

Angle degrees	Event	Time mins
20	PA - Ship in no danger	3
25	Containers hit	5
30	Patrol boat hits	8
35	7 blasts on horn	10
35	PA – Attempting to right – Do not launch boats	12
40	Engines stop	14 (20)
50	Hit sandbank	15 (21)
90	Lowers rope	20 (25)
90	Drops rafts	60
90	First rescue boats	70
100	Explosion	80
100	Helicopters	90

Prologue

The ship gleamed in the silver moonlight, its brilliant white paintwork cleaned and sparkling ready for the passengers on its maiden voyage. The floodlights on its upper decks shone down on acres of immaculate laid teak decks and the light spilled out across the harbour to the rusty coasters that languished on the other berths. It did not, however, penetrate down to the dockside where the great height of the hull-sides left an eerie gloom and rats feasted on the food that had been dropped during loading, and looked at the mooring lines snaking up into the darkness.

A dog appeared from around the corner of a container, limping slightly as it favoured a damaged leg but moving carefully in the deeper shadows near one of the massive mooring bollards. It was lucky that day. A security guard approached from the other direction, flashlight in one hand, cigarette in the other, kicking broken cans over the dock-side into the sea. The rats saw him coming and ran straight towards the dog, which moved with incredible speed and took an old grey in its powerful jaws shaking it so hard that even the guard looked up and ran across, chasing it back towards the container. The grey fought hard as the dog retreated, tearing chunks of rabied fur from its captor's scarred hide; but the more it fought the harder the teeth closed on it, squeezing it's life out until it hung limp. The guard shrugged, throwing his empty cigarette pack after it and the remaining rats were straight back to their food, unconcerned about the loss of one of their number. More appeared from every corner in the dockyard as they gorged themselves on an entire pack of cheeses which had fallen from a crane and burst, leaving its contents to go rancid in the heat of the day.

By now the area was a sea of rats fighting over their feast. A group formed by the remaining cheeses, coalescing around an enormous brown with one ear and the end of its tail lost in past battles, but still strong enough to keep all others at bay, whose attention shifted to the ropes, pathways up into the darkness. They swarmed up only to find the rat guards, discs of metal lowered into place from the decks above and held secure with thin ropes at their top, well away from gnawing teeth.

The mechanical sweeper wove an intricate pattern through all the sheds and cranes with its engine roaring and whirling brushes and sucked up every last trace of food, to leave the concrete wet and clean ready for the guests in the morning. The rats scattered when its lights approached but were soon back when it had gone, searching in vain for their food and then going back to the ropes. They ran up as a horde and soon the strongest were climbing over others, only to overbalance and fall, crashing onto the fenders before sliding down to drown into the water below.[can't get out]

Others went for the lines of the coaster on the next berth, dwarfed by the enormous height of the cruise ship it was secured with ropes only half as thick; harder to balance on but with rat guards badly placed or missing. But it was the smell of food and newness that drove them to keep trying for the bigger ship. There were many lines fanning out from different points on the ship to the whole row of bollards, and the rats tried them all, scraping and testing the guards to find the slightest gap to let them through. The crew was new, commanded by experienced officers but many of them raw recruits, and one of the guards hung at a loose angle and began to move.

Just then the dog came back, having found only a meagre meal on the old grey, and this time it was not alone. They came as a pack, rushing at the rats, only to have them vanish into the darkness. Seeing prey up the ropes they barked and a crew member looked out and called the security guard on his radio. The man reappeared, cigarette now replaced with the radio from his belt. He was shouting into it: "Vicious animals, dirty and evil, Can't have them by a new ship, I'll call the

others to get some sticks and we'll chase them right away from the pier. " And so they did, leaving the rats in peace.

The bishop stood in the shade of the awning over the pool bar on deck 22 and addressed the visiting dignitaries and press.

“We ask God to bless this ship and keep it and all who sail in it safe during many voyages in years to come.”

Not knowing quite what else was expected of him for his five hundred dollars, and knowing few other words of English, he tapped his crook three times on the deck and bowed his head.

As he stepped back after his address of just a few seconds the captain looked up in surprise and then looked anxiously at the chaplain who, taking this as an invitation, stepped forward to the microphone and introduced himself. Seeing this as a great opportunity to get his message heard he took to it at length and with great enthusiasm.

Paul stood among the crew at the far end beyond the Jacuzzis, many wearing their own clothes smelling slightly of cannabis even out on deck in the open air. He wondered how many had attended just out of curiosity or as an excuse to get away from the huge workload preparing the ship for its first passengers the following day. He had come to try to see why the owners had wanted to get the ship blessed in the first place. He could find no record on any of the website of them ever doing it before.

The chaplain was in full flow inviting everybody to join him at his daily services regardless of what religion they followed and even if they did not follow one at all. He emphasised the value of the congregation in providing mutual support and understanding and how he hoped this would spread throughout the ship.

He stepped back slightly but the captain leaned over to say something making him step quickly back and make a long and profound request for God to bless the ship and even added a request that he should carry on blessing it throughout its life.

The bishop looked up his cathedral looming over them next to the citadel. Paul imagined him wondering if he had any blessings left for it. The guide book said it had been sacked six times by invading armies and it now appeared to be largely supported by a forest of scaffolding.

Their work for the rest of the morning was to set up and check the projection system for their lectures. Arriving in the forward lounge they found the pile of boxes. Harry looked surprised.

"They asked me what I wanted to use." Paul replied. "I said I wouldn't come if they didn't get good kit."

"Nothing normally changes on the ships." Harry explained. "They build new ones, a bit bigger and a bit smarter, but deep down they are just the same." He managed to keep smiling while they set it up. He admitted that the pictures were clearer and brighter but still looked as if he thought that they should have got the same as the last one.

The cabins with no port-holes were not places to spend the day in so when they had finished they went out onto the promenade deck. New crew members were being shown how to launch the lifeboats.

The officer in charge spoke in strongly accented English, Paul guessed that he was Greek. The crew members seemed to be mainly Phillipino with a number of other nationalities with them.

The officer was endlessly patient and spoke as slowly and clearly as he could. He showed them the buttons to push to work the mechanism and finally asked one to go ahead. The man stepped forward and pushed the button and the davits swung out above them suspending the lifeboat over the side of the ship. He then pushed the next button and it was lowered to deck level. Opening the gate in the rail the officer then asked most of the crew members to get on board. As they boarded they all looked nervously down at the sea several decks below them.

The crewman now pushed the next button and the winch started releasing the cable again. For a few seconds nothing happened and then suddenly the boat jolted down a few inches.

"Do not worry." The officer said quickly. "The cable sometimes stays in place for a short moment when the ship has just been painted." The boat was now descending smoothly but the damage had been done. Some of the crew were trying to climb back on the ship, only to be met by the officer barring their way. Others were kneeling in prayer.

"I'm glad I wasn't in it." Paul said, looking at them. "It would have scared me ok. I don't think praying would do much good."

"Why not?" Harry asked. "Who knows?" He stopped briefly, but before Paul could think of a reply he added. "All the boats are actually tested. If the brake fails completely and the drop freely all the way to the sea, the boat floats up ok and nobody gets hurt."

"Money better spent that paying that bishop to bless the ship." Paul replied, but then wished he hadn't. [When] Harry just replied "who knows" again [as] they looked down at the boat, now floating safely in the water while one of the crew was detaching the hooks from the lifting eyes and the officer [looked down and] shouted instructions.

The "sail-away music from the quay side" [which had been proudly described in the brochure] arrived in a battered looking blue coach. Paul watched from fifteen decks above them as they clambered out with their cumbersome instrument cases. A line of old rail track that must once have supported a dockyard crane gave them a convenient position to work to, and the front rank arranged themselves along it. They wore matching red jackets, and when their shining brass instruments emerged, the band formed a passably impressive sight. Soon they started into some jazz standards. He was no judge of the quality of music, and on this [occasion] this was probably an advantage, but, even from his distant viewpoint, he could see that they were enjoying it and that was good enough for him.

Their audience was minimal. He knew that on these [occasions] almost everybody felt obliged to wait in their cabins for the suitcases to be delivered. On a ship this size the process could take hours because all of the cases had to be checked in the customs sheds with endless x-ray scanners and other devices. On his way up he had seen that some of the more adventurous who had managed to escape from their cabins but had decided to start in the way they planned to continue, in one of the many bars. This only left about twenty passengers to gather at the rail and clap enthusiastically at the end of each tune. Below them there were five decks of balconies which had been carefully designed beneath an overhang so their privacy could not be disturbed. There may have been some audience watching from them and possibly some on the promenade below but he heard no applause felt that he was probably with the main supporters. He sensed that some of his fellow passengers were slightly embarrassed about the idea of walking away. This was not a problem for Paul. He had chosen a position which was shaded from the afternoon sun by the ship's funnel and was happy to listen to the music and watch the band and the dock workers further along the quay.

The last of the suitcases were appearing from the customs hall piled into high trolleys which were wheeled out and then picked up by fork-lift trucks to be driven through the low cargo door into the ship. A small holdall which was perched precariously on top of a pile of suitcases started to slide off. The driver could not see as it fell through the side of the trolley onto the roadway. At the critical moment the forklift turned just in time to run one of its heavy industrial tyres squarely across it.

Paul reached into his shoulder bag for his binoculars to inspect the damage. The driver had finally noticed the holdall and stopped to pick it up. It was comprehensively flattened. Liquid was flowing out and forming a small dark line on the concrete as he casually picked it up and threw it back onto the trolley. Paul looked around as the band played on and saw that everybody else had been watching it. Somebody in a cabin would soon find their holdall full of broken bottles of perfume and shampoo but nobody would know how it had happened. He certainly wasn't going to create complications by reporting it.

The fork-lift was returning empty from the ship. He looked to see if any of the gang of dock workers gathered by the door of the customs shed would say anything to the driver. They stood and watched as he collected his next load. Nobody approached him or appeared to say anything. He picked up another pair of trolleys full of suitcases and Paul looked at them to see if there was anything likely to fall off. Seeing nothing, he slowly scanned along the front of the shed to see what else was happening. With a ship of this size in port there were several other loading operations in progress. Pallets of supplies were being loaded through another cargo door. He was surprised to see one of the forklifts with a load of boxes drive up towards the band. The band members looked on as he drove right past in front of them up towards the suitcases. Paul could not imagine why they would be loading boxes of supplies mixed in with the passengers' baggage so he looked down to see if he could see what the boxes were. They gave no hint as to what was in them, but between two of them he could just see something red concealed within the pile.

The two forklifts, one with suitcases and one with boxes, moved off together behind a shipping container where they could not be seen. Moments later they reappeared and a small red suitcase had appeared on the top of the pile in one of the trolleys. He looked down at it, realising that it was going to be taken to a cabin without passing through any of the security checks. He was idly wondering what it was when he saw that one of the drivers was looking directly at him and his binoculars. He saw a red sunburnt face with a thick grey moustache looking up at him before he tried to show as much interest as possible in the cathedral in the city beyond the docks.

Thinking little of the incident he stayed to listen to the music and see what else was happening. The audience had thinned even more and those that remained clearly felt that they were doing the right thing and clapped even louder at the end of the tunes. There was camaraderie and this meant conversation. He glanced around to see who was next to him and saw a middle-aged lady. He was seen looking – she was looking at him. He awaited the inevitable conversation starter which was always to enquire if one had been on a cruise before. Clearly she had not because she broke with tradition.

“Hello, I’m Velma from Idaho.” She announced herself.

“I’m Paul from England.” He replied, knowing that considering England as just another state of the USA was a well accepted convention.

“Is this your first cruise?”

“I’ve been on a few before.” He replied and asked. “Do you think that this will be a good one?” to avoid having to fill in any details.

He had opened the floodgates. Soon he had her life story. She was a teacher in a small town and had saved up for the holiday. She was travelling alone and nervous about almost everything. She extracted a few details from him about his family and quite a lot of information and advice about cruise ships. She was actually quite engaging, if a little overpowering, to talk to. She had obviously scoured rural Idaho for the right things to wear and her cream calf length skirt and white blouse looked quite attractive.

He was wondering how he was going to be able to escape when he noticed an amazingly beautiful woman walking across the deck towards them. She approached their little group and stopped just a few yards away and seemed to inspect them. Gradually they fell silent and were drawn into inspecting her. She was clearly used to this effect and her smile, although only just perceptible as such, made her perfect features yet more striking. Her skirt was just short enough and her heels just high enough to look stunningly attractive without losing any of her natural elegance. She clearly patronised the finest shops in Paris or New York.

The inspection finished, she took him by surprise and walked directly towards him. She looked briefly at the band below them and immediately asked, in a soft mid-Atlantic accent, if she could borrow his binoculars. The loading was finished so there was little to see. Velma was slowly recovering her poise and when the detailed scan of the band and the deserted sheds behind them was complete she was ready to go.

“Hello, I’m Velma from Idaho.”

“I’m Helen”. She replied and immediately turned to him.

“Have you been watching the band for long?”

“Oh yes. They’re great fun aren’t they?” Velma replied from behind her without waiting for him.

She turned more directly to him and returned the binoculars. “Thank you so much for letting me borrow them. You can see all the different things going on on the quay side can’t you?”

He was having trouble understanding what she was doing. Her conversation seemed almost childish but she did not appear to be simple in any way.

"I like to watch them getting these great ships ready for sea." He replied. She was making him feel somewhat uneasy.

"I like to watch too. I sometimes watch to see if I can see them loading my suitcase. I have a little red one which stands out so I can often spot it."

She looked straight at him with wonderful brown eyes watching for the slightest change in my expression as he worked out what she was looking for. He turned away instinctively and found himself looking at Velma who was standing conveniently against the rail beside her.

"I'm afraid I never really notice what they are loading or where it comes from." He said, trying to think of a way to change the subject. "I just take a quick look at the cases to see if they are about to finish. Then I like to watch them take in the gangway and the ropes."

Just as he was saying this one of the main lines that fanned out from the lower stern deck went slack and a man started lifting the loop on the end of it clear of a bollard. It was as thick as his arm and it took him some time to get it clear. He watched through the binoculars and offered them back to Helen just as the end of the rope fell into the water as the capstan on the ship drew it in.

She was not interested. She only had one question to ask.

"Did you see them load many of the suitcases? I'm worried about it. It hasn't arrived at my cabin yet."

"Oh I shouldn't worry about that." He replied. "They're very good. They always deliver the last ones quickly once we sail." He refrained from suggesting that she should go and check to see if it was there. Beauty or no beauty she was beginning to annoy him. "I really am afraid I just saw hundreds of cases on the trolleys and can't remember any of them or where they came from or went to. I didn't see mine but I'm sure that they are all on the ship ok."

"Do you have a video camera. The zoom on them is as powerful as binoculars isn't it."

He reached into the bottom of his bag and showed her his camera. It was not much to see, just the cheapest one he had been able find. He worked with stills and his other camera was a completely different matter but he saw no reason to make the conversation last any longer.

"Did you film anything?"

He reassured her that he did not film the baggage loading.

She turned to leave. Her composure was such that nothing she did could appear abrupt or rude but she left with a brief remark about seeing them again and was away through the doorway into the stair well remarkably quickly.

"What a strange woman". Velma remarked and immediately went up in his estimation for saying what she thought.

Once it had been said they all agreed.

The band's finale was accompanied by the rumble of the bow-thrusters as the ship moved away from the dock. He finally managed to get away from Velma and went forward to see it move out into the estuary. He looked back at the cathedral and could now see the whole city spread out below it, as if nothing had changed in hundreds of years and the church still had power over all the streets, houses and docks spread out along the shore.

[Paul's cabin was small with a single bed with a narrow space between it and an equally small wardrobe and desk. He was slightly disconcerted to notice that it was against the hull of the ship but had no porthole. It was too low down for that, possibly right below the water line. He was half way through unpacking his suitcase when there was a loud knock at the door. The man standing outside looked middle aged, but very fit with a full head of dark hair. He was immaculately dressed with a blue nautical blazer and a striped tie.

“Hello, I’m Harry, the other lecturer.” He said while reaching out to shake Paul’s hand with a firm grip.

Paul introduced himself while his visitor looked somewhat surprised at his old open-necked shirt.

Paul invited him in and he looked around eagerly at the cabin. “Where’s the other bunk.” He asked. “I expect your cabin-mate will have got in first and got that one and yours will fold out from somewhere.”

“It’s a single cabin.” Paul replied.

“How on earth did you get that? Only officers have single cabins. We humble lecturers are just sort of half passenger and half crew to them.”

“I said I wouldn’t come unless they gave me one. You get to an age when you don’t want to share one except with your family.”

“That’s quite an impressive start you’ve made.” He looked at Paul as if he was about to trust him with one of his closest secrets. “I see exactly what you mean. Steve, that’s the man I share with, he organises the tours or something, snores as loud as the ship’s horn.”] [move]

They were standing in the narrow space, the bed was covered in clothes and Paul’s suitcase and there was only one small chair. “Let’s go up and see if my on-board credit works at the bar. I’ll bring my lap-top and show you some of the stuff I’ve brought with me.” He suggested. He could see that Harry was enthusiastic about the bar, He wasn’t sure about the lap-top.

The ship had many bars and they walked right by a few of them as they made their way to Harry’s favourite. Paul trailed along slightly behind him as they struggled through the crowds of arriving passengers. Their progress was rather slow because Harry was never too busy to help a passenger. It was always “let me help you with that door madam.” or “let me show you which way to the pool deck madam” accompanied by a smile which brought a warm response.

Finally they reached his favourite bar which was in a small cafe area with a view out across the atrium. As Paul expected, the girl who was serving at the bar knew Harry. He introduced him and ordered the drinks. His was non-alcoholic. Paul could easily imagine the number of people who would offer him drinks and he could also imagine what would probably happen if they were alcoholic. They took a table near the balcony rail.

“In my lectures I do ships, all the galleys and that. I gather you do the temples.” Paul said. “I hope you haven’t been doing any ships to go with your temples so we don’t overlap.”

“I shouldn’t worry about that.” Harry replied. “Don’t take it too seriously. Just keep your audience with you. How many tours are you doing?”

Paul had set his lap-top on the table and switched it on. He showed him the start of one of his lectures. He stopped at a picture of a replica galley which had been built a few years before and was being rowed across an idyllic sandy bay.

“I never used that sort of thing on my undergraduates.” He said. “It was hopelessly badly built, completely the wrong shape, but it looks fun so I thought it would be ok here.”

Paul looked at Harry for a response but he looked back as if it was the strangest question he had ever heard. The drinks arrived and Paul enjoyed the taste of his cool beer for a moment before continuing.

“What sort of stuff do you use?” He asked.

Harry produced a memory stick and he showed him a sequence of pictures which must have come straight out of a travel brochure. Some of them didn’t even have any antiquities in them at all.

“How do you like the ship so far?” He asked, looking out across the inlaid marble floor below them. What do you think of the newest and biggest in the fleet?

