I took his hand again, and he led me through the door. I wanted to see everything, to touch everything – the ship in a bottle on the bureau and the brushes that slid back and forth with the swell, the small shelf of books above his bunk, the framed picture on the bulkhead between the portholes (somehow I remember it as a Vermeer). But he set me down securely on his bunk. A sudden swell caught him as he went to the closet; he stumbled and crashed against it and laughed. Opening the door, he pulled out an immaculate white uniform on a hanger and hooked it over the doorknob. Then he sat down in his small armchair to remove his shoes.

"Do you know what I like to do when there is a storm like this?" Bent over his shoes, his voice distant, he hardly seemed to be speaking to me, but he spoke in English. Rising to his feet, holding the chair's back for support, he began one-handed to unfasten the brass buttons of his tunic. He gazed not so much at as through me, and there was a dreamy smile on his lips and in his green eyes. "I like to get into the swimming pool and really feel the storm and the sea."

The most reckless child is really cautious and cowardly at heart, I believe – he tests his fears but, unlike the adult daredevil, hopes to be prevented. The sudden image of Dr Jan breasting those waves was exhilarating to me, but when I placed my own small self next to him – even clinging to his neck, even though those swells were no greater than the surf at Amagansett – I became frightened. "That sounds dangerous."

"Oh, no." Shrugging the tunic off, he shook his head. "One can't properly *swim*, but if you hold onto the rope, the waves roll you back and forth, lifting you up and down." He wore a white cotton singlet like Ismail's, but his skin was not as dark, and there was a feathery fan of black hair across his breast. "It's lovely, exciting – like Space Mountain at Disneyland."

"I've never seen you go swimming, Dr Jan." I felt that he was asking me to test my fear.

"Yes, you have." He grinned and unbuckled his belt. "I've seen you watching from the promenade deck at tea time."

"I didn't know it was you."

"I wasn't wearing my uniform, was I?" Still grinning, he let his trousers fall and stepped out of them. In undershirt and white boxer shorts and socks, he took a sudden two steps to the bureau and opened the top drawer. "I was wearing my bathing trunks, wasn't I?" he said, turning and holding up a scrap of black fabric.

The sailors, when they had the use of the pool, wore small European briefs, not the baggy trunks American men favored in the sixties – and favor

again now, in the nineties: it was no wonder I hadn't recognized Dr Jan among the other young men, practically naked as they all were, undisguised.



"Dr Jan," I said, suddenly courageous, "may I go swimming with you now? Just for a little while? Then I'll go to bed."

"Like a good little boy?" Still holding his swimsuit, he came over to the bunk and sat down next to me. I leaned against him and he put his arm around me. "Do you really want to? Won't you be frightened?"

Pressed up against him, I shook my head. "Not with you there. I'm a good swimmer, Dr Jan."

"You won't be sick again?" He patted my belly.

"The pill made me better. Anyway, there's nothing left in my tummy. Please?"

Jumping to his feet, his back to me, he swiftly stripped off his underwear and socks and pulled on the black briefs. Turning to me as he tied the drawstring, he said, "You must do exactly as I tell you and hold on very tightly." He looked very different now, just as big and impressive (in fact he was slight and wiry and probably no taller than five foot ten), but no longer quite an adult. This despite his mustache, the hair on his chest and the line of hair from navel to the black margin of the swimsuit. Of course I had seen other men nearly as – and once or twice completely – naked, spending as much time as I did by a swimming pool, so it wasn't the stripping down that made him seem younger. It was his goofy, boyish, excited grin, an expression that made it clear he knew we were being naughty but thought we could

get away with it. Then, briefly puzzled, he muttered, "But you have no bathing trunks."

Kicking off my shoes, clawing at the buttons of my shirt, I said, "I can go in just my underpants."

"Very well." As he went back to the closet and brought out two white towels, I pulled off my clothes, hopping up and down in my eagerness to be in the pool, which suddenly seemed the perfect – the *only* place to be during a storm at sea. Turning to me where I stood in my white underpants, nearly trembling with excitement, Dr Jan grimaced slightly. "But your pants will be wet and cold and unpleasant when you get dressed to go back to your cabin. You can swim naked." He dropped the towels on the bunk and scooped me up, pulled off my underpants and let them fall on the floor with the rest of our clothes. I clasped my arms around his neck and he lifted me higher and the silky hair on his chest brushed my little penis. It was stiff of course, with general excitement – part of it sexual, naturally, but I don't want to make an issue of that. I have no clear memory of when I recognized that I even had a sexuality, but it wasn't yet. Dr Jan grabbed up the towels again and carried me through the dispensary. At the door, he asked again if I was sure.

The winds blustered still wilder, spray lifted off the crests of breaking waves to mingle with the gusts of rain that now filled the air, not falling so much as flying. Leaving the towels inside the door of the dispensary, Dr Jan closed it after us. Head down, reeling as the deck reeled underfoot, he half-ran the twenty feet or so to the ladder up the wooden side

of the pool. The voice of the storm was gruff in the way of a large dog that growls at you while furiously wagging its tail.



I was laughing crazily, delirious with elation. I didn't want to let go of Dr Jan when he pried me off and set me on the ladder, but then I clambered up the slippery treads. At the top, I clutched the railing, crouched on the narrow rim, waiting for him. As his head came over the top he shouted, not a word: "*Whoo!*" And then the pool sent a huge wave up against the side, breaking and cascading over my back, into his face, over the edge. I held tight and shrieked.

Dr Jan shook his head, grinning, manic. "You're all right!" he cried. In one swift movement he was up over the side, past me, into the pool. Still holding onto the railing, I edged around to look into the volume of the water, but for a moment I couldn't make him out, only the rolling waves. Shivering, I made a little noise. And then I saw him.

Out in the middle (not clinging to the side), upright and facing me, he rose through the face of a gleaming wall of water, already curling at the lip. Chest out, arms upraised over his head, head back, he rose up and rode forward, in slow motion it seemed. When he broke through the crest of the wave, exalted, I thought of a painting of Poseidon in one of my books of Greek myths.

Yelling, I threw myself forward, hurtling into the advancing wave. It caught me in its chill liquid grasp and flipped me head over heels, hurled me to the bottom. My back scraped a seam in the tarpaulin.

Another wave grabbed me, tossed me to the surface, before a third crashing on my head thrust me down again. When I bobbed to the top again, coughing, I gazed around wildly but saw nothing but the roiling waters. Something seemed to grab my legs, dragging me down into a trough. Kicking and thrashing, I tried to climb the sheer cliff, and I called out, "Dr Jan! Dr Jan!" Salt water flooded my mouth.

And then his strong, solid arm was around me, I was bellied over his shoulder, retching, and he was slapping my back. Holding me close, my head up, he rode the waves like a master until I recovered, and then he lifted me overhead and shouted, "Wonderful! Marvellous!"

I fell back against his chest, he stroked to the side of the pool, and while I clung to his neck and wrapped my legs around his waist, he gripped the rope with one hand. The other hand he kept in the middle of my back, keeping me safe. The billows took us up and down. Sometimes we went under for a moment, but I was never afraid. I rested my cheek in the hollow between his neck and his shoulder, hearing him shout "Marvellous! Wonderful!" and other words, Dutch words, with the voice of the storm, and I let the storm roll through me.

This is where the story ends. (It's nearly 7.00 – the power will come back on any time.) Were there consequences? Did we get away with our adventure? I don't remember. Two weeks later, the *Diemerdyk* docked at Southampton. A huge crane lifted the Studebaker from the hold – from the hatch atop which the pool had stood only a few days before

– and set it on the pier. I don't remember saying good-bye to Dr Jan. I hope he let me rest against his chest again for a few moments before I walked down the gangplank holding my mother's hand to a surface that did not move under my feet. We drove to London, for a week or two, then across England and Wales to the little port of Fishguard, to board the ferry that would take us across St George's Channel to the other small island – setting for many other stories.

Blow out the candle. Bright enough outside that I could have done so an hour ago. If I stand up from the desk to stretch, Element and Enkidu will look up, suddenly alert, uncurl themselves from their cat pie and ask for breakfast. And you? Early riser that you are, even on vacation, you may be rubbing sleep out of your eyes, or already drinking coffee in the kitchen, putting together a picnic lunch so as to get a head start on the beach today.

I'll feed the cats, feed myself, take a shower – go to bed at last. What I want to do is pick up the phone and dial, say, "I'll be there on the afternoon train." I'm sure Nancy or Neal or somebody would be willing to look in on the cats. Or, if I were to rent a car and drive, you wouldn't have to tear yourself away from the beach and meet me at the station, and I could bring the computer with me.

Right. Some kind of vacation that would be. Besides, I wouldn't trust myself to drive. No, I'll sleep for a few hours, then shovel myself back into the snows of an imagined January. Hope for a postcard from the Jersey shore. Imagine you opening this let-

ter two days from now – sitting on the porch of a rented cottage in the late afternoon sun, still in your swimsuit no doubt (black nylon briefs like Dr Jan's), tanned, lovely as only you are lovely, long and lean, holding a sweet, potent summer drink in one hand. Your brow wrinkles up as you read, you think: Why does he tell me these things?



I'll see you in a week, less than a week, dearest heart. The book likely won't be finished – Robert go hang – but I'll take the evening off anyway, meet you at the train, make you dinner. Little enough. Meanwhile, love to the family. To you: all of me.

**Ships at Sea**
*(Selected Letters: letter the third)*

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