Paul was happy to make small talk but wanted to ask one question and knew that it was now or never.

"It looks good to me. I think I'll have a really good month here. I only just retired and I need a good break after 40 years of Universities." He went right on and told him about the four different places where he had taught and a bit of the research he had done. "What about you?" He asked. "What's your background?"

This was what he wanted to know. How could he be a professor and be described as a world expert in the brochure when in 40 years of research and conferences he had never heard or seen his name.

Harry smiled. "Oh I never moved much. Kept out of the way a bit. You wouldn't have come across my place." And gave the name of a small University in Western Australia.

Paul replied quickly giving the names of several people he knew from it. He immediately regretted it. Harry looked at him shamefully.

"I expect you were there before them." He said. "None of them have been there more than a year or two. People move around so fast these days."

The routine of a cruise soon took over. First there the lifeboats drill. Summoned by seven short blasts on the ship's horn, all the passengers were required to gather in one of the lounges with their lifejackets where cruise staff were on hand to help them put them on. The captain read out his safety message over the public address system. Having been through this routine many times before, Paul had remembered to bring his book to read, but was distracted from it when the message got to the part about throwing a lifebelt if anybody fell overboard. Anybody with any sense knew that the chances of survival for someone falling, or being pushed overboard at sea were negligible. Even if you survived the impact with the water from 17 decks above it the ship moved so fast that any lifebelt that was thrown would be at least half a mile away and impossible to find. It would take the ship more than an hour to turn around and go back and launch boats to search for anybody. He returned to his book as the captain went on to warn against dropping cigarette ends over the side because they could be blown back into a lower deck.

Hearing the loud knock on his door again; Paul wondered if he would tire of the interruptions, but on this occasion he was slightly relieved.

"Sorry to interrupt again but I wondered where you were planning to eat?" Harry asked. "I guess you normally go on these ships with your family, must be a bit different on your own." He added, with a level of perception that Paul appreciated.

On the first night there was informal dining with no set times or tables.

"Let's head for the café up by the sun decks." Harry suggested. "It's likely to be a bit shambolic in the main dining room and if the maitre d' spots me he may send me to a table where I've got to explain to everybody how the system works."

"I thought you liked helping passengers. They certainly appreciate what you do for them." Paul replied.

"I like people." Harry replied simply. "But that doesn't go as far as liking being pressurised to help them when I'm supposed to be relaxing."

They took the lift up to the cafe, only encountering a few lost passengers on the way for Harry to help. Soon they were among the crowds of people loading their plates from the vast array of different buffet offerings. This was where many of the families with children chose to eat and they were relieved to find a table well out of the way near one of the doors through to a swimming pool.

Paul found it difficult to ask many questions without straying onto the subject of his career but he did find out that Harry lived alone but spent much of his time on various cruise ships.

"They're strange places." He observed pointing out a family with children who had just piled their plates up with food. "They'll only eat about half of it but they took it all because it's paid for. On the other hand, in the middle of all the greed, I've seen passengers go to enormous lengths to help other ones."

As soon as Paul stepped out from the air conditioning into the warm night air on promenade deck, he walked across to the rail to look down at the waves. The ship was now well clear of the land, running through a modest swell. The bow would rise almost imperceptibly and then drop into each successive wave throwing up a fine spray and white foam which flowed down the side of the ship glowing in the floodlights which shone down from above him.

The evening had passed quickly, mostly spent in the piano bar, where the pianist seem to have an almost inexhaustible repertoire of jokes to tell between the succession of popular tunes that he played.

Paul looked up to see the lifeboats. The real purpose of this deck was not to provide space for passengers to promenade; it was the lifeboat deck where they would get into the boats before being lowered into the water if they had to abandon ship. He could see the row shining white hulls of the boats with their silver-grey propellers stretching out along the full length of the deck interspersed with racks of inflatable rafts.

Starting to walk, he looked in through a window and saw the thinning crowds in the casino, playing the machines and gathered around the tables. Walking on towards the stern of the ship he stopped again to admire the lights of a port on a distant shore line. Turning to look back at the ship he saw Velma looking out at him through the window of a lounge. She looked up and, seeing him alone, came out to join him. Telling her that he had come out to walk did not discourage her. She would walk with him.

Soon they were looking over the stern rail. This was the one point where the noise was too great for reasonable conversation. The turbulence from the propellers boiled up to the surface about 20 feet behind the ship only to disappear rapidly into the darkness beyond. Velma was anxious to move away.

They walked on along the opposite side of the ship towards the bow. Velma had moved on to describing the show and confirmed his estimation that the rest of it would be as indifferent as the part he had seen.

Reaching the end of the line of lifeboats the deck narrowed for a bit passing some doors marked "crew only" and then, looking ahead, they saw that there was no further lighting.

Velma was cautious. "We can't go along there" she pronounced.

"Of course we can." He assured her. "It's quite ok. They can't put any lights because they would shine in through the windows of the navigation bridge above it. What harm could come to us anyway? There's a perfectly good rail all the way round."

He set off into the darkness with Velma following reluctantly behind. As their eyes began to adjust they could see enough to walk and could make out the shapes of a couple talking softly by the rail.

He stopped to admire the moon and its reflection in the sea. Its shifting image on the waves was precisely in line with the wire rope that came down from the mast head above them to the very front of the ship. When in port this wire would have been used for flags or strings of lights but now it was just a fine line in the darkness.

Velma was keen to move on. He tried to reassure her by pointing out the dim red night lights glowing behind the full-height glass windows on the front of the bridge above them. They could just see the angular shapes of the instrument cabinets and he reassured her that the officers of the watch would be able to see them quite clearly with their night-vision binoculars.

[Their eyes were now adjusting fully to the darkness. Directly below them he knew that there was a pool and recreation deck for the crew. At this time of night it was dark and deserted but he was sure that, even in daylight, careful design of the structure just below them ensured that it was shielded it from view from the

passengers. They could just see the deck beyond it and make out the shape of the enormous capstans for the anchor chains.]

He looked up at the sea again and was about to give in and escort Velma back to the lights when he saw a shape on the water. Instinctively he looked down at the rail in front of him and saw a small sharp bend in it which showed that he was standing at the exact centre of the ship.

As soon as he looked up he could see that it was a small boat. Its tiny low hull was outlined by the reflected moonlight for just a couple of seconds as it rose up on a wave. Moments later he saw it again. It was exactly in line with the wire rope which stretched down in front of them.

“Did you see it?” He asked Velma. “We’re headed straight at it.”

“Why doesn’t it get out of the way?”

“Perhaps it can’t. It’s only about a mile away so we’ll be on it in about three minutes.”

Velma moved quickly and decisively. She leaned down and removed her shoe and threw it up at the bridge window above them. Paul saw that she was either well practiced or lucky because it hit with a loud thud right in the middle of the glass before falling back onto the deck. A figure clad in white uniform quickly appeared behind the glass and looked down at them. Velma pointed vigorously and eventually the figure raised its binoculars and looked at the small boat before disappearing rapidly back out of sight.

Paul checked again and saw that the boat was now just off the line of the wire. But it was much closer.

They watched as the ship bore down on it. When it was about to disappear from sight under the bow he ran across to the side rail almost tripping over the couple who were now looking around having been startled by the noise of Velma’s shoe.

He looked down and saw the small boat being thrown violently outwards by the bow wave. It was an open fishing boat loaded up with nets and marker buoys. A terrified bearded face was looking up at him. At the back of the boat he saw a small outboard motor tipped up with the cover off and some tools flying off the thwart in front of it into the nets as the little vessel rolled in the wash.

He looked up. Two officers had appeared on the open wing of the bridge above him. “We could do nothing.” One of them shouted down in halting English. “He had no lights, no radar reflector, no radio, nothing. By the time we saw him it was much too late to turn. He was very lucky.”

His comrade was clearly uneasy about the idea of talking to passengers under such circumstances and ushered him back out of sight.

Retrieving Velma’s shoe they made their way back round into the light on the side deck. It was deserted except for one couple they could see about half way along near the door where they would go back in having completed their circuit of the ship. As they got closer he recognised one of them as Helen. They were leaning over the rail looking out and were in the middle of an animated conversation. He would have preferred to walk by and get back to his cabin but Velma went straight up to them.

Helen was dressed as attractively as before and her partner, who appeared to be of a similar age, had clearly made the same effort.

“Did you see the little boat?” Velma asked immediately. “We almost hit it.”

They had not.

“It was a little fishing boat.” He explained. “To see something go past at that speed you would need to be looking down at precisely the right moment.”

“What happened to it?” Helen asked with unexpected alarm.

“I think it survived. It got rocked about badly but I don’t think it went over. It was very lucky. If we’d hit it there would have been nothing left.”

“Why didn’t they see it on their radar and do something”. Helen asked very abruptly. Velma glanced at him in surprise at the tone of the question.

“Didn’t have a radar reflector.” He replied.

Velma quickly cut in and started introducing herself to Helen’s partner. He introduced himself as Karl. Helen looked at him with an alarmed expression and then suddenly, as she noticed that they were looking at her, it melted into a pleasant smile.

The first day of the cruise was at sea. Gathering up his book and binoculars Paul retired to a sun-lounger in the shade with a view over the back of the ship. Looking out at the waves he felt quite relaxed but had an annoying perception of being watched. He wondered if it was simply a deck steward who was more attentive than normal in his efforts to get him to sign for his next beer. On one occasion he was almost sure that he saw Carl watching him from the opposite side of the open arena which was formed by the curve of several decks at the back of the ship.

During the afternoon the wind increased and with it the sea conditions worsened. [The ship did not roll. The stabilisers were deployed like moveable wings below the water to prevent roll in the waves and any tendency to heel over sideways as the wind caught the enormous superstructure was corrected by moving water in the ballast tanks. But there was nothing that could be done to prevent the bow from rising and falling in the waves.] This was scarcely noticeable in Paul’s cabin near the centre of the ship but in the dining room, which was located at the stern, it would be quite severe.

The passengers divided into three categories: Those that did not get seasick, those that disappeared into their cabins to suffer and those that joined the queue which stretched out of the door and up the stairs from the medical centre. The doctor had a well practiced system in operation. In return for signing a set of documents which included an all-encompassing disclaimer for all responsibility, and a payment of a substantial fee from the cabin account, he provided injections which were so powerful that the patient would feel no ill-effect from the motion for at least a week.

Paul departed for an evening swim. As he had hoped, the crew had not yet put the safety nets across the pools. The combination of the current from the water-jet and the large waves caused by the movement of the ship made the pool the perfect place to take exercise before the formal night to come; and also made it conveniently empty of other passengers.

The ladies in their high-heels held onto the handrails and the men in their bow-ties pretended to be completely unaffected, as they all swayed past the Maitre d’ who stood by his computer screen trying to look worthy of the large tips he hoped to collect. Helen and Carl had appeared from nowhere as Paul had descended the stairs and were just a few paces behind him. While he went straight into the dining-room towards his allocated table, he noticed that they stopped at the desk.

Minutes later they joined him at his table.

“I hope you don’t mind. We enjoyed our conversation so much yesterday we asked if we could join you.”

Helen’s remark sounded so contrived Paul was virtually unable to think of a reply. He mumbled something about how nice it was. This was genuinely true. They seemed an interesting couple to have as company at dinner each day.

Next to join them was Velma, who came cautiously across the room looking decidedly unsteady greeted him with a warm smile and a look of slight confusion.

“They seem to be in a bit of a mess over there.” She observed. “They said that there wasn’t any space at the table I was supposed to be at and sent me over here.”

Helen observed how surprised and delighted she was. Paul wondered if she had arranged it and he waited to see who would arrive for the last two empty places.

They were not long in coming. He strode across the dining room with his neatly trimmed moustache and white dinner jacket looking every inch the retired

naval officer that he turned out to be. His wife followed behind in a shimmering blue dress looking equally unconcerned by the moving floor beneath her.

Introductions followed and they were soon well into asking everybody whether they had cruised before. They could feel themselves falling slowly as the bow rose up on a wave and they would then rise up again and feel a slight shudder as it went down into the next wave. This was a good conversation starter.

Soon the dining steward, his assistant and the wine steward all arrived to tell them what country they came from and try to seem attentive enough to get the tips they hoped for. By the time the first course was served, Paul had started to find out about his fellow diners. He tried to resist the temptation to base his opinions on where they lived or what job they did but, when he heard Helen say that she was a sales executive, he couldn't help feeling that it fitted his perception.

She seemed keen to talk to him and her art of conversation seemed superb [dialog]. She showed enormous interest in everything he said, following any remark with a perceptive question. She seemed wonderfully keen to know everything about him take an interest in everything that interested him. He watched the contents of his third glass of wine gently flow back and forth to each side of the glass and eventually realised that this was not just conversation – she was really trying to find things out. He reasoned that telling her as much as possible about his background and views should soon make her realise that he had no interest in what she carried on and off the ship. He just hoped that when she did realise it, she would not use her powers of persuasion on the Maitre d' once again and move to another table.

She moved the conversation on. Although he doubted her motives he could not doubt her skill. Soon she had the whole table joining in. Carl was smiling engagingly at everybody but Helen was leading the show. Even the retired sea Captain and his wife looked as if they are enjoying themselves. They started talking politics.[tension]

"I'm a bit of a radical liberal." Paul said. "Stop all arms exports and legalise all drugs and that kind of things."

"You mean legalise all of them?" Helen focussed entirely on him.

"Yes – just scrap all the laws. Put the dealers out of business. Make lots of money by taxing them and let adult people make adult decisions about what they want to eat, smoke and drink."

"So you don't think that there is anything wrong with drugs?" She was fishing for a response but Paul didn't want to say anything that wasn't plausible.

"What do you mean by wrong?"

"Something that should be stopped." She was getting very direct.

"I vote for a government to make laws, and as far as I am concerned they should be obeyed unless there is an exceptionally good reason why not. On the other hand I would probably vote for any political party that said that it would legalise them." The ship hit a particularly big wave and propellers below them shuddered so much that the cutlery rattled. By the time it stopped he had decided that he had overstated his case and tried to water it down. "We're a long way away from my home just now and all the law we have here at sea is a set of international treaties which impose the will of rich nations onto poor ones. I don't agree with them at all."

This seemed to satisfy her and she let the subject drop. There was no doubt that this had been far too much serious conversation for their first dinner and Karl conveniently supplied an unending stream of stories about his house and car. Paul was disappointed to see that he took it all very seriously and wondered what Helen could see in him. The sea captain said little. Paul had little doubt that his house and car were far superior to Karl's but he managed to look politely impressed as the descriptions were produced.

The sea was getting rougher.

"Will they have to take the stabilisers in if it gets much worse?" Paul asked the captain.

He assured him that they would not. He was sure that, unlike the older ones, the ship could keep them out in any sea. He had a very reassuring manner and so when he told a couple of highly amusing stories of ships he had been on in storms he was able to convince everybody that nothing at all untoward could ever happen to one which was as large and modern as the one they were on.

By this time they could hear the storm. In the gusts they could hear the wind howling past the stern of the ship. The dining room was on one of the lowest passenger decks and every couple of minutes they heard the splash of spray against the windows. But inside, the sorbet was served without missing a beat.

It may have been the effect of having been seated for a long time, or possibly the wine, but, when the meal ended, nobody except the captain and his wife was very steady. They made our way from table to table stopping at each one for support. Paul found himself standing next to Helen in the foyer before the others had arrived.

“Thanks for not mentioning me and Velma.” He said.

She looked puzzled.

“About last night when you saw that we had been together.”

“You mean you could have been in trouble?”

“It could have made life a bit difficult for me.” He said quickly before the others arrived. “We’re not supposed to get too involved with the passengers if you see what I mean”. It seemed a simple way to make her quite sure that he would never tell anybody about her suitcase.

Somewhat to his relief, she and Karl decided not to join them when he went with Velma to see the show. As they moved towards the centre of the ship there was less motion and they soon regained their balance. The theatre was in the bow, but by the time they arrived they were steady enough to find some seats without too much difficulty.

This time the show was good. They had a singer and a comedian who had joined the ship at the last port. They would only stay for a couple of days and do just the one show before moving on to another ship so they could put everything they had into the one performance. The theatre was packed with almost a thousand people and a few good jokes about the storm soon got the show started.

As it finished, Velma asked if he would be walking around promenade deck. This was a good question. He suggested that they should take a look out on the sheltered side and see what it was like.

The storm was magnificent. The wind swirled around the ship so they were not fully protected but it was calm enough to go over to the rail and look at the waves in the moonlight. Looking forward they could see them breaking against the bow, throwing up clouds of spray which was carried away by the wind. They moved towards the stern.

As they rose up on a wave they could see the wash from the two propellers breaking out to the surface cleanly to each side, but when they went down again there was almost clear water below them. They moved on round to the windward side and ventured cautiously out into the gusts. It was blowing Velma’s hair out behind her but she seemed to find it as refreshing as Paul did, so they moved forward into it.

They reached as far as the doorway into the first stair well when spray from a large wave came streaming down the deck. They dodged back towards the door but it would not open. The pressure of the wind was so high that even when they both pulled as hard as they could the heavy glass door would not let them through. They decided to wait for a few minutes in the shelter beside one of the varnished wooden cabinets with lifejackets in them, rather than risk getting their evening clothes covered in salt. The noise of the wind and the waves made conversation difficult so they stood and watched the storm. Between gusts there was a brief moment of calm and in one of these they heard voices shouting.

“They can’t go out in that.” It was a man’s voice and they recognised it as Karl.

“Don’t be stupid. It’ll be calm by tomorrow. Why did we have to come out here and look? I’m getting soaked.” Helen replied.

With this they appeared, running around from behind the next cabinet.

They looked shocked to see Paul and Velma, but Karl wasted no time in grabbing the door handle. With one pull he had it open and they all struggled through and pushed as hard as they could to hold it while he followed. The heavy closer stopped it slamming and, when it was shut, they went on in through the inner doors onto the stair landing.

“Thanks for that. We might have got a bit wet going back round. Quite fresh out there wasn’t it.” Paul said cheerfully.

He looked at Helen. She was not quite soaked but the salt water did not look as if it would do her evening dress much good. Nevertheless she glanced at Velma and back to him and gave a quick but knowing smile.

At lunch time the following day Paul and Harry surveyed the buffet. The officer’s dining room was fitted out in the same non-descript luxury as the passenger areas. The fine mahogany legs of the table showed beneath the perfect white table cloth but somehow left the impression that, if the cloth was removed, it would reveal a plastic table top.

They moved forward to meet the officers. They all wore similar immaculate white uniforms but there the similarity ended. The two groups were completely different. The idea of recruiting people who could both operate ships and also deal with passengers had long since been abandoned. Having seen them all being introduced in the show, he knew which group was which but even without that it would have been obvious. The ship’s officers were mainly engineers and officers of the watch and were talking quietly among themselves. The doctor seemed to attach himself to their group as well. The purser and his assistants who operated the hotel function were a far more lively group. The head of entertainment had a fixed smile and looked as if he was totally unable to shake off his stage persona and might burst into song at any moment.

The captain stood appropriately between the two groups and came forward to welcome them as soon as they walked in.

“I am captain Costas” he announced, in an accent with only a faint hint of a Greek mother tongue. “I am so glad you have been able to join us.”

Paul had to assume that this meant to join the cruise since his invitation to this meeting had made clear that it was mandatory. He replied with a few compliments about the ship.

“Yes it is by far the finest ship I have ever had the honour to be master of.” He replied, ending his sentence in a way that almost made one think that he was going to go ahead and admit what the websites were saying about it also being one of the least profitable.

“The facilities for our lectures are the best I have ever seen.” Paul replied. “I am sure that the audience will be impressed.” This time it was his turn to wonder if he should continue and say how many of them would hopefully go ahead and book on some of the highly profitable tours.

“If there is anything else you need please make sure you let the entertainment manager know and we shall do our best to get it.”

The conversation moved on. He seemed genuinely interested when Paul told him that his lectures would be about ships and he thought that the man might even turn up to listen to one.

Velma led the way to a table by a window. It was early evening but dark outside and flecks of foam on the top of the waves could be seen reflected in the moonlight and, even at this height, occasionally rattling against the glass.

As soon as they had sat down and ordered drinks she asked Harry about their port of call for the following day.

"There's one really good tour there, up to the church of St. Anthony on the top of the hill." He replied. "I went once and it was really beautiful. It was well worth the cost of the tour. Make sure you go early. Best to get up there before it gets too hot."

"I'm afraid I can't set off until later," Velma said. She looked around the group apologetically. "I go to church on a Sunday morning and shall be in the chapel here on the ship. Will that really be too much of a problem?"

"It's a church you're going to." Harry replied. "They run lots of services, why not go to one of them."

"But what sort of a service would it be?"

"Greek Orthodox I presume or something like that. Lots of incense and fancy robes. Should be really good. Shame there won't be room in the taxi or I might join you."

"No. I'm sorry but it's not my type of service. I am a protestant and don't believe in that sort of thing."

"I'd go with you." Helen said. "There's only one God and he'd be there. I find things like incense help me to get closer to my God."

"And the rest." Karl added, reaching for the drink that had appeared on the table in front of him. "And quite a few things a bit stronger than incense."

"What's wrong with that?" Paul asked. "We are only human and any one of us may want to choose any help we can get to search for truth." He paused and then added. "Sorry – this is getting a bit complicated. I don't suppose you're interested in my theories on religion."

"Why not?" Karl replied. "Much more interesting than discussing the weather, or whatever people normally talk about on ships like this."

"What are your theories on religion?" Harry asked.

"Don't believe a word of it." Paul replied. "Complete fiction. Useful at times, but no basis in fact. I'd go to the service but inside I'd just be a spectator. What about you?"

Harry paused for a second and Velma replied. "Perhaps he doesn't want to say. Religion can be a very private thing. As you said, it's a personal search for the truth. I can respect your position. Not to say that I might not try to make you change your mind but I shall complain if you don't respect other people."

"I believe in Jesus." Karl said turning to Velma. "I go to church at home and I'd go to either service with you."

"The reason I hesitated." Harry replied at last. "Was not that I mind talking about my beliefs. It's just that they are a bit complex. I believe in a God and I am sure that you would find the same one on the ship and in the church but I think there may be others as well." He paused and looked out at the storm. "I am sure that there is a God and when you sing hymns about him protecting sailors from the storm you may be right. But I don't think that there were many hymns that talked about him sending greed and war."

"This is an interesting place to talk about greed." Helen replied. "Does God approve of this ship which goes into ports so poor people can have a little bit of our loose change? The strangest thing is the chapel. I looked in there. I can see why Velma likes it – it's lovely. But it worries me that the cruise line only put it there so they can make a fortune out of weddings when ridiculously rich people pay to bring lots of guests on a cruise and come to the ceremony".

"They do make a lot from wedding parties." Harry agreed. "We never quite know which ones have been paid for by the hosts and which ones have asked the guests to pay for their own tickets. But it has resulted in a fine chapel."

"I always find it strange the way we use religion to deal with problems." Helen said. "If we are doing something and we don't know how to justify it we bring in religion to make it ok."

"What, you mean like terrorism and war?" Harry agreed. "Call it a holy crusade or jihad and go ahead."

"I was actually thinking about the way they have set up the chapel. None of the bland over-designed feel of these lounges. Plenty of colour and purpose. But you can use religion for anything. It could have been war."

"I thought religion was about death." Paul observed as spray from a particularly large wave splashed up, covering the windows. "That's a problem we can't solve and they insist on having a solution so they invent God and say he's solved it so they don't have to worry about it. Why can't they just accept that it isn't a problem that needs to be solved?"

Harry avoided the question. "Now you're mixing up God and religion. I think that when any God looks down on our religions they would be horrified if not amused. As for the churches and others that run the religions, they're even worse. All they are is a system to control the people and support their own bureaucrats."

Velma leaned forward to get their attention. "That's often true but not always. You hear too much about the leaders of churches and religions and not enough about the grass roots. Churches in communities can provide a moral compass. OK, sometimes the compass points the wrong way, but normally it's good because normally they listen to God."

"And they do a vast amount of charity work." Karl added. "And build some incredible buildings. But you are right not to mix up God and religion. People can relate to God without the need for religions. A religion is a prop to help us do something we should be able to do ourselves; and I don't think that you have to become a hermit and spend all your time just trying to listen to something." He paused to look round at his audience before continuing. "If God had wanted us to sit around and do nothing all day he wouldn't have given us legs. God has given us the ability to do things, to go places and build great ships like this one. And he has given some people more ability than others and we would be wasting his gifts if we did not use them. Stronger people must believe in their own moral compass to lead mankind forward and do new things so others can follow."

Paul saw Helen smiling at him. He had often wondered what she saw in him and this appeared to be it.

"Don't you think that's a bit risky?" Harry asked. "Don't you think that there might be a bad God or devil out there somewhere pointing compasses the wrong way?"

"That's a bit old fashioned isn't it? I don't think they teach devils at Sunday school any more do they?" Helen asked, looking at Velma.

"I don't teach Sunday school very often but I don't remember many devils." She agreed.

"Perhaps you should." Harry suggested. "The kids would have great fun drawing the pointy tails and it would give you a chance to explain why God is so good but the world never got there. In fact it went the wrong way most of the time. You need a new image. Kids aren't scared by the image of hell fire any more because none of them have ever been burnt by an open fire, and if they ever burn their finger on a hot dish there's always something to take the pain away. Perhaps you should describe hell as a place with no food."

"That would be better." Karl agreed, helping himself to a nut from the glass bowl on the table which the steward had just replenished. "And then you could go on

to explain that when people work together and work hard they can have plenty of food but if they mess up they starve and have to go begging from somebody else.”

“I’m not sure I’d go for that.” Velma replied. “Plenty of people go hungry without any chance to help themselves and if rich people don’t help them they starve.”

“That’s the trouble with religions.” Paul agreed. “They are governed by a load of books which are very old and long and complicated so you can read anything you want into them. So somebody can say that God helps those who help themselves and nobody can prove them wrong because, until they die, nobody finds out whether there are any pearly gates and what happens at them.”

Velma looked back at him. “You do think that religion is all about death, don’t you?”

Paul agreed.

“But it’s not.” She went on. “It’s all about life. Our reward is in the here and now not just when we die. If we have faith we are rewarded.”

“What about the ones who have faith but aren’t rewarded? The ones who carry on starving or get shot or something.” Harry asked.

“God is a mystery.” She conceded. “His ways are often difficult to understand.”

“If a man is fighting for a good cause and he dies for it then it is a glorious death and God will reward him.” Helen added. She looked a bit glazed and Paul wondered what else she had enjoyed apart from what had been in her now empty glass so he didn’t remind her that she had taken the argument back to death. He had often heard it done before by perfectly sober people.

[The steward took the order for another round of drinks and Velma soon agreed to risk the service at the church on the hill.]

Paul was up on deck early to see the ship dock but he was disappointed. He saw the town in the distance but as they came into the port it was out of sight on the far side of a headland. The harbour was commercial with a collection of rusting coasters and ferries moored to concrete wharves. With little to see he went down to the dining room for a full breakfast while the ship was moored up and cleared for customs.

Meeting the others outside the purser’s office they were able to disembark quickly without having to go down to the lowest decks because the jetty had a passenger terminal with link bridges at high level. They found themselves in a large hall with a collection of stalls selling souvenirs and duty-free drinks and cigarettes.

The drinks were far cheaper than on the ship but nobody was buying them because they knew that they would not be allowed to take them back to their cabins.

At the far end of the hall there was a customs barrier. There was little queuing. The officers were scarcely glancing at the passengers and their cards as they walked by. Beyond the barrier an escalator took them down to the entrance out to the car park. Even this early in the day the heat from the sun was intense and they had to walk past the line of thirty tour coaches to reach the taxi rank. They noticed that some passengers who had set out to walk were being sold tour tickets as they went by. Several small groups were gathered around cruise staff with their distinctive pads of tickets for signing.

Karl ignored them and strode out in front with Helen trying to keep up behind him. As soon as he reached the first taxi he asked the driver how much it would be to take them to the church, wait with them, and bring them back in time for lunch. As soon as the price was given he accepted it.

Other drivers had gathered round. With the hard selling of the tours and the long walk even with the size of the ship customers were scarce. Soon they were offering lower prices. He ignored them. “I have made my deal.” He announced. “And I never go back on a deal.”

One of the drivers was standing in the way trying to persuade Velma to listen to him. Karl moved quickly and the man turned and ran and he saw him pass his shoulder bag to Helen and push through the crowd.

"He's right." Helen remarked as they drove away. "He never goes back on a deal. Particularly in our line of business people must know who to trust and they trust him." Her honesty made Paul uncomfortable. He wondered what would happen to him if they were stopped and [drugs] were found in the shoulder bag. Perhaps he had persuaded Velma to take a bad risk.

The docks seemed to go on for miles with warehouses and stacks of containers but eventually they reached a gate where a sleepy looking security guard raised a barrier to let them out. Paul felt relieved that they were out and found himself quickly glancing in the mirrors to see if they were being followed.

They were soon clear of the small cluster of houses and cafes around the dock gates and out into the countryside. The road took them around the headland and up behind the town into the hills beyond and they were looking down across the bay and could see the upper decks of the ship partly concealed by the trees which grew between rocky outcrops. They drove on up [the hills] until they pulled into a large dusty car park and their driver, keen to show that he was earning his generous fare and a tip with it, was quickly out and opening the doors for them. He took them over to the [chapel]. Standing outside the door they looked back and saw the sea glistening blue in the sun. From this height they could see the ship quite clearly and saw that a second one like it had come in opposite it. Paul thought of the other taxi drivers waiting in the sun and wondered if they would have any work yet. The driver opened the door and they went inside.

The interior was dark with small shafts of sunlight coming in through high windows. He was just about to get his guidebook out to look for the descriptions of the frescos when he saw Helen walk up to the altar and bow her head briefly and move to a pew to one side. Velma followed. She did not bow but went quietly to the pew by Helen. Karl marched up looking almost as if he would salute but then stood in front of the altar for some time as if examining every detail. He then nodded his head forwards by an almost imperceptible amount before going to the pew. Paul did not follow. They knew that he did not believe in [God]. He sat in a pew at the back and looked round at the driver by the door and, after what he thought was a decent interval, went over to him. They stepped outside and he asked if there was a priest and whether there would be a service. He wasn't sure if the man understood all of what he was asking but to his relief the answer seemed to be yes. Velma would get her church service.

They went over to a small cottage in the trees behind the church and the driver knocked loudly on the door. Paul had been expecting an old man who would have to rely on the driver for translation but, to his surprise, a young man appeared who, after a few brief words with him, addressed Paul in perfect English.

"I do a special service for the visitors." He said. "I do most of it in English but one or two come up from the village because we normally get a good crowd and they like the hymns." Paul knew that he would enjoy it. In a way he felt that he was the absolute opposite of Harry. He did not believe in God but he liked the church and there was nothing he liked more than to see somebody run a good show.

They had time to walk around the churchyard and look at the gravestones before the service began. There were some inscriptions in English. Two graves side by side were of a captain and a sergeant of the Irish Guards and were dated in the 19th century. Paul always wondered if there could be anywhere on earth where British people had not gone to die and leave their memorials behind for future generations.

When the priest reappeared from his cottage he was wearing a heavy robe which was completely covered with intricate embroidery in red and gold thread. He walked at a dignified but steady pace into the relative cool of the church pausing only

to reassure a young couple that they were welcome to attend his service and that the dress-code was very relaxed. The simple church had no vestry so when Paul went in the priest was seated by the altar welcoming his congregation.

"You should come and sit with us". Velma whispered. "I shan't complain if you don't join in with the prayers."

He had contemplated making excuses and missing the service altogether but since he had already spoken to the priest about it he realised that that would have been completely wrong. As he joined them in the pew he looked around at the rest of the congregation as they drifted in and wondered how many of them actually believed in God. Some of them looked as if they had just come in for somewhere cool to sit down. He hoped that they would not walk out part way through. Opposite them on the other side at the front there was a small group of local people. The men wore waistcoats that looked old but well cared for and the women wore long skirts and covered their heads with white shawls. Cynically he wondered if they came to give the place an authentic look and keep the tourists coming.

Velma looked pleased. The priest had welcomed her in good English and she felt quite relaxed. It had been right to venture out from the chapel on the ship and she would be able to share her worship with these people.

The priest started the service and they stood up to sing the first psalm. It was unfamiliar to most of them but it was at least in English so they did their best. They were just struggling with the third verse when they heard a strong clear voice leading them from near the back of the church. Paul turned to see a second man in clerical robes entering. He was carrying a large bowl of incense which quickly filled the air [with?] as he placed it on the altar with a magnificent flourish. Having done this he took his place to one side while continuing to lead the singing. Paul was impressed. This was the entrance priest would normally have made but he had come in early because he spoke English and had left the other part to his assistant who had probably been tending goats a few minutes before.

The service moved on and he began to feel that he was being drawn into it. He was not worshiping God but he was becoming part of the communion of people around him. When there were prayers he took time to think about what was being said. There was a lot of truth in it and it helped him to think about who he was and what he was doing with his life. The precise purpose of repeating the same words day after day was a bit obscure but that was for others to worry about.

Behind the altar there was a painted wooden screen. It looked old and he started to wonder what it was supposed to show. He was sure that it must have a purpose. Churches weren't decorated just to make them look nice, they were supposed to convey a message. There were pictures of people with halos so these were presumably saints. They were supposed to be examples for others to follow. They would be people who lived their lives helping others and doing good. The message seemed right to him. You don't need God to believe in morality. Then he saw that one of them was carrying a sword. St George may have made his name by killing dragons but there weren't many dragons about and most swords were used for killing people. He thought of the graves outside. Had the men been blessed by a priest in this church before they went into battle? Perhaps it was their killers who had been blessed by the priest.

He looked again and saw a devil looking down from a corner of the screen. His face was black, perhaps it had been red once and needed restoration or perhaps they were normally black when the screen was painted. He thought about Harry and his devils. The logic was compelling. Blame everything bad on the devil and then enjoy yourself and forget about it. Harry might complain about other people using religion as a prop but he used the devil.

The sermon was about forgiveness. He was impressed. It would have been so easy to talk about charity to all the rich tourists and then give them a hard sell to try to get them to part with some money. Forgiveness was a good topic. Not much

of it about in the modern world. The problem was that he kept referring to his text in the bible and it was so obvious that he was trying to give the words meaning that the writer had never intended. It would have been so much more convincing if he had taken it as obvious that forgiveness was a good thing and moved on to discuss the practicalities.

He found himself reciting the Lord's prayer with everybody else but then stopped quickly when he saw Velma looking at him. He enjoyed her company but that would soon end if she thought she could persuade him to believe in God.

The ship moved through the narrow channel between the boats. Most of them were sailing yachts but every other type was represented ranging from sleek racing craft with enormous outboard motors to wooden fishing vessels. They spread out from the edge of the channel all the way back to the shore filling all the bays and creeks which extended outwards from the estuary. Each one was only just far enough from its neighbours to remain clear when they swung on the tide. In the warm light of the rising sun they made a magnificent sight set against the barren hills behind them.

A few of them had dinghies trailing behind them showing the owners were on board. They would emerge from the tiny cabins and look up at the vast structure of the ship towering over them as it went by. It had slowed to what seemed just a crawl relative to its speed in the open sea but its wash would still be enough to send the kettle on their gas stove flying across the cabin as they brewed an early coffee, so they soon disappeared back inside.

One lone yachtsman in a tiny dinghy rowed hastily clear of the channel ahead of the ship. Had he not seen it, or been unable to get clear, there would have been nothing anybody could do to save him even at this speed. Running the engines hard astern to stop suddenly would inevitably cause enormous damage to the boats passing close alongside.

Paul was standing in a small viewing area just above the bridge. Below the big panoramic windows, small viewing ports let me look down at the anxious officers as they navigated the ship into the port. The thick glass made their voices inaudible but it was clear that the captain was giving brief tense instructions to the two other officers commanding the instrument panels. As well as providing this facility for passengers to view the bridge the German designers of the ship had thoughtfully installed repeater screens of the main navigation displays. As each course adjustment was made he could see the computer projection of where the ship was expected to travel. Different screens showed the current and projected course superimposed on maps and radar images. The instrumentation was impressive but it had to be when mistakes could so easily crush the tiny boats around them.

Only one other passenger of the thousands on board had come to this vantage point to watch the ship manoeuvre along the channel. It had only been noted in a small paragraph at the end on an information sheet and the directions given gave little indication about how to find it. Only the very interested would find the small opening behind the stage in one of the lounges and he wondered if the ship owners were not very sure that they liked having it at all. He could see quite a crowd gathered to watch from the deck below but watching the working of the ship was clearly not a popular interest. His companion was a man who seemed to be of similar age. They briefly discussed the details of the images on the screens and what a fine facility they were.

Ahead he could see the city walls on the hillside and below them the dock and enormous marinas where the wealthier yachtsmen kept their luxurious vessels on moorings that would be more convenient but vastly more expensive. The industrial quantities of solid white superstructures with just the occasional mast made a jarring contrast to the swinging moorings.

By the time they had finished breakfast the ship was moored up and customs had cleared it for disembarkation. Soon he was in the queue for a tour bus. The customs inspection of the bags had seemed quite cursory but they had been through the usual x-ray machines so he assumed that whatever Helen and Karl had taken onto the ship could not have been taken off. In the distance he saw them in animated discussion with one of the cruise staff and was slightly surprised to see that they then hurried across and joined him on his coach.

They set off through the city and out towards the farmland beyond. Knowing that he would probably find the view from the coach more interesting than the destination he looked out at small villages that they passed through. They had clearly been very [poor] when they lived by subsistence farming on the [poor] dry soil. Now small clusters of new houses showed the wealth brought in by the tourist industry. He wondered if Helen and Karl's [package] was destined to come here and be paid for by some of that wealth.

The tour had three stops at which they were expected to take photos of some quite attractive small towns and, of course, buy from the shops outside which the coach stopped.

They returned to the ship for lunch and then he set off alone to explore the city.

The dockyard, which had seemed compact from the coach was actually quite large. Even walking the length of the ship in the intense heat of the day was quite exhausting and when he finally reached the dock gate he was relieved to go through past the security post into the shaded streets beyond. His efforts were, however, well rewarded and he found a fascinating maze of narrow streets and alleys connecting beautiful squares dominated by ancient churches and the cathedral. He explored it for much of the afternoon before finally stopping at a small cafe near the citadel at the highest point on the hill on which the city had been built. Looking down across the square he could see the ship in the distance glistening in the sunlight and the river stretching out beyond it. He ordered a beer and enjoyed the view and even tried to make sense of the ridiculously simplified city map that he had been given. He was on his second beer and feeling almost set for the walk back when he looked up and saw Karl looking at him from the far side of the square. Rather than waving or even coming over to join him, he seemed to duck quickly back out of sight.

Pretending not to notice he looked down immediately and studied the map again. If he left the square down the street behind me he could get down to the far end of the marina and walk back to the ship along the shore. On the map the area he would walk through was entirely devoid of the little stylised pictures that marked the tourist attractions and the middle portion was obscured by portrait of an unlikely looking young lady in local costume but the roads appeared to go through it. He waved his hand across my face as if irritated by a flying insect and used this as a pretext to look up very quickly. Karl was there again, ducking down as he looked up. Once again he pretended not to notice and continued looking at the map and finishing his drink.

He left the cafe quickly but trying not appear to hurry and turned immediately down the street that ran alongside it and took him directly away from Karl. Assuming that he would take a couple of minutes to walk across the square he continued straight down the street aiming for a turning a hundred yards down. Just as he reached it he heard running behind him and looked back to see Karl appear. Passers by were looking up and the sound of Paul's shoes on the paving slabs echoed off the buildings. He went quickly into the side street and, seeing an alleyway opening up a few yards ahead, ducked into it.

Looking ahead he thought for a moment that it was a dead end but soon saw that it turned sharply and, following it around, he found that it turned again and again, sometimes sloping down the hill, sometimes level and sometimes going down steep steps. It also had frequent junctions with other similar alleyways and very soon he

turned and then turned again. As he moved down the hill and away from the citadel the houses around him became poorer. The flowering wisterias which had decorated the balconies of the rich houses on the other side gave way to garish looking clothing hung out on lines that crossed back and forth above him sometimes almost completely blocking his way. Surprised faces looked out at him in his tourist clothing as he hurried by. The smell of rotting rubbish grew progressively.

Suddenly he emerged into a square. Here the shops were full of cheap electrical goods and faded bottles of cleaning chemicals. Crowds of locals hung around outside dingy looking cafes sitting on the kerbs with bottles of beer. Looking behind as he rushed into the next street he was horrified to see Karl [rushing] into the square. All pretence at being an innocent tourist was now gone. He was angrily pushing people out of the way as he ran into the crowd and searched to each side.

[Ducking] into the next alley Paul was entering the area on the map over which the artist had placed the picture of the young lady and he could immediately see why. Red lights glowed from windows and ladies in various stages of undress stood in groups at every corner virtually blocking his way. Running towards the first one he squeezed past as quickly as he could. His apologies were met with hoots of raucous laughter as he rushed on. He was just at the next corner when a great shout went up behind him. From the corner of my eye he could see that Karl had arrived. With his stunning looks and designer clothes they were not going to let him pass without a struggle.

This gave Paul a chance to [duck] into an open doorway. The girls in the house seemed to know what was needed and gathered in front of him so when Karl came running past he was hidden from view. Karl seemed to be reaching inside his jacket for something and Paul immediately thought of a knife or a gun. Karl went on past but Paul stayed where he was and, as expected, Karl soon came back, looking more carefully this time. The girls obliged by calling to him and some ran out around him and eventually he moved on, passing one more time as he went off down the hill to look for Paul.

Leaving his hosts with a generous payment he set off back up the hill and made his way back to the ship. Walking through the crowded streets of the tourist area he felt reasonably safe and took time to consider what would happen next. He realised that Karl could not have taken a gun or knife through the metal detectors on the ship and would have found it very difficult to buy one. It occurred to him that Karl might even possibly have followed him for a very innocent reason to help him as he strayed into the rough part of town.

He walked slowly past the spectacular facade of a church illuminated by the setting sun. If Karl thought that he was going to tell the police about what he had seen at embarkation he would surely expect him to have contacted them already. If Karl had wanted to kill him he could have quite probably thrown him over the side [of...] without being seen. Disappearances from cruise ships are not uncommon and they are assumed lost over the side. But Helen always followed him on the ship. Was she trying to keep Karl under control?

The pool bar was quiet. First sitting for dinner was already in progress and almost everybody from second sitting was in their cabins getting ready for it. Paul had been [sitting] alone at a table in a quiet corner for 10 minutes when Velma arrived. He had brought a book with him but had been unable to concentrate on it.

"What do you think of Karl?" He asked as soon as the steward had taken the order for her drink.

"He's very good looking." She replied smiling.[but drugs evil]

"No, seriously. Do you think that he's a good person or a bad one?"

"That's a very odd way to look at people. They come in shades of grey you know. I don't know anybody, myself included, who is all good or all bad."

"I thought you Christians saw it as good and bad or even good and evil." He replied. "Saved or not saved. To be trusted or to be avoided."

"I thought that you were the one who said that you didn't mind if he was a drug dealer. He says that he is a Christian and I admit that it doesn't seem to fit that well but I thought that since nobody else wanted to complain about it I wouldn't either. Why do you suddenly want me to make a judgement on it rather than just to sit here and enjoy the sunset. Do you like my dress, I bought them all [it] specially for the cruise."

He glanced out over the rail at the sunset. There was no land to be seen with just one ship silhouetted on the horizon [with the light behind it.] He looked back at her dress. He hadn't noticed it when she had arrived. It was very attractive.

He apologised and while the steward brought her drink he tried to take his mind off the afternoon's events but then she asked what he had done since she had seen him at lunch.

"I walked up into the town." He replied, and then added. "And I saw Karl."

"What did you do when you saw Karl?" She asked, now slightly curious.

"I ran away." He replied, and then went on to describe the whole incident.

She listened intently and laughed when she heard how he had hidden but when he finished she did look concerned.

"I see why you're so worried about it." She replied. "I guess you're right. He could just have been trying to help you but he could have been after you."

"I thought about going to the police or the security people on the ship but I can't prove anything. He's very clever so I doubt they would find anything even if they searched his cabin. I even thought about just getting a taxi to the airport and taking a flight home. Calling the ship to say I had decided I didn't like the job. If I got tied up in a police investigation it wouldn't be any fun staying on board. The trouble is that I don't think he trusts anybody. I don't suppose you can when you do what he does so it is easy to see why he doesn't trust me."

"Why don't you talk to him?" She suggested. "Try to convince him that you don't care what he does."

"I have tried to make that clear to both of them and they seem ok when I do talk to them but they're hardly going to tell me if they want to get rid of me."

They watched in silence as the sun disappeared below the horizon.

"I don't think he is a bad person." Velma said finally. "I don't think that his idea of Christianity is very much like mine. He doesn't seek humility in the presence of God but I don't think he is evil. I think he may have chased after you simply to find out what you were doing. Anyway you made your decision when you came back to the ship. All you can do now is to keep your door well locked at night."

"It really is a shame when you have put so much into this cruise that this should happen."

"Don't worry about me. It's not as if I had to spend my life's savings. School teachers aren't paid that badly. I put in a lot because I like to put in as much as I can into everything."

He smiled. "I bet that's what you say to the kids in your class. Get them all to work hard to please teacher."

"No – I get them to work hard to please Jesus."

He finished his beer. Just talking to her about Karl seemed to have made it seem less of a problem. Now he could relax and talk about religion. It was a fine abstract concept with no real bearing on reality and just the topic for an interesting discussion because nobody could ever actually prove anything about it.

"Is there really a verse in the bible that says that Jesus will be pleased if they do their homework?" He asked, looking into her eyes to make sure she didn't look upset as he made fun of her beliefs.

“Not in the real bible but there’s lots in their children’s bibles that says that sort of thing.”

“You mean somebody invented it as a way of keeping them working hard.”

“No – somebody wrote it because they had read the real bible and they really believed it was true.”

“Sounds a bit like all the instructions about food in the religious books. Don’t eat this and don’t eat that and wash your hands or you will upset your God when all it really meant was that you would get an upset stomach. Would God really care if we sat around all day and lived off handouts provided we never cheated or stole anything?”

“God created us in his image”. She replied. “Having taken the trouble to create us, yes he does care if we waste our lives.”

“I have a problem with the word creation. You’re not a creationist are you?”

“No, not in that sense, but I do believe that God created the world and cares what we do with it.”

“I’m glad you’re not a creationist. I enjoy talking to you about religion even if I don’t actually believe in it. But I would find it rather hard to know what to say to somebody who didn’t accept evolution. Anyway if God cares what we do how did we end up with Karl. Surely God doesn’t like what he does?”

“I know you think this is a get-out but the answer is that God is a mystery and man cannot know all about him. He must have a use for Karl but I must admit I don’t know what it is.”

“But you still don’t think he’s after me?”

Velma didn’t reply. They looked out at the last of the sunset. The ship had gone but just above the horizon there was a line of clouds blacking out much of the last red glow.

“I thought I might find you here. Beautiful isn’t it.” Harry’s voice came from behind them.

As soon as they turned he remarked how wonderful Velma looked in her dress, embarrassing her slightly and Paul rather more for not noticing it when she first arrived.

“You been telling her all about your chase round the town? “

The steward appeared and Harry ordered a new round of drinks. [move]

“I bet you’re wondering what to say to him at dinner. That’s if he doesn’t bribe the Maitre D again to move to another table. I’m sure you’re right about that part; he did specially arrange to sit at your table. I’m not sure about the rest though. A conversation at dinner is one thing but chasing you through the streets is a bit different.”

“I think he may have been chasing me but I don’t know quite how to get him to admit it.” Paul replied. “If he just asks me why I ran away and says how worried he was about me there’s not a lot I can do. I’ll just look rather stupid and not find out anything.”

“It’s a shame you can’t join us at our table”. Velma said. “To give him moral support and ask some more questions.”

“I’m afraid it’s one of the company rules.” Harry said. “Even if I did persuade them to fit in an extra chair they don’t allow more than one lecturer at each table. We’re supposed to be captivating the guests with stories about the ports and getting them to sign up for the tours rather than talking shop with each other.”

“What would talking shop consist of?” Velma asked. “Discussing the latest ideas about the design of a Trireme?”

“No, more likely discussing who said what to who at a conference ten years ago and what it did to their chances of getting their next paper published.” Paul replied. “Probably boring, probably wrong and probably just a method to drop a few names and try to impress people.” Harry picked up his drink and when Velma wasn’t looking he briefly raised the glass to thank Paul for quietly helping him maintain his

bluff. He admired the method, it was far more effective than actually talking about the subject.

“Did you get your wallet back?” He asked suddenly and smiled.

“My what?” Paul asked.

“Your wallet that the man took from your table at the café and ran off through the red light district. When you chased after him did you manage to get it back?”

Paul thought for a moment before replying. “Yes, when he saw that I was chasing him and was catching up he grabbed the money out of it and threw it into an open doorway. I saw him do it and stopped to pick it up and check that my cards were still in it. By the time I looked out again he was out of sight but the cards were all there so all I lost was a bit of cash.”

“But what about Karl?” Velma asked. “Did you actually see him running after you or didn’t you notice him at all?”

“I wonder. I did look back a couple of times but we weren’t exactly eyeball to eyeball. He probably never saw me do it.”

“So you didn’t see him.” Harry said. “You tell the story and wait and if he’s stupid enough to say nothing you know he’s bad.”

“But if Helen prods him and he tells a dramatic tale of how he was trying to rescue you you’re none the wiser.” Velma added. “But it’s a good one to try. Look at the storm.”

They looked out at the clouds. Flashes of lightning could be seen from somewhere along it every few seconds. Some were forks arcing down to the sea and some were sheets which seemed to dissipate in the clouds themselves but were bright enough to light up the whole storm.

“Now if you had been watching that a few hundred years ago you would have said that it was your devil at work.” Velma said to Harry. “Your devil is too easy an explanation for everything. I would have said that it was one of God’s mysteries and I would have been right. It may well have been God’s way of mixing up the molecules to start life in the first place.”

“Ok. So Karl is one of God’s mysteries and in a few hundred years they’ll know all about it. Right now let’s pray that he decides to tell us a bit sooner.”

“I think you’re almost serious at that.” Velma smiled. “Yes – I’ll pray.”

Paul decided to wait for a few minutes to tell his story. Rather than rush into it he waited while the food and drinks were ordered. When the assistant dining steward asked everybody how their day ashore had gone he pretended not to be listening. On the other hand he had a story to tell and he would be expected to start soon. Karl was saying nothing about it and he wondered if he was also pretending to be distracted.

Finally Helen asked him how he had got along in the town. The question sounded natural enough. She was, after all, very attentive with her conversation and always asked everybody how their day had gone.

“The town was great but I almost lost my wallet.” He replied and looked up to see if there was a reaction. Helen looked genuinely surprised and asked him if he got it back. He found that he couldn’t leave a silence that Karl would have to fill. He had set it up so he had to go ahead and tell his story.

He started slowly, describing the café in detail and then saying how he got his wallet out of his pocket to pay the bill. Suddenly he was panicking. What about the detail. How did he pay the bill if his wallet was stolen. If he hadn’t paid it then surely he would have gone back after the chase. He hoped nobody noticed his hesitation. Perhaps they would put it down to the shock of the whole thing. He went on to say he had already paid the bill and then put his wallet down on the table for a moment to get some coins out for a tip when it was snatched by a man who ran up from behind him.

"I almost managed to grab his arm but he was incredibly quick." He went on. "I just managed to see which way he went and I ran off after him."

"Do you think he was a local?" Helen asked. "I saw a few youths who looked like they had come in on a ferry or something looking for casual work. Didn't look like they belonged at all."

He paused. If Helen was trying to catch him out she had done the complete opposite. This was a question that gave him reason to take time to think. He waited for Karl, watching to see if Helen gave him some sort of signal. Suddenly it occurred to him that he might not have told her. He had failed and would hate to admit it. Now he was going to have to and he would have to explain himself to her later.

He was sure Karl was about to speak. He could almost hear his words but it wasn't him it was the admiral. "There's a lot of them about." He said. "You can almost feel sorry for them at times coming from places like Albania looking for a better life. You say you only almost lost it? You got it back then – that was lucky."

"It wasn't luck because he never lost it." Karl's response caused a stunned silence. Velma looked up at him in alarm and Paul looked down at the table fearing to catch his eye in case it made him violent even in the crowded dining room. The admiral had no reason not to look him in the eye but decided against any sort of reply. But when Paul glanced across at Helen he saw that she didn't look either frightened or embarrassed. He wondered if she knew what would happen next.

"It's easy to divide the world into good people and bad people. Possibly you would call it sorting the sheep from the goats." He said looking at Velma. "But you should also remember that the bible tells you not to judge people. God will judge us for what we are and we should never judge other people in a way that we would not want God to judge us. We can judge them for what they do if we are sure it is wrong but not for what they are."

He was in no hurry to continue. Nobody was going to interrupt him. Paul felt un-nerved by the way he was responding to the question he had asked at the pool bar. He wondered if he was getting paranoid about being watched.

"Think of your Albanians out there in the town." Karl continued, looking at the admiral. "They may be God-fearing people and regular attenders at church. They may never have done anything wrong but they create problems not because of what they are but because of the way people react to them. I am not saying that none of them ever steal anything but on this occasion they didn't and I know that because I was watching."

"You were watching him in a café in town. What were you doing? Were you at another café nearby?" The admiral asked.

"No. There was only one café in the square. I was watching him to see if he had judged me to be good or bad."

Now they could see right through it. He was just playing for effect and this time it hadn't worked. He clearly liked to be in control and wanted to embarrass Paul into admitting that he had made the story up so he could take the moral high ground. But this time when he glanced around the situation was reversed. Helen was looking slightly embarrassed and everybody else was looking relaxed and the admiral even looked slightly amused. "Let's hear your tale." He said. "We've heard Paul's and now let's hear yours. You do seem to have had some fun in town."

"As I said I was watching Paul." He tried to make it sound as if watching people drink beer was an entirely natural thing to do. "He was at the café and when he finished the beer he paid for it and put his wallet safely back in his pocket and just when he had done it he got up and ran. I don't know why he did it but as soon as he saw me he ran away. He seemed to have made a judgement about me and automatically assumed I was going to do him harm."

Paul knew that he was hoping for a reply which would be a sort of excuse. Karl was determined to show he was in control so he could rearrange the situation the way he wanted it. The man's tactics were crude and clumsy. He seemed to be trying to make him feel that his fears in the town had been foolish so nobody would take him seriously but then he couldn't resist trying to scare him off at the same time.

"Perhaps he wasn't judging you." Velma replied calmly. "Perhaps he was judging what you were doing and you just said that was ok."

Karl was about to speak when Helen cut in. "Anyway." She said. "Karl meant well. He saw you run and knew that you were going into a rough part of town so he ran after you to help. As you can see we are rather upset to find that you had made a moral judgement about him and decided to run away but no harm came of it. Did you have trouble finding your way through the back streets?"

Paul continued his story and even took the time to move it back to Karl's theme. "It may be a rough area but you shouldn't judge the people by the area they live in. They were quite friendly."

As soon as he had said it he realised what he had done. Velma pointed out that a single man running into a red light district was possibly not going to be the most impartial observer of the hospitality of the area. Other jokes followed.

With the mood lightened Paul found it hard to believe that Karl really meant him harm. They had a long conversation about the town and the churches in it and he felt sure that Karl had actually been to them so he couldn't have been following him all the time. Finally when they were leaving the dining room and nobody else was listening he asked why he had been watching him at the café.

"You know what I do for a living." Karl replied. "Different people react in different ways if they find out. Particularly people who have nothing to do with it themselves. It's just what I said. I was concerned that you had made a judgement about me and were considering going to the local police. But when you ran away I was genuinely worried about you. I know a lot more about rough parts of towns that I would like to and by my reckoning you were lucky to get out and not really have your wallet stolen." [too much judging]

Paul looked at the boat in horror. In his lectures he had promised his audience that it would be a luxury passenger vessel. He had been given a publicity photo to show, but as far as he could see it must have been about thirty years old. Paint was peeling from all over it and, although some effort had been made to patch up the worst bits, big areas of rust were showing through. He could hear the engine idling and if the noise wasn't bad enough a mass of thick black smoke was coming out of the small funnel just behind the wheel-house. As he walked up to the quay side he heard what sounded like a small waterfall and looked down to see vast amounts of oily water being pumped out through a port just below him.

Since it was the first time he had done the tour, one of the entertainers had been sent along to help him. They only did shows on about two days a week so most of them were expected to help out with some other work. Jenny was a small slim blonde; he had seen her in the shows and she danced well and she seemed to be doing well as a tour guide. As the passengers emerged from the coaches and saw the boat she smiled at them and assured them that a welcome drink was waiting for them on the main deck and, in response to the most frequent question, yes, there were toilets at the back on the same deck. She had seen Paul's shock and acknowledged it with just a quick arching of her eyebrows and soon they were both seamlessly escorting people on board.

He could see the problem. When the biggest cruise ship in the world came into port every available boat had to be pressed into service to run all the different tours. Probably everybody else had complained about this boat so they had given it to him and he wouldn't be able to change until another new person came along. He could also see why they had been landed at the quay and told to walk along to

another berth rather than disembarking from the other side of the ship directly onto it. The old tyres that it used as fenders would have made an appalling mess of the ship's gleaming white paint, and it was even missing some of them so the paint that wasn't blackened would have been scraped off.

When most of the passengers had boarded he went on [board] and along to the front where he found one of the crew standing next to a cupboard that he had unlocked to reveal a battered microphone which appeared to be plugged into a plywood box with a switch on it. The man clearly spoke no English but when he turned the switch on there was a loud crackling noise which seemed correct to him so he passed the microphone to Paul and went off to help release the mooring lines.

Paul knew the area well and as soon as they were moving he started his commentary and soon he was quite enjoying the trip as they passed the old town fortifications and he described the various sieges that had taken place. There was an old bar stool and when he was sitting on it he found that he had a good view down the deck as well as out to the coastline. He could see everybody from his dinner table sitting near the bar. He had felt guilty about persuading them to come on the rather expensive tour in such a bad boat but they seemed to be enjoying it.

It only took them 40 minutes to reach the dock for the first temple. He had never bothered looking at the café very closely when he had been before but this time he had a good look and it looked quite clean. He could see them setting up long tables for the group to have lunch after the tour of the temple. Some of the group obviously liked it because they had decided to start in with some drinks and miss out the temple. They tried to look the other way as he walked by.

As they were walking up the dusty track he saw Karl and Helen coming towards him. [more tension] For a moment he was instinctively nervous but he was in full sight of dozens of passengers so he was sure he was safe.

"That was a really good commentary you did." Karl said as he approached. "You seem to know a vast amount about these places."

"Thank you . It's been my life for 40 years." He replied. "Reading about them, teaching about them, writing about them and coming to see them when I could find somebody to pay for it."

"You seem to have done very well by it, you seem so enthusiastic about the subject , you must enjoy it."

"I do enjoy it but it never paid for the nice house and cars like you have."

Karl had no time to reply. An elderly lady was asking him if there was a toilet at the temple. He had no idea but assured her that there was. He was thinking about Karl. Perhaps the man was right and he was always judging him unfairly. Perhaps what had sounded to him like a cynical charm offensive to put him off guard had just been a genuine compliment. It might even be the first time Karl had actually listened to any history and he might be fascinated by what he heard. Perhaps Paul had achieved his lifelong ambition of introducing new people to the wonders of history. Or perhaps he was being led into a false sense of security.

They arrived and he felt good about his tour of the temple. He heard some of what the local guides were saying and knew that much of it was inaccurate and that his description took account of all the latest findings. [Also he had a smart banner that Jenny had produced with the ship's insignia on it for him to hold up for his group to follow while they [were waving an assortment of home-made placards.]

By the time he had finished his tour of the temple they were late for lunch. He had told the tour manager on the ship that time would be tight but nothing had been done. He had also tried to get around the tour as fast as possible but, as always, there were stragglers and he had been warned about getting ahead of them. If they couldn't hear what he said they would complain, regardless of how long they had taken to walk the few yards from the last stop. A few complaints would be contagious. Lots of people on cruises were plainly bored and although they pretended to be interested they would like nothing better than a cause to give them

something to think about and talk about. Saying that the new tour guide was no good and how they had heard from a reliable source that the last one was better would make a fine conversation opener at dinner. He needed to be careful.

Finally they made their way back down the track [to the cafe] . He decided not to sit with the people he knew and found himself with a group of elderly Americans who were very enthusiastic and asked plenty of interesting questions. Declining several offers to buy him a beer he poured himself a large glass of fruit juice from the jug on the table and sat back to enjoy the discussion.

The staff at the café rushed them through the first course. It wasn't their fault; they had the main course cooking and needed to get it served. He saw a few surprised looks as plates were whisked away but chose to ignore them. He was served a large plate of fish that looked as if it was locally caught and freshly cooked as promised in the tour brochure. It was good; by far the best he had ever had in the area. He wondered how much the cruise company had paid for it. His enjoyment was soon interrupted.

The group who had decided not to walk up to the temple were getting louder. They had clearly had several drinks while they were waiting. One of them was shouting at a waitress.

"She doesn't like it. Take it away and get some decent food." He grabbed the plate from in front of the child sitting next to him and thrust it at the waitress so hard that she staggered backwards only just regaining her balance.

Paul was on his feet and saw Jenny converging from the other side.

"What's the problem?" He asked; trying to sound calm.

"That food, it's disgusting." The man replied.

Most of the food had been thrown off the plate and was on the floor. "It was the vegetarian option." He replied. "Did you not want it?"

"No, it's disgusting. First we got the fish that was all full of bones and then we told them to take it away and they brought that." He looked down at the floor. It was, as the name implied, a selection of vegetables.

Jenny was trying to calm the child. The manager had arrived. The man stood up and was shouting even louder. He put his face right up to Paul's so the smell of the alcohol and the noise of his incoherent shouting almost overpowered him. Out of the corner of his eye Paul saw him raise his arm. The man was going to hit him. Then his arm came down again. Karl had appeared. He had passed his shoulder bag to Helen who stood a few paces behind him. The arm came down as Karl put his arm around the man. Superficially it looked like a friendly comradely gesture but Paul could almost hear the bones crunch.

"That was a good one Frank". Karl was laughing. "They should have fish without bones shouldn't they?" By this time he was down level with the child. "You'd like that wouldn't you? Little fish fingers swimming around all covered in bread crumbs just the way you like them." He had an engaging laugh and soon the table was laughing with him. As he had stooped down Frank had gone down with him and was now seated again.

Karl only had to stay for a minute. As Helen carefully gave him back his shoulder bag Paul and Jenny did their best to thank him. Other groups in the café who had looked up at the disturbance returned to their conversations. Somebody appeared with a slightly different looking plate of vegetables with an apple with it and the child started to eat it. Paul returned to his table and his group returned to normality.

As soon as the meal was finished Paul went on ahead onto the boat leaving Jenny to gather everybody up and make sure there was nobody left in the toilets. He went to a table in the shade and carefully tipped all the chairs forwards to reserve it. He then stood guard until the drunken group appeared and told them how he had kept the best table in the shade for them because they had not enjoyed their meal as much as they should have.

Velma saw him doing it.

"That's a bit much isn't it? Keeping the best table for them when they were such a nuisance." She said quietly as he walked back up to his microphone.

He just smiled at her. It took some time for everybody to board and the boat to get underway. By the time it was moving the drunks had largely fallen asleep in their comfortable chairs. Quite a number of passengers clearly shared Velma's opinion as they saw what he had done and tried to pack into the rest of the shaded area without getting too close to the table.

As soon as the boat was clear of its mooring it turned around to head out to the next temple, which was on an island a few miles offshore in the opposite direction. As it turned the shaded table came into full sun and much of the rest of the deck was shaded. Paul gave a spirited commentary on the history of the next temple as he watched the drunks with their pale complexions turn visibly red under the powerful early afternoon sun.

With their parent asleep, the two children at the table soon grew bored. They managed to tip their chairs over and started dragging them around the deck. They were clearly seeking attention but finding that nobody had any interest in chasing them around the hot deck they settled down to a game of sorts which involved climbing on the chairs and jumping off again. By this time Paul was involved in a long discussion about the temple with his audience. He saw Jenny and Velma talking and then they went across to the children with a tube of sun lotion.

The discussion paused while everybody watched what happened. The children watched as the two adults approached and almost looked as if they were glad to have some attention at last. Jenny spoke to them and offered the lotion but they looked suspiciously at it and ran back to their parents. When their mother was woken up Jenny tried to talk to her but was shouted at and called a stupid interfering bitch so loudly that everybody on the boat could hear it. Paul quickly re-started his commentary on the island which had now come into view as they passed a headland. The children seemed pleased with their victory and went back to their game as Jenny and Velma retreated.

An hour later they arrived at the island. Frank was one of the last to disembark and he walked up to Paul just as he was getting ready to lead the way up to the temple.

"My daughter is ill." He said. "She needs to get back to the ship."

"I'm afraid that the only way back is on our boat." Paul replied. "There aren't any others. There are some medical supplies on the boat and we could arrange for a car to meet us as soon as we get back. I could phone ahead. What's wrong with her?"

"She's got a very bad headache and she's feeling faint." The man replied. "You've got to get her back right away." [explain that he has a hangover]

Paul could see the child walking towards him. She had clearly had a little too much sun. He advised that she should be kept in the shade and given water to drink and then he turned to start walking towards the path to the temple. The man grabbed his arm and dragged him back, throwing him to the ground.

"I said get her back to the ship now." The man said, leaning down and shouting at him.

Before Paul had a chance to think what to do next Karl had arrived and dragged the man away. He got awkwardly back to his feet and tried to brush the dust off his clothes.

"Are you OK?" Karl asked, holding the man in an arm lock without any apparent effort.

"Yes I think so." Paul replied. "We should call the Police to meet us when we get back. This man just assaulted me. He shouldn't be allowed back on the ship."

Frank started shouting abuse and saying that he was being assaulted and how he would get Paul and Jenny dismissed from their jobs. By this time most of the tour group had gathered around to watch.

Karl let Frank go but stood in front of him to discourage him from attacking again. "Let's be practical about this." He said. "I'm sure that everybody wants to go to the temple. I'll stay here with Frank and Helen will stay with me to help care for the children." He looked sharply at Helen and she nodded her head. "And there won't be any need at all to call the Police." This time he looked at Paul. There was something in the look or possibly the slight movement that went with it. Paul had no choice. He agreed immediately.

"I'm sure she'll be fine. I expect you've got some after-sun in that bag haven't you." Velma said looking at Karl's shoulder bag that [she] was holding for him. She was holding it very carefully and Paul couldn't remember them opening it since they left the ship. There was a moment's silence. They left for the temple.

By the time they returned the day had cooled slightly and the two children were playing happily. Karl was sitting with Frank and the other adults, they did not look happy but they were calm.

The final stop was for a bar-b-q on a beach. They moored in the middle of a bay and three small boats came out to ferry them to shore. It was supposed to be an idyllic remote location but Paul knew that there was actually a road just behind the trees on the headland.

It was very well organised. The tables and chairs had been carefully made to look like authentic driftwood but the glasses and plates were immaculate and the chefs had spotless white aprons and hats. A small band played and the food and drink was excellent. Everybody seemed to relax except Karl who was clutching his bag and looking [nervously] at the top of the beach.

When the other people around them had gone to get more food Paul went over and sat next to him. "As far as I can remember from the little map I saw there is only one road for miles around here and it comes in over there." He pointed to the end of the beach. "So if you want to go over you could see them before they see you."

Karl nodded and said a quiet "thanks". A few minutes later he took Helen's arm and they walked off to the end of the beach. [bag returns empty]

The Purser's office was off a short corridor behind the reception desk. Other doors from it led to the offices of his various assistant pursers. The office was clearly intended to show that he had a senior position on the ship. The walls had wood panelling to half height and above it there were framed pictures of other ships in the fleet. It was, however, not large enough to have a separate table for visitors so Paul and Jenny sat facing him across his mahogany veneered desk. The head of entertainment sat to one side.

The purser had tried to make the proceedings a bit less formal by ordering a tray of coffee which he offered to everybody. Nevertheless it was clear that jokes would not be welcome so the head of entertainment sat in silence. He was doing his best to look serious but his everlasting infectious smile was still there so he found it difficult.

"You've seen what the man said." The purser said, getting straight to the point as soon as the door was closed and they were seated. "He says that you encouraged another passenger to assault him."

Paul was not used to being told off. The last time he could remember anybody trying to do it had been many years before when he had been a junior lecturer. On this occasion he decided that it might actually be warranted because he was in a very awkward situation but it still wouldn't be a good idea to take it quite the way the man wanted. He said nothing. No question had been asked so no reply was

necessary. Jenny seemed as confused as the purser by this but decided to remain silent as well.

The Purser had to continue. "He says that you let this man take control of your entire tour party and that he intimidated the whole group. What happened? Why didn't you call us for assistance or even call the local police?"

"It was a difficult situation." Paul agreed. "Over the years I have taken lots of groups to see historical sites and I have given presentations to groups of several hundred but I have never encountered anything exactly like that. They had far too much to drink and my main concern was to ensure that the rest of the party could enjoy their day."

He hoped it sounded convincing. The problem was that the accusation was true. He had let Karl take over. In fact he was letting him take over his whole cruise.

He continued quickly. He didn't want to give the purser the chance to repeat his question. "I decided not to call in because it could have delayed us a lot if we had had to wait for assistance and I felt that the situation was well under control. The passenger who helped me is called Karl Smithson. He sits at the same table as me for dinner and was very willing to help. I felt that he subdued the man in a very professional way with the minimum of force."

"That isn't what the man is saying." The purser replied. "Apparently he can hardly walk he's so badly hurt."

"I think that you will find that he is actually suffering from sunburn and heat stroke. He fell asleep in the mid-day sun."

"Even if that is the case it would normally be good practice to try to prevent it happening."

Paul sensed that he was going to get away with it. If the worst they could say was that he had not warned them about the sun then he was clear.

"What about you Jenny?" The head of entertainment asked. "You've been on lots of tours before and you should have known that you are supposed to call in if there is an incident."

"I followed Paul's lead." Jenny said, passing it back. "We are always told to follow the lead of the tour guides and do what they say."

"Did you even suggest it? We sent you along because you have had lots of experience with looking after tour groups."

Jenny looked agitated. [she hadn't suggested it] She looked back and forth between the purser and the head of entertainment wondering what to say next. "The man was an offensive drunk and I wouldn't believe a word of what he said in his complaint." She said nervously. "When Paul says he fell asleep I would put it more like he passed out and probably can't remember much of it. Karl was incredibly efficient. I think Paul handled it really well getting Karl to help him. I suggest we tell the drunk to drink less and give Karl a free bottle of champagne."

The purser was glowering at her. Dancers weren't supposed to make suggestions to senior managers and tell them how to run the ship. Nevertheless he had to accept it. They had said she had lots of experience and she had made a clear judgement.

"We'll send an apology." The purser said. "We'll apologise for what happened but politely refuse to accept any liability for it."

He turned to Paul. "We're here to help. You said yourself that you had never had to deal with anything quite like this. We'll let it pass this time but if it happens again you should call us and we can send some people out to sort it out." Paul had felt ok up to that point but being patronised about it was enough to make him determined to do something. He left the office biting his lip and resolved to go and tell Karl that if he took any more drugs on one of his tours he would personally throw them in the sea.

Leaving port the pilot cutter followed them through the channel. As soon as they were in open water they could see it speed up. They watched as it caught up with the ship and looked down as it approached the stepped gangway that had been lowered ready for it. Even this close to land the sea was quite rough and it matched its speed but kept a few yards away from the ship to avoid hammering against it. The pilot emerged through a doorway from a lower deck and, at the last moment, the small boat came alongside only touching the fendering on the gangway once as the pilot stepped across onto it. In a single well-practiced step he was holding onto a grab rail on the cabin roof and signalling to his helmsman to say that he was safely on board. As soon as he was inside the wheelhouse they sped away, circling back towards the land with spray flying up across the decks.

"That looks a bit dangerous". Velma observed.

"Don't worry, they are well paid for it. I think their fee depends on the size of ship so I am sure he was keen to do this one." Paul replied.

The officer who had been watching from the wing of the bridge way above them walked back inside and they felt the slight vibration as the power to the engines was increased and they gathered speed

Helen and Karl were standing at the back rail looking intently out into the night. Soon Paul could see what they were looking at. A small speedboat was struggling to catch them up. In the heavy sea the little open boat was crashing through the waves throwing up spray which was glowing in the moonlight. At times they caught glances of two men inside it desperately trying to hold on as it was thrown from side to side. Finally they emerged into the calmer water directly behind the ship where it had flattened the waves as it went through.

Karl was waving furiously at the boat. He looked round angrily at Paul and asked. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm just enjoying the view." He said. "And you can be assured that I am not at all bothered if you plan to try to drop something down to that boat. It doesn't bother me in the slightest and you have my word that I shall not report it to anybody. But if you signal to that boat to come in close under the stern I shall be very bothered because it may well get drawn into the undertow and either sucked under the ship or just turned over and sunk. There is also the point that there is an open crew deck below us where they take in the mooring lines and right now there are probably some crew on it. So if you want to lower anything down you had better give your friends a call and tell them to come alongside like the pilot cutter. I know that they can be seen there from the wings of the bridge but you'll just have to risk it."

Karl contemplated his speech for a moment and then his expression seemed to change. He mumbled a "Thank you" and was soon talking on his mobile phone.

The speedboat moved out to the left side.

"I recommend the other side." Paul said. "It's far more sheltered".

This time Karl and Helen both looked at him in a slightly amazed way but Karl duly shouted more instructions into his phone and the boat moved across.

The ship's hull was well designed and there was only a small stern-wave for the speed-boat to get past and soon they were up alongside. This was a very different situation from the pilot cutter because the ship was now moving at full speed. The small boat was well up onto the plane as it crashed down on each successive wave that came along the side of the ship.

"If the captain ever decides to take up water-skiing his ship is quite fast enough." Paul remarked to Velma as they stood a small distance away and watched. They had positioned themselves out of the way and clear of any windows where people might look out and see them peering over the side and wonder what they were looking at. He hoped that they were also far enough away that if the ship's security officers appeared, they would not be seen as part of the operation.

The operation itself was a shambles. It was clear that neither the crew in the boat or Helen and Karl had any idea how difficult it would be or any real plan about how to do it. They tried lowering a package on a piece of string but the wind caught it and it blew around, crashing against the side of the boat and flying out in all directions. In the meanwhile a man in the boat below struggled to get to his feet to try to catch it only to be thrown back down every time a big wave came. Several times the speedboat crashed into the ship again and again and the man struggled to tie more fenders in place to protect it.

They watched as this performance went on. Finally the first package was caught and they started on the second one.

"I wonder how many there are." Paul said. "I'm amazed they haven't been seen."

"Perhaps they have." Velma replied. "Probably find the ship's security just don't want all the bother of trying to arrest somebody."

Just as she was saying this he looked out towards the distant orange glow of the shore line and saw a pair of red and green lights standing out. He pointed them out to Karl. The lights became clearer and they could see that they were heading to intercept them at a point some distance ahead. Slowly a large grey shape became visible around the lights.

He called out to Helen and she looked up but they carried on trying even more desperately to transfer the next package. By this time they could see that the boat coming towards them was very fast and was cutting through the waves with ease.

Velma suggested that they should move away so they went well along the deck to make sure that we weren't involved.

Finally the package was caught and the speedboat started to move away. But the patrol boat was moving in very quickly behind it. They could see it clearly now, coming in behind at an angle. It was well over a hundred feet long with a tall superstructure covered with radar receivers and radio aerials. It clearly had a deep hull and very powerful engines because it was having no trouble powering through the rough sea.

Suddenly the deck behind them was crowded with ship's crew. They were glad they had moved well away because the guards emerged through several doors at the same time and converged on Helen and Karl.

The speedboat was almost level with the front of the ship. As it shot clear of the calmer water it was thrown sideways by the bow wave. Paul assumed that it would turn away but it didn't. Almost as soon as it landed it turned straight across in front of the ship disappearing from sight.

The patrol boat was level with them now. It was an impressive sight with crew in blue uniforms clearly visible in the wheelhouse and even some out on the front with a powerful looking gun mounted on the deck. One of them saw passengers looking down from the ship and looked up and waved.

In a moment it was past, overtaking the ship and moving out well ahead to make its turn. It was clear that they had no plans to follow the speed boat and risk turning close under the bow. Paul and Velma ran forward to watch.

Looking back they saw the security staff had now gathered around Helen and Karl and could just see Karl trying to push them away and could hear him shouting. They couldn't hear exactly what he was saying but he kept pointing at them and shouting even louder. Suddenly four of the security men turned and started running towards Paul.

"What's he saying?" Velma asked urgently. "We haven't done anything."

She didn't sound very convinced. Paul had visions of trying to explain why he had done nothing to stop them smuggling drugs and had even tried to help a bit.

Moments later the first man had arrived. The others were close behind. For an instant they seemed unsure whether to grab hold of Paul to stop him running

away, but before they had a chance to decide there was a crash and the noise from the patrol boat's engine suddenly changed. They all looked around and saw that it had just started to make its turn across the path of the ship but it had stopped dead in the water. Its bow had risen up slightly and the whole boat was lying over at a slight angle. The propellers were still churning out a massive plume of water at the back but it was not moving at all.

"What the hell has it hit?" The man asked, instantly diverted from his arrest.

"God knows". One of the others replied. "But we're going to have to turn like hell to miss it."

They looked on in horror. One man could be seen sprawled across the front rail having been thrown there by the force of the impact.

The ship started to turn. The patrol boat had stopped before coming directly in front of them and remained slightly to the right hand side of their path so they were turning to the left. As they turned they began to lean.

Velma asked what was happening.

"It happens when these ships turn at speed." One of the security guards replied. "It's happened before. They're tall and thin so they lean over a lot but don't worry. They always level up again. They're designed for it."

Even as he was speaking the ship leaned further. Some glasses slid off a low table, dropped onto the deck and rolled past them. Velma found herself holding on to the rail for support

Somebody on the bridge turned on a searchlight and quickly directed it at the patrol boat. Now they could see a rectangular shape in the water in front of it.

"It's just a shipping container. How come that stopped it?" Paul asked.

"It's a whole raft of them." The man who had been arresting him replied. "All chained together."

He could see them now stretching out in two directions.

"Just as well we didn't hit them" Velma said.

"We'd have just gone through them. Hardly scratch the paint on this ship something like that." He reassured her. "Looks like we're going to get clear." He added as their heading turned away from the wreckage in front of them.

Suddenly there was a loud crack and the patrol boat lurched forward as some of the containers broke away.

"Why doesn't he stop his engine." One of the crewmen asked.

"Look at the man on the front." Paul replied. "If the ones in the wheelhouse got hurt that badly they won't be doing anything."

They continued to turn and the ship leaned further. Paul now reached out to grab the rail to stop himself falling.

Looking into a lounge through the window opposite he saw more glasses sliding off tables. People reached out to catch them but soon gave up and were struggling to prevent themselves from falling onto the floor with them.

They heard a noise behind them and all turned to see the speedboat had circled around the back of the ship and reappeared. Karl acted immediately. In one single movement he picked Helen up and threw her over the side and jumped over after her. With the ship leaned so far over it was much less of a fall and within a few seconds of landing they were being hauled on board. Seeing them escape the men who were with Paul and Velma seemed to take it as a signal to guard them much more carefully. One of them grabbed his wrist.

The ship leaned more. The table and chairs now slid across the deck and crashed against the rail.

Velma was looking terrified. "It's ok." He tried to reassure her. "These ships really are designed to turn in circles at full speed. It won't go over." He wondered if she was more scared of the ship or of being one of the only remaining people to face the charges of drug smuggling.

The patrol boat was moving forward. The ship had now turned at right angles to its original path but it seemed that the more it turned the more the smaller boat came into its way.

A voice came over the public address system. It was the officer on the bridge saying that the ship was not in danger. He sounded very reassuring. He said that they had had to make a sharp turn but they could soon bring the ship back upright and there was no reason to panic.

Paul looked down at the water that was now directly below him. It was flowing past but as much as going along the side of the hull it seemed to be going under it as the force of the turn was driving the bow sideways across the water.

Some way behind them Helen and Karl were almost out of the water. One of the men helping them was looking up anxiously at the ship looming over him but still had time for a quick laugh at the state of the patrol boat. They could see it quite clearly now. The only man visible through the wheelhouse windows was slumped forwards across the instruments and was not moving.

There was a loud crash from just behind them and they turned to see a big plate glass window had shattered throwing fragments in all directions. Almost immediately others followed it as the whole line of them exploded in turn. This was followed by an instant of quiet before the screaming started. Looking in through the gaping hole they saw an elderly lady who has been thrown to the floor against the wall was now covered in glass and starting to bleed. Others were now trying to help her but many were slipping on the debris on the floor and falling into the glass with her.

Finally the officer who was trying to arrest Paul decided that he had other priorities and ran awkwardly up the sloping deck and tried to help.

"What's happening?" Velma asked, half shouting, half screaming.

"It's just the structure bending a bit." Paul replied, trying to sound calm. "It's happened before when they tip. The ship bends a bit and twists the glass so it shatters. It'll all spring back when we get upright again and they can replace the glass. It'll be ok."

She looked up at the crowd now gathering around the injured woman.

"Don't go there." Paul said, looking down at Velma's evening shoes and trying to sound calm but definite. "Your shoes will come off and you'll get badly cut."

More screaming started from above them. Passengers who had been asleep were emerging onto their balconies. He looked up and saw one man who seemed to have skidded across his balcony and was now hanging over the rail at a dangerous angle. Towels were falling down from all levels followed by bottles, glasses and a mass of other things that had been left outside for the night. Suddenly a great sheet of water emerged from way above them and poured down into the sea.

"We're better off without that." He said. "It's water from one of the pools."

Helen was now in the speedboat and Karl was almost clear of the water. Debris and [water] was now beginning to fall on them and the man at the controls opened up the throttle so they shot away with Karl hanging on as best he could with one leg still in the water. In a few seconds they were out of the pool of light around the ship and he heard the engine slow again.

There was a dull crash from below them and the ship seemed to shudder slightly and teeter over a little bit more. He looked down and saw that some way in front of them a container had been sucked in towards the hull and was now pushing hard against it as the water flowing under them swirled around it. For some reason it was not flowing past with the movement of the ship.

Without saying anything he grabbed Velma's arm and started along the deck.

"Where are we going?" She asked.

"To the front." He replied. "It's safer there."

She was coming with him. That was what mattered. He didn't want to have to tell her why.

She was finding it almost impossible to walk on the sloping deck in her high heels so they stopped for a moment while she took them off.

There was another crash and the ship shuddered again. He didn't need to look down. The rest of the containers were being sucked in against the hull. They ran as more crashes followed.

Very soon they had reached the corner of the deck and could see the way open to get across the front to the other side of the ship. They stopped to have one last look down. Now he could see why the containers were not moving. One of the heavy chains that must have been supposed to secure them to the cargo ship they came from was stretching forward from the front one. The first container in the line was clearly caught in the torpedo shape of the ship's bow.

Behind them he heard more screaming and glanced around to see where it was coming from. Inside the windows the casino had been in full swing. Dozens of slot machines had come loose and crashed into crowds at the card tables and roulette wheels before piling up against the broken windows. He only spent a couple of seconds looking at the mayhem before turning back.

The patrol boat had broken free of its last container and was gathering speed. It was pointing away from them now but with nobody at the helm it was turning in a slow circle.

The speedboat crew were the first to realise what was happening. He could just see them in the darkness as they quickly started their engine again and shot out of the way.

Looking up, he saw an officer had come out onto the wing of the bridge. He tried to shout at him to tell him that the containers were caught up, but the man must have thought that he was just screaming the same as everybody else and took no notice.

He was looking out at the patrol boat and Paul could see why. It was making its turn. The wheel was still jammed well over and the throttle was fully open and there was nobody in control as it ploughed through the water. It had a slight list and seemed to be down by the bow where the container may have breached the hull but the engines were so powerful that they were still driving it forward at an ever increasing speed. He could see the man at the front rail now, starting to look up. In an instant as he came too he must have seen what was happening. He looked around and up to the wheelhouse and saw the helmsman collapsed across the controls and tried to make a dash for it. As soon as he started, they could see that his injuries were too bad. He struggled a few paces along the rail but he was not moving anything like fast enough. He must have seen this because he decided to let go and run. Almost immediately they boat hit a wave sending him skidding across the deck to disappear into the water. He was lucky. The speedboat was near and they had been watching him. Moments later they were crashing through the patrol boat's wake to rescue him.

"What's going to happen if it hits us?" Velma asked.

Paul didn't answer. He couldn't answer. The officer on the bridge above him couldn't have answered either. They watched transfixed as over 100 tonnes of patrol boat hurtled towards them of control at an ever-increasing speed.

Paul ran towards the opposite side of the ship, as fast as he could up the sloping wooden deck taking Velma with him. She did not question why they were running but just struggled to keep up. Luckily the area had no chairs on it at this time of night and was spotlessly clean so there was no rubbish sliding down towards them.

When they were half way across there was a loud crash from behind them as the patrol boat hit. They felt the ship shake under the impact and the deck became steeper. The hull was being pushed sideways so hard it was being pushed away from under the superstructure. They reached for the rail to pull themselves along.

He glanced across at the casino through the window. A small group of people were hanging onto one of the main tables. It was well secured to the floor and would not move. Most of the slot machines had now fallen and slipped away so they were safe from being hit. But they had nowhere to go. They were in the middle of a floor that was already too steep to get across and getting worse by the second. They were screaming. He wondered if they were screaming at him as he climbed past them. Through the thick glass he couldn't tell. There was nothing he could do for them.

Looking behind him he saw some of the crew members who had tried to arrest him were following him. They had obviously given up trying to save the crowd by the broken windows and were trying to escape. All the time he could picture the patrol boat, now jammed up under the side of the ship pushing at it with those incredibly powerful engines and driving the hull sideways and increasing the lean.

Finally they reached the far side. He found himself climbing part way through the rail and pulling Velma after him. They managed to get up onto the outside of the rail and paused for breath.

"What's going to happen?" Velma asked.

"I think it's gone." He replied. "I don't know if they are still trying anything on the bridge. They still might be able to do something with the ballast or the stabilisers."

The noise of the patrol boat's engines stopped.

"It must have sunk." He said. "That may help but I think that it's done the damage"

They could see right along the side of the ship. Looking down they could see an expanse of bare clean white hull and then a clear water line below which it was green from being in the sea. But now it was tipped up at a steep angle and they could just see the curve of the hull and the sea beyond. The ship was still moving quite fast. He could see the waves moving past them at almost the same speed as they had been before they started to turn. All the time he could feel that they were still tipping further.

[Moving along the rail to work back along the high side was easier than] climbing up it across the ship and they made good progress but they could not go far. Very soon they reached the point where the promenade was enclosed and it went down a flight of steps to the next deck down.

Soon one of the crew members was coming up behind them. Paul asked him if he knew what was happening.

"We can't do anything. None of these big ships have ever been this far." He replied.

Just as he finished speaking they heard the ship's horn. It was sounding short blasts and he counted seven of them. This was the signal to get lifejackets and go to muster stations but they all knew that hardly anybody could go anywhere.

"Is that somebody on the bridge telling us they can't stop it?" Paul asked.

"They might get some of the boats away from the other side." The crew man replied. "If anybody is prepared to risk having the whole ship coming down on top of them."

"Can't we do anything?" Velma asked. "Can't we even get some lifejackets. They may be able to launch some boats the other side but we haven't got a hope of launching any here. It might take hours for rescue to come and I can't swim for that long."

"We go for the rafts." Paul replied. "If it goes a bit further we can get out on the hull side and get back to them. They're in racks under the boats and if we can get one out they are designed to inflate as soon as you open the casing."

"Not quite." The man replied. "But they are quite easy to work. We should be ok. We've used them a few times in practice drills."

He looked along the rail. There was nobody else there for as far as he could see. He looked up again to the rail on the sun deck way above them. There was nobody there either. It was past three in the morning and almost everybody had been inside. A few more had now joined them on their [rail] but they were just ten people out of the thousands on the ship. It was still tipping. If anything it was going faster now.

“As soon as we can we’ll have to go quickly.” The crew man was saying. “This ship won’t lay on its side for long. As soon as they hit the water all the glass doors on the balconies will burst and she’ll go right over.”

One of the men behind him tried to climb out onto the hull side but it was still too steep for him to stand and he had to reach back for the rail to stop himself from sliding across it into the sea. All they could do was to wait.

“Can’t we do anything?” Velma asked, looking in through a window at the chaos in the casino. “How will those people get out? Can’t we help them? How are they going to get out to the rafts? Will there be space for them?”

“There will be plenty of space in the rafts. There are at least twenty and they take twenty people each but...” He stopped when he saw Velma’s relief about the space in the rafts.

One of the crew men had to finish it for him. “They can’t get out. The nearest exit doors are almost half way along the ship and it’s tipped too far for them even to get as far as the door out of the casino. They can’t get out of the broken windows because the slot machines have piled up against them. If the ship sinks they will go down with it.”

“You can’t say that.” She replied immediately. “There must be something we can do. God will not forgive us if we don’t do anything.”

“Do you think that just because I don’t believe in God I don’t want to try?” Paul replied. “We really can’t do anything. The deck is too steep to go back the way we came and we can’t go forward yet. Even if we found anything strong enough to break one of the windows we couldn’t help the people inside.” He looked around at the others for agreement.

“And we only have a few minutes before we have to move on.” The crewman added.

“Do we move on and leave them all to die? How can a Christian do that?”

Just then the speedboat appeared around the front of the ship. It came around on the plane and stopped opposite them. Paul could see that it now had six people in it and was quite low in the water and guessed that they must have picked up another man from the patrol boat. He knew why they had come around to their side of the ship. Nobody could jump from where we were so they couldn’t get swamped with people. This was Karl’s practical Christianity at work.

He was still looking at the speedboat when one of the crewmen shouted out to tell them to look down at the hull. The stabiliser was being deployed. Like a stubby aeroplane wing it was folding out from the hull and rotating so its leading edge pointed up at a steep angle. In the air it was doing nothing but they realised that it must have been impossible to put out the one on the other side without putting them both out.

“Do you think they’ll be able to do anything?” He asked.

“At least they’re trying.” The man replied. “Listen to the engine. They’re trying to turn it.”

They could feel the ship begin to turn as the stabiliser on the far side took effect. The engine note increased. They were using all the power they could to try to turn the ship into the lean and use the stabiliser to lift the low side.

“They can’t use the rudder.” He explained. “It would pull the hull further across and just make it worse. They’re doing the right thing.”

They waited in silence and tried to see if it was working. It was impossible to judge. In the darkness they had nothing to measure it against with no horizon that they could see.

A voice came over the public address system. It sounded less confident than before. "This is the bridge. We are attempting to right the ship." The man said. "We have deployed the stabilisers and are moving ballast water in the tanks. Passengers who can are asked to gather in muster stations but no attempt should be made to launch the lifeboats. We cannot stop the ship yet and we are moving too fast for passengers to embark safely into the boats. Please await further instruction."

They still couldn't tell if he was winning but now he had made clear the gamble he was taking. Paul pictured him struggling to keep his balance on the bridge. He was taking an enormous risk with the lives of people he probably knew little about. He probably had few reports from the muster stations so he had no idea how many people might get away if he did slow down. But he knew that most would not. Most were trapped in rooms where the floors were too steep for them to move and he was trying to save them.

"I assume that it will stop well enough if it goes right over." Paul said, not wanting to go on to point out that it would mean that they could get away in their raft even if nobody else could escape.

The stabiliser below them kept turning. One moment it would turn to a slightly steeper angle and then it would turn back. The man on the bridge was trying everything he could think of

They heard a noise above them [add] and looked up. It was a helicopter. It was shining a searchlight down at the ship. They could see the beam scan along the hull until it got to them and they were blinded by the glare. It stopped for almost half a minute before moving on.

Paul looked up again as it moved up over the front of the ship. It wasn't a heavy rescue craft. It had an open hatch facing towards them but he could see no winch mechanism. He could see it now. They were going to be on the news. They were virtually the only people on the ship with a good chance of survival and the only ones they could see to film. Millions of people would sit in the comfort of their houses and watch them. They would see him doing nothing. He had time to think how they would judge him. Would they realise that only one man could do anything and he was up on the bridge and doing his best.

The helicopter flew out across the sea in front of them. First its searchlight picked up the speedboat which was keeping up with the ship. With the light on it he could see how difficult it was for it. The boat was over-loaded with the six people in it and it wasn't built for use on open sea. It was being badly buffeted and he could see a man at the back trying to bail water out.

The helicopter moved on and he could see that they had found another boat out in the sea ahead of them. It was a lifeboat. Its orange roof was clearly outlined in the pool of light with a number painted in white on the top.

"It's one of ours." The crewman said. "We must have done a full circle and come round to it."

As they approached they could see that the lifeboat's engine had been started and it was moving well clear as the ship shot by. Soon they were moving past it. Even if it was one of the boats they used as launches to ferry passengers ashore at the smaller ports it couldn't go nearly as fast as the ship at full speed. The light was still on it. It was quite close now and they could see a man standing up at the helm. Then, for a moment, they could see inside. There were rows of empty seats. A boat designed for over a hundred people had fewer than ten on it.

"It's the first thing we learn." The man was saying. "Never let a boat go until it's full."

“What if it’s that or waiting for ten decks above you to fall on top of you?” Paul replied. “Perhaps there were only a few people who could get on it. It must have been incredibly difficult to get it launched with the ship like this.”

The helicopter was moving on. It had found another lifeboat. He glanced at it but then he looked back at the other one. It had a light in it, a point of reference. He watched it closely. As far as he could tell the helmsman was not winning. They were still tipping.

There were just the ten of them, Velma and Paul and eight crew. Nobody else had appeared. They assumed that anybody else who had been out on the promenade deck had either got into a lifeboat or fallen into the sea in the attempt. They needed to get ready.

“We may only have about two minutes.” One of the men was saying. “The ship may lay flat on her side but most likely she will go further than that quite quickly. We need to get round to a raft and pull it up out of the rack. The casing is a cylinder so we can roll it across to the edge. Then we inflate it and try to get launched. We must get well clear before she sinks. There will be colossal suction which could easily drag us way down.”

“It won’t sink.” Another replied. “Once it’s upside down it will float for hours. The poor folk inside will never get out but it won’t sink. It’s going to be incredibly difficult to get into the raft. [If we all get into it and let it slide down the curve of the hull it will rip itself apart]. The welds between the plates can be quite sharp and there will be barnacles [make it happen] If we could get ourselves and a raft up onto the bottom of the hull it would be much easier.”

Paul looked down at the hull below them. They were near the front and it curved away very quickly. It looked very slippery and the idea of running about on it while it rolled over beneath him did not appeal at all.

“Sooner or later.” Velma concluded. “We are going to have to go to the side and throw the raft in and jump after it. It may not be too high and I expect that we can all swim so we might as well do it as soon as possible. The sooner we can get away the safer we shall be.”

The discussion came to an abrupt end when we saw that the stabiliser below them was being retracted.

“What the hell is going on?” One of the men shouted up in the direction of the bridge. There was no reply but next they felt the engine stop.

“Perhaps he knew the engines were gone.” Paul guessed. “Maybe the cooling water intakes had come out above the surface and they were about to explode.”

“Perhaps he decided he should stop them before it goes. They might drive it under if the bow flooded first. Perhaps he decided to switch off before trying to save himself.” He added.

As the ship slowed it leaned faster. They found they could get safely out onto the side.

“It’s definitely gone isn’t it.” Velma said as they ran. “All those people inside, they must know it now. It’s not going to stand up again.”

In a few seconds they were past the enclosed length of deck and were looking up the sloping side of the ship at the hulls of the lifeboats. Just a minute later two of the crew men had a life raft clear and were rolling it across the hull side. The ship was tipping fast now. Paul couldn’t help looking down through the railing and the window below it. The lounge extended across the full width of the ship. It had been divided into smaller areas by decorative railings to suit the seating plan and the rails had been well fixed down because they were still in place. Resting against them were piles of furniture and people. Nearest him he could see a small group who had managed to climb out on top of the chairs that had landed on them. They were struggling to pile them up so they could get closer to the window. It all looked helpless to him. In the next few minutes he expected the ship to tip past the

horizontal and the entire pile would fall away and they would all crash down to the far side. In the distance he could just see the water lapping up against the glass. It would soon burst through.

Suddenly they saw him looking down on them. They waved and he could see that they were shouting. He could not hear them and he knew that there was nothing he could do. When the water came some of them might swim out but it would be a long way to find a door or a broken window. Most of them would know that they would die. The ship would sink and they would be in it all the way down.

He stood up again and looked around. All the others had gone ahead of him across the ships towards the curve of the hull. They were gathered around the raft and heard a sudden hissing noise and he saw it start to spread out. He had just started to run towards them when he was thrown from his feet. The whole ship shook and the raft skidded off across the hull. He landed sideways but managed to get back up on his knees just in time to see it slide over the side bumping over the welds and being torn apart so the air was blowing out of it by the time disappeared from view.

“What the hell was that?” One of the men shouted jumping up. “Something big must have blown.” He was running towards Paul and the rack to try to get another raft.

Paul glanced down through the rail again. There was no sign of the group with the chairs. He pictured them landing hard on another railing further down and their pile of furniture landing on top of them.

This time they had more trouble getting a raft out of the rack. The ship was settling fast. It was past horizontal and so the launching chute with the rafts in it was almost vertical. Two of them were struggling with it while the other two tried to hold them to prevent them from falling through the rail. For an instant they paused for breath and at that moment the realisation came to them all. The ship was not moving at all. There was no rocking or motion of any kind.

Harry had had a good evening. His lecture had gone well. The audience had not been great when he had started but he had kept them for the whole hour and more. Better than that he had got a large group of elderly Americans asking questions and got enough dialogue going with them to be sure that they would come back next time, and almost certainly buy tickets to his tours. After that he had joined a somewhat younger group in the bar but he had made an excuse and left early to get a good night's sleep ready for his next lecture.

He opened his cabin door with his card. He had worried that it might be bolted from the inside which would mean that Steve, who shared the cabin with him, had female company and he would have to come back later. As he entered, the smell of cannabis was overpowering. Given that they had been put together in a completely random process they got along very well. Steve was almost the same age as his older son and he was the drummer in the band which played in some of the smaller lounges. He was generally quite quiet but when he did talk he was very polite and he kept his few possessions very tidily in the available space. His use of the cabin to entertain his girl friend the dancer did not bother Harry at all. The cannabis was another matter. He worried that when Steve was caught by the ship's security, as he surely would be, they would come back to question him.

Exchanging few words they were soon in bed. Steve switched out his reading light in the upper bunk and when Harry switched his off it was completely dark. This was not like a house at night with a bit of moon-light filtering in through the curtains. There was no port-hole and the door was sealed so no crack of light from the corridor got through. The cabin was completely dark. He had thought of leaving the bathroom light on but it seemed pointless. He could turn his reading light back on if he needed it. The movement of the ship, the gentle rumbling of the engines, and the

noise from the air conditioning vent in the ceiling all combined to give the pleasant feeling of being at sea.

He woke with a start, not knowing what it was that had woken him. He felt disorientated in the complete darkness, his feet seemed to be higher than his head. For a few moments he wondered if it was the effect of the cannabis but then he heard something sliding across the floor. Turning his light on he saw that it was the chair, which had slid across from in front of the dressing table and was now level with his head by the hull side.

He called to Steve to see if he was awake.

“Yes, it’s quite a lean isn’t it? They do this sometimes. The captain will be in big trouble if anybody gets hurt.” Steve sounded reassuring so he turned the light out again. Moments later he heard a loud crash and turned the light back on to see a bottle of water had fallen on the floor. The fiddle rail on the high shelf was not broken. The ship had leaned far enough for the bottle to slide across and fall over it onto the floor.

He got up and within a minute he was dressed and climbing past the collection of papers and clothing that had slid onto the floor. Gathering just his wallet from under the chair he headed for the door.

“Let me know if you find anything.” Steve called after him but the practised calm in his voice was gone, and from the corner of his eye Harry saw him moving towards the steps to get down from his bunk.

The corridor looked better than the cabin because there was nothing in it to fall or slide about. A few doors were opening but everybody looked calm. Another crash signalled another bottle falling to the floor but there was no panic. At that moment the officer on the bridge made his announcement that everything was under control.

Everybody hesitated but Harry suddenly felt claustrophobic thinking about the 15 decks above him. He was turning towards the stairs when the first scream came from behind him. He knew who it was, it was Stephen’s girlfriend.

“That’s Victoria.” He shouted through the door.

Stephen must have been out of bed close behind him because he appeared immediately and rushed past him. It was the opposite direction from the stair well but Harry found himself following. They could not run, the slope to one side was too steep, but the cabin was only four doors along so Stephen was there in a few seconds.

“Don’t worry, we’ll get you out. The ship will be upright again soon.” He shouted these words but nobody listened. Many more screams followed the first. As they rushed into Victoria’s cabin they saw others emerging from cabins as far as they could see and all reaching frantically for the handrails to work along towards the stairs. They ran towards the bed where she lay screaming with her leg bleeding. The sheets were covered in shards of broken glass.

“I’ll pick her up, you get the glass off.” Harry shouted. “Then we can wrap something round it and run for it.”

Showing strength which amazed Stephen he reached his arms under her and lifted her enough for him to pull the bed cover with the glass on it off the bed.

Stephen pulled the blood-soaked cover away, gathering the glass in it and throwing it down towards the lower corner of the floor against the hull side. Harry unceremoniously dropped Victoria back down on the bed and roughly wiped off the remaining glass with a towel. He knew that this hurt her and her screams tuned to sobbing as the stab of pain hit her but he could feel the deck continuing to tip. Stephen wrapped another towel around her leg showing scarcely more gentleness than Harry and they picked her up between them and ran to the door.

The first container hit the hull side so hard that even Victoria was stunned into silence. There were no portholes so they could not see anything and the hull was so thick that it didn’t give way, but they knew that something big had hit it. It was not a

crash so much as a deep thud that reverberated through the structure around them making doors tear at their hinges before slamming back. Neither Stephen nor Harry could say anything, they just ran.

The corridor outside was now empty. They could see the crowd disappearing towards the stairs and ran after them. The slope was so steep that they had to hold the handrail with one hand. Passing Paul's door Harry noticed that it was closed but had no time to worry about it.

The stairs were in chaos. They were broad and thickly carpeted. They went up to a spacious half-landing and then turned back to go up to the next deck. They were tipped so far to one side that most people were trying to hold onto the rail. Others were trying to rush past grabbing onto clothing and arms of those at the rail to gain their balance. Harry watched as a large man who looked as if he had come up from the engine room grabbed a girl's arm so violently she was torn from the rail and ended in a heap against the opposite wall. The man shouted something in a language which Harry could not understand before running on.

He ran up to help the girl. She had collapsed in the angle between the floor and the wall and had reached up to hold the rail. When he reached her he saw that she was crying. He tried to talk to her and persuade her to move on while they still could but he couldn't tell if she understood him at all. He even gently tried to ease her hand off the rail but she only gripped tighter. He saw Stephen looking across at him holding Victoria. He was not saying anything but was shaking his head.

Harry looked down at the girl below him. "Don't worry, we're going on up but you can follow later. You'll be ok." He hadn't the courage to look at her eyes.

"How far have we got to go?" Stephen asked. "Will anybody open the cargo doors on deck five."

"No chance." Harry replied. "We've to go up to the promenade on deck eight to get out."

They started up and reached the half-landing and struggled across it. They were half way up the next flight when the patrol boat hit. Feeling the ship lean further they tried to move even faster. Reaching the next deck they had to slide down the carpet to get across to the next flight and start climbing up again.

Nobody was coming past them now. They just formed part of a long line clawing their way up slowly along the rails.

They were almost at deck five when they heard the seven blasts of the ship's horn. Everybody around them knew what it meant. The ship was doomed. They had to struggle even harder to try to make progress. This was the only way out.

Harry looked up ahead. He was on the easy section where he could walk along the angle between the steps and the wall just leaning down to hold the rail for balance. He thought about the girl still collapsed on the flight below and hoped that people were getting past without hurting her even more. Then there was the landing where people were pulling themselves up the slope. After that was the difficult bit. He looked across at the other flight where they had to move along taking their weight on the handrail.

Victoria was recovering now and they found that she could make progress without being held, leaving Stephen free to concentrate on holding on for himself. She was not the only one who looked as if they had been injured. An elderly man on the far side had his shirt torn away revealing a bad cut on his chest that was dropping blood onto the carpet but he was struggling on. The minutes passed. They were moving at the pace of the slowest person. They all knew that timing could be critical, the ship was sinking and they still had two decks to go, but they moved on in silence each following in turn. Harry reached the next landing. Sliding down the carpet he caught the rail half way across so he could look up and down the well. There, just below him, was the girl who had collapsed. Even she was moving now; people around her were helping her. He called down but she was gone before she heard him.

He had time to think about what was happening. There had been a few people who had fought their way past but all around him he could see people helping others. Perhaps his views about humanity were wrong. Just then the captain made his announcement saying he was trying to right the ship and asking people not to launch the lifeboats.

This gave renewed hope.

“Let’s keep going as fast as we can. Two more decks up to promenade and then we’re ready to get on the boats if we need to.” Harry announced, feeling that he should say something encouraging. The line started to move faster. He was amazed by the reserves of energy that people were finding.

As he was about to emerge onto the next deck he heard a shout from just in front. He climbed forward to see what had happened. The elderly man in front of him had tried to slide down the carpet to get to the next flight of stairs but then had missed it and had slid down a corridor almost right across the ship. He was shouting to his wife who was safely on the stairs telling her to carry on and not to let go and join him. There was nothing Harry could do. The deck was far too steep to climb and there were no handrails. He felt ashamed as he carefully guided himself to the next stairs and waited there to catch Stephen and Victoria.

He finally reached promenade deck just as the crash came and they were thrown forwards. Then came the silence as the ship laid right over, the floors were now upright and they found themselves hanging onto the rail with nothing to stand on. Victoria fell almost immediately, Stephen dropped down after her and the others followed to form a group standing on what had been the side wall of the stair well, all slowly realising that the ship was not moving at all.

Pauls saw the two men who had been trying to get the raft stop and the two who had been holding them pull them back up.

“She’s aground.” One of them finally announced. “That’s what he was doing all along. He’s got her onto a sandbar. That’s why he had to slow down and get the stabilisers in.”

Just as they were standing up the last of the engines stopped and the lights went out.

Soon they were all standing in a group on the vast expanse of the ship’s side. It was sloping down very slightly towards the upper decks but was easily level enough to walk on.

Paul looked warily at the security men, knowing that they had originally been trying to arrest him.

“You’re not going to...” he started. But at that point they heard a sound like a waterfall coming from the promenade deck doors below them.

“I think that we can forget that.” The man replied. Pausing for a moment before tentatively adding “for now”.

“We’ve got to help them.” Velma said, but nobody could see how. They started looking. They had hundreds of places to look down into the ship. The hull side that they were on was covered with windows and portholes. They could look across the promenade deck through more windows and doors and at the back of the ship one of the crew members was able to go right past the balconies and look down into some of them.

Paul was looking down across the promenade and through a window into the lounge where he had seen the people before. He could see the faint glow of an emergency light but it was only intended to show the exit, not to illuminate the room. He could tell that water was flowing in fast because he could see white patches which reflected light like the surf on a beach. Beyond that he could see little but he knew that people would be dying there. The water would rise to the level it was

outside, about half way across the ship, and anybody who was not a strong swimmer had little hope.

He heard a horn sound behind him and looked back to see the speedboat. Even in the bad light he could see that it was sinking. The people in it were shouting and pointing towards the front of the ship. He could see that one of them was holding what looked like a long rope.

"If we had that rope we might be able to get some people out". He said as he ran along the hull with the speedboat following after him.

The shape of the bow was such that the flat surface gave way to a slope down to the water and he soon realised what they wanted. The speedboat pulled in and the man with the rope jumped out onto the [torpedo shape of the bow] at the water line. Once he was on it he threw up the end of the rope. Paul grabbed it and one of the crew men came to help him but, instead of trying to climb the rope they saw that the man was tying something else onto the end of it. When he signalled they pulled it up and saw that it was a long rope ladder.

It was made of orange rope with plastic steps and was very light but looked strong. As it unravelled they realised that it was extremely long.

The crew man watched as they pulled it up. "They may have had the wrong boat but they sure brought something useful with them."

Paul shouted "Get out fast so we can use the ladder" and five of them scrambled up the slope. The one man remaining was bailing out water but as soon as the others were gone he jumped into the driver's seat. With the weight of all the people [gone] the boat went quickly onto the plane and disappeared.

As the people reached the top of the ladder Paul saw that Helen and Karl had come back. He smiled at Karl. "We can use this rope ladder. There are hundreds of people inside who can't get out."

Karl scowled but Helen smiled. "At least it might be some use. I got them to bring it in case somebody needed to climb up onto the ship"

"It would have done that all right." Paul replied.

She looked across the ship on its side in the moonlight. "Did we really cause all this? How many people will have died?"

"It was the patrol boat that did this. Not your little speedboat." He tried to reassure her.

They pulled in the ladder and dragged it across the deck. They lowered it through one of the promenade doors and could already feel somebody starting to climb onto the bottom of it while they were fixing it to the rail.

Paul looked down into the darkness to try to see the people climbing up and just caught sight of the head of the first person. He moved back. The four crew members were grouped around the ladder ready to help the people who climbed out and there was little he could do.

Karl and his crew and the two security men had disappeared.

He asked Velma if she had seen where they had gone but she had been looking down at the ladder as well. They saw movement further along the ship and went to look. The others were grouped by the edge of the promenade deck much further along the ship.

"What do you think they are doing?" Velma asked.

"Perhaps they are trying to rescue people with the rope." Paul replied. "We might be able to help but Karl would be the one for rope climbing."

"I can't see Karl helping anybody but himself." She replied. "Helen was right. It was really them that caused it. They only came back because their boat was sinking and I don't think they had any lifejackets."

They arrived to see one of the security guards tying the rope to the rail and throwing the rest of it down through the doorway below them. Almost immediately it tightened and started to move as people in the ship pulled on it.

"What happens next?" Paul asked.

"We wait while they climb out." Karl replied.

They looked down. There was an emergency light almost directly below them and they could see people gathering near the rope. The light was reflecting on water and they could see others swimming towards it. But there was no sign of anybody being able to climb it. One of them seemed to get partly out of the water but then they dropped back.

"You'll have to go down and help them." Helen said.

Karl jumped up to face her.

"You're the only person here who could do it. You can climb ropes easily."

"What about this man." He said, turning to one of the security men. "He's supposed to be here to help passengers. Why not him?"

The man cowered as Karl leaned towards him. He was middle aged with the build to control a drunk but never to climb a rope. "My job is to help and advise our customers." He replied. "We don't normally have a requirement for rope climbing because criminals like you don't normally manage to cause disasters like this. If you can help you should do what you can."

[He looked as if he was about to carry on but Karl was on him. "So you're going to tell the world I did this are you? Go and tell them." He grabbed the man by his shirt and threw him forwards onto the rail and before he had a chance to realise what was happening he was falling into the ship. They heard a terrible crash followed by screams from below.]

Helen was shouting at him but Karl was calling to his crew and they quickly surrounded Paul and Velma and the other guard, forcing them towards the rail.

Helen shouted again but Karl pushed her away.

"These three are the only ones who know. All the others will have died. If we don't get rid of them we shall have to run away forever."

One of his crew from the speedboat was standing next to him holding a knife with a long shining blade.

"You can't." Helen shouted. "It would be cold blooded murder."

"We're not safe yet." Harry said, listening to the water pouring in below them. "We may not get trapped in an up-turned hull but we don't know how deep we are in the water."

They looked down at the corridor which was now below them. Water was seeping up through the cabin doors and forming pools on top of them. And on the water there was oil. It was thick black fuel oil [coming up from the lower decks] and as soon as they could see it they smelt it.

"The whole ship could be under water." Stephen said. "We might not be on a sand bank, we might be on the sea bed."

They were crowded on the wall of the stair well. From one edge they could look down at the oily water or up at the dim and unreachable outline of the doorway out to the promenade deck. To one side there were the carpeted treads of the staircase now standing upright. Behind them the wall of the landing had a handrail reaching up it. A fit person might be able to climb it but it led nowhere. To the second side there were ceiling tiles. Harry had already tried kicking through one of these but all it exposed was the steel underside of the next flight of steps. [more urgent]

The roar of the flowing water continued. In the dim light they could see it steadily rising in the corridor that went out to the promenade on the low side.

Harry could hear screaming from the rest of the ship but his small group were quiet. There was nothing more to say. The glimpses they had had into lounges and down corridors as they climbed the last flights of stairs had show them that they were fortunate to be where they were. There was nothing else they could do but to wait and hope that rescue came before the water level reached them. Even if they could

swim in the oil they saw that if it rose to the level where it was deep enough for them to swim around to the next flight of stairs to get them to the next deck it would be too deep to get down to the one after that to let them carry on up.

He tried to pray. [It wasn't easy]. It would be easy just to recite some words to himself. Just say the words and you couldn't lose. If God was listening it might do some good but if not it couldn't do any harm. In the back of his mind he had the nagging thought that if he was about to die he should be making peace with God rather than idly speculating about whether He existed.

He had led prayers often enough before. Sometimes on ships the chaplain didn't get up in time, sometimes he was too drunk and sometimes there just wasn't one and every time the passengers expected a Sunday service. Harry had often had to stand in and lead the service so it seemed wrong to pray alone.

When he started with "Let us pray" and went on to the Lord's prayer nobody seemed surprised and most joined in. But he needed to rationalise.

"I am finding it difficult to pray." He explained. "It seems obvious that if God could listen to us and could do anything to help if He did hear, then He wouldn't have let the ship get like this in the first place".

But he didn't quite see it like that. If people were fighting wars or doing other things that were presumably classed as bad by God then it was quite rational to think that He might be able to get them to stop. The devil would be working against Him but it still might be possible to affect the human mind. But this ship had turned over because somebody had made a mistake. Even if there were terrorists or others like them involved it still took a fault in the design to make it go over. The person who had made the mistake was not evil, just incompetent.

He tried again. "Let us pray that whoever made the mistakes that have led to this disaster will learn from them and spare others from suffering what is happening to us. If God had a purpose letting this happen let us pray that it succeeds in that purpose and nobody else has to have it happen to them."

Nobody replied. He hadn't expected a lively philosophical discussion. At least he hoped his words might have distracted them from the terrible screams they could hear echoing in the distance.

He didn't want to leave it there. They couldn't just be part of some great learning exercise. He tried to explain: "Perhaps the devil had driven somebody to cut corners with the design of the ship to cheat the passengers and make more profit. Perhaps God will see it and rescue us."

Just then he saw some things floating in the oil below him. He realised that the level must have reached up to a doorway and what had been inside was floating out. They were just black shapes seen in the very bad light. He couldn't reach them even if he had been prepared to try to swim because the doorway was well below him. They could have been anything just rocking gently in the swell that was coming from somewhere into the remains of the dining room. They could have been just piles of floating debris, bits of wooden tables and chairs mixed up with table cloths. But then the arm moved and he felt violently sick. But there was still nothing he could do but to wait and hope that he was rescued before the oil reached him. Soon the bodies floated away through another doorway.

He had watched the wildlife programmes and seen lions killing everything else that lived nearby. It looked rather bloody but apart from that it was good to watch, it was the natural order of things. So why was it so terrible when a person died? Was it because they had a special relationship with God? Or was it just that to be sentient was to know about mortality and seeing one of your own species die reminded you of it?

He kept thinking about the person in the oil. They would be dead by now. Had they believed in God? It didn't matter which God it was, the deal was supposed to be the same from all of them. He told the others that he had seen dead bodies but gave no detail. He couldn't describe it and didn't think he ever would be able to.

“We should pray for their souls” He said, wondering what it meant and how it should be done. Surely the book said that if they had lived a good life they should be collecting the reward and if they had lived a bad one they should be suffering for it.

“Let us hope that their bodies are quickly recovered and they can be passed into God’s care at a proper funeral.”

That was all he could think of saying.

He couldn’t imagine how the souls would know whether they had had a funeral or not. Death was like sleep, time had no meaning, so they might not wake to find out until the end of the universe. And if it was all a myth after and they never woke then they would never know. That, at least, was reassuring.

Suddenly the rope appeared; hanging down past them almost as far as the water level.

He was at least able to tell Stephen that they were not under water. But all his attempts to call out to whoever had lowered the rope were ignored. All they could hear was distant voices that sounded as if they were arguing.

Karl was distracted by a loud cheer from the group at the other stair well. Paul didn’t stop to look what it was; he grabbed Velma and jumped, just managing to keep clear of the doorway and land on the side of a lifeboat. They slid down the smooth white hull and landed on a pile of sun-loungers which had piled up against the bulkhead below them.

They looked up to see Karl staring down at them wondering whether to chase them. Without waiting for him to decide they jumped clear and ran along the cabin side towards the front of the ship. Karl was following above them but Helen was still screaming at him and he turned to face her.

They ran across the windows of a lounge but then they came to a door. It was not one of the big glass doors leading into the stair wells but a smaller varnished wood one with a notice on it saying “crew only”. Paul leaned down and pulled on the handle and just managed to lift it and open the door. It opened to a corridor but this was not a wide one like in the passenger areas but a much smaller one leading to facilities for the crew. They jumped through onto the far wall just as Karl saw what was happening and jumped down past the lifeboat after them. Velma looked up and saw a bolt. Moments after she had pushed it home they saw the handle turn, followed by Karl’s shouted curses as he found it locked.

Soon they heard him stamping on a window just to one side of the door. Looking up they could see his clothes were covered in blood.

“He must have done that jumping down across the promenade deck.” Paul said.

“Either that or he killed the other guard with the knife.” Velma replied. “He can’t get through can he?”

“No chance. That will be really thick strong glass. He’ll give up in a minute and find a way round. We need to get out of here.”

Paul had to duck slightly as they ran along the corridor. There were two doors opening off it but they ran across them assuming that they would just open into cabins.

“They’d be like rat traps.” Paul said. “Once we jumped in there we’d never be able to get out and he’d just work along until he found us.”

In one direction the corridor turned sharply giving them a vertical drop. In the other direction it went up a flight of stairs. These had a solid wall on each side so they could get past them without difficulty. It then continued a short distance and ended in a door. They opened it to find what looked like a crew dining area. It had big windows facing out over the front deck and the moonlight was shining in through them. The tables had benches around them and they were all fixed to the floor. The area seemed to go right across the width of the ship and way below them they could

see water. It was quite still and reflected the moonlight, except in places where it had collections of plastic cups and plates and other debris floating on it.

Paul ducked through the door and jumped across onto the first bench. It seemed to give slightly but did not move. He climbed along and Velma followed him. They could get across from one bench to the next, holding onto tables as they passed them and they slowly descended across the room. After a few minutes they paused for breath.

Below them they could see a door just above the water level. It was in the centre of the ship and they were about half way down to it.

"I don't think we should go any further." Velma said. "If Karl comes in after us we would be well ahead of him but if we go on down we couldn't get back up."

Paul could see the truth in what she was saying. They had been sliding down the edges of the tables from one to the next but there was nothing to hold onto to climb back up.

"If we're going to stay we should hide." Paul replied, looking across at a serving counter with a solid base. "Let's get across to that so he won't see us if he looks in"

They started to move. Getting across the room was slow and difficult. "What do we do when we get there? We can't just sit there forever. The only way out [of the ship] is back up." Velma looked across at the table edge below the serving counter contemplating the idea of sitting on it for a long time.

They had no idea who would rescue them or when they would come. "The first helicopters and rescue boats should arrive any minute." Paul replied hopefully. "Since the one came over with the tv cameras they must have got quite a big response organised."

Velma was climbing across the gap between two of the plastic topped tables. There were two small benches in the gap, which seemed to be securely bolted down but they had rounded ends making them almost impossible to stand on.

"How long will it take them to get to us though?" She said as she finally got hold of the next table. "It will take them days to get everybody else out before they look in here."

"And all the while Karl will be pretending to help while he looks for us." Paul added.

Karl looked down at the three life-rafts. He could just see their bright orange outlines standing out against the oil in the gloom. Harry was rescuing people down there and soon the level would rise enough for him to take the rafts through the doorway into the dining room and rescue a lot more. If he then threw a lot more down he could save hundreds of lives. It had been his idea to get the rafts and his trick to get them to inflate on the way down. The suggestion that he should go down was wrong. He had important things to manage where he was. He was too busy to go down. That was why he had given up trying to catch Paul and Velma. He could deal with them later

To some extent he admired Harry. His ideas about God and the Devil were logical. But they almost ignored the main players, the people. Harry thought that God and the devil were fighting it out and all he could do was to watch. Hopefully he was doing more than that now but it had taken a leader like Karl to show him how. Humans were masters of their own destiny and should thank God for giving them the freedom for it. That was why Christianity was so different from other religions. Harry was wrong to say that God was the same in any religion. Christianity was all about the freedom to make decisions and anybody could see that it worked because Christians were so successful, they dominated the world.

He was pleased that the two crew men were working well. He had sent them to get more rafts and now they were on their way back rolling them across the hull.

He had seen the rescue boat as it circled the ship. He was pleased that it hadn't managed to land anybody on the hull. It could try to do things around the far side while he ran things properly on his side.

Suddenly he felt the ship move, the deck under him just seemed to drop slightly and then stop. He shouted to Helen to get down and hold onto the rail. She didn't move but in an instant he was down holding onto the rail himself and holding her with his free hand. An explosion followed with a sound like a roll of thunder. The deck shook throwing everybody down. He was able to catch Helen as she landed hard on the steel. Now the ship was tipping, turning past the horizontal. He wondered for a moment if it would go right over, should he be running so he was standing on the bottom when it went. But he held on where he was and watched as others crashed down and slid away helplessly as the ship settled down by the bow with the superstructure tipping well down into the water.

He jumped up with his senses alert for signs of fire. If the explosion had been a blast from the oil igniting he was sure that he would see some smoke or flame coming out of the windows or doors. But there was nothing, just silence after the blast. He decided that the blast must have been a compartment imploding, collapsing, the whole structure of the ship breaking up. Perhaps it was too big anyway. Was man being arrogant to pretend he could design a ship this big? They had said that about the Titanic and the Great Eastern before it but this was eight times the size of the Titanic. Man could create his destiny but God set the rules.

He looked back down inside only to see a vast wall of water pour out from the dining room and engulf the life rafts below him. For some seconds all he could see was swirling black water but then one by one they re-emerged. He knew he had saved Harry. By taking swift decisive action he had also saved Helen and himself. That was the key to his philosophy of life. It was up to the individual to take the initiative. Not like the weak fools who bought the drugs he sold. They were useless anyway and it wasn't his fault if they wanted to buy them.

His two crew men had recovered from the blast and were on their way back along the tilting hull with the rafts. He had work to do. His doubts disappeared. The design of the ship had not been arrogant, just incompetent.

He looked out and saw the rescue helicopters coming in. He redoubled his efforts so he looked at his best for the cameras they would be carrying.

Just as Paul and Velma reached the counter, a powerful light swept across the room, shining in through the windows. Looking out after it had gone they could just make out the outline of a patrol boat similar to the one that had crashed into the ship. They could make out the profile of a man on the front deck. He was having some trouble holding on as the sea seemed to have become much rougher and the boat was rocking badly.

The light shone in again and they waved. When it was gone again and they could see out the man seemed to be pointing at them. The boat came up close to the glass and more crew men appeared with a long pole. They reached out with the pole and it crashed against one of the windows. It made no impression and by the time they had picked it up again the boat had moved away.

"Don't give up." Velma shouted. "It can't be that strong".

As they came in for another attempt the helmsman mis-judged his distance and the front of the boat itself hit the ship. Paul and Velma could see it ride up on a wave and crash down against the windows. The rail on the boat bent back throwing the crew men back across the deck. As the boat scraped clear they saw that the hull side below it was bent inwards. But the windows did not give way. Two of the panes of glass were cracked and the metal bar between them seemed slightly bent but there were no holes.

"I'm afraid that if that didn't do it nothing will." Paul said. "Nobody is going to make a way out through there so the only way out is back the way we came.

The boat went away. They tried to make themselves as comfortable as possible on the end of the table next to the counter but there was little to hold onto.

Soon they heard the unmistakable noise of the first helicopter landing. More noise followed but they couldn't tell if it was the same one leaving or another one arriving.

"We should be out there helping. I know that I'm no expert but people are dying on this ship and I should be trying to do something. Perhaps Karl gave up."

[move down?] "We're going to have to move soon with or without Karl." Velma replied. "I can't hold on here all day."

They could see that the water appeared to have risen and was now level with the far side of the door.

"Either the ship's sinking into the sand bar or the tide is rising." Paul said. "Either way if we want to get through that door we go now." [move..]

They were soon down level with it and he was standing up to his waist in water with his hand on the handle. They had talked about what they might find in the water on the far side. Paul realised that in all his life he had never seen a dead body and there might be many of them floating in the water just through the door.

"I think that most of the people who have drowned will be the ones who were never able to get out of their cabins." He said. "Hopefully most of the ones who got out are gathered at the bottom of rope ladders waiting to get out."

Velma pointed out that almost half the passengers would have been in cabins on the dry side. "They probably won't be badly injured but if their doors are above them they won't be able to get out."

He slid back the bolts and turned the handle and the heavy door dropped down into the water. As it came, a wave of oil almost three inches deep floating [on the water] surged out past him, smothering everything and bringing with it the overpowering smell.

At that moment he heard the explosion reverberating through the ship and felt it lurch as it tipped further over. He reached down into the oil as fast as he could to lift the door back up. Even as he was lifting it he could feel the ship tilting further and the water starting to flow towards him. He managed to close it and felt the latch click home but before he could reach for the bolts he could feel the weight of water build up on the far side making it impossible to slide them home. It was a steel door and was built to hold back water but soon it was bending out with oil spraying through the cracks. He glanced behind him. He could see the water level had risen outside the windows.

"It should hold." He said hopefully to Velma. "I'll climb up first and give you a hand." But he couldn't. It had been easy sliding down the edges of the tables but now he was trying to climb back up there was nothing to hold onto and the oil was everywhere making every surface treacherous. In any event there was no time. The water was rising too fast. It would go down again, they knew that, they had not gone down into it so it must go down again eventually when the effect of the explosion passed. But if the door or the window failed before it did they would be right in line with the full force of the wave.

Velma prayed. There was no time for words but she knew that the words they recited in church were not the real prayer. The words were prompts to help them with the real prayer and now she was praying for real. She had often worried about this. Many times she had held back from asking God for anything for herself because she knew that on average her life was good and there were many who needed God's help much more than she did. This time she needed Him and she hoped that he would look kindly on her pleas.

For an instant she wondered exactly what she was asking for. How would God save her? Would he make the water go down or would he somehow make the

door and window stronger or could he just save her and not worry about the details of the physical world.

She tried to concentrate on her prayer and stop her mind wandering off to consider irrelevant detail. There was a loud crack from the window. The pane of glass which had been hit by the boat was breaking up. A single shard had fallen from it and the water was pouring through it right by Paul. She thought of him and was immediately sorry for him. He didn't know God so he would have none of the comfort of prayer. Suddenly she realised that she had caught herself out. If prayer was just for comfort then it could do nothing to help her. If it was real and God was really listening then anything He did would inevitably save Paul as well as saving her. Paul was lucky to have her with him to pray for them both. She had never thought of it that way and it seemed odd that she was asking God to save Paul but she cleared her thoughts of the detail and submerged it in one final effort to pray with all her conscious mind. She could feel the power of God growing inside her and suddenly knew with complete confidence that her prayer was being answered.

Paul could see that she was praying. [dialog] In some ways he felt jealous of her ability to invoke a sort of instant therapy that made her face their situation without the sheer terror which he felt. The oil was jetting through the cracks around the door right across the room and spraying against the windows. The next few seconds were critical. If the latch failed it would swing down. The hinges were strong so there was no risk of the door itself flying into the room, it was what was behind it that was the problem. Without thinking he swung round so he could hold onto both legs of the table, one in each hand. His back was to the door now to take the force of the blast of water and everything in it and Velma was in front of him. He should protect her, he knew that. He did not know her well. She reminded him slightly of a distant aunt. They had only met a few days before. She seemed a nice enough person but that was not the point. He had a moral duty to protect her because she was another human being.

Velma saw him move and immediately saw it as a Christian act. Was this God answering her prayer by getting Paul to protect her? She prayed that God could save Paul as well as her. She could see now that the water level was beginning to fall outside the windows but she knew that it would take longer to fall inside the ship because it had nowhere to go. The door shook and creaked and the handle seemed to move. The water was pouring in now past the bottom of it which had bent well back. The whole thing was distorting. She was sure it would fail. She could see it now. God would answer her prayers by taking her soul into heaven but He would do nothing to protect her body. It had been ridiculous to assume that he would. She would die. She screamed.

[repeated? Force of the wave?]

Harry jumped back from the edge and the raft came past making a loud hissing noise as it went. As it took shape below him he thought for a moment that it might be upside down but then he saw that its cover was angled so it was self-righting. He looked up to see where it had come from and for an instant he saw Karl waving at him.

There was a rope on the cover for him to grab hold of if he jumped down but it wouldn't be easy. He could see himself sliding off into the oil and then coming up with his eyes full of it and never getting out. He wasn't fit and he wasn't brave. He knew that he should jump down and try to rescue people but now it was almost too late. It was drifting away past the end of the rope. Suddenly he heard the hissing noise again and a second raft came down, only just missing his head. He jumped back wondering if God had saved him or [just pure luck.] Almost immediately a third raft dropped down, sliding across the others and wedging them all tight in the space making it much easier to jump onto them.

He landed on the sloping cover of the life raft and held onto the safety rope that was fixed to it. He found it was very stable and it soon stopped rocking and he

was able to work his way round to the flap which was fixed with three ties of thin rope which looped over small nylon cleats. It took him a few moments to work out how to release them but soon he was inside looking out.

He looked back up and could just make out Stephen's outline glancing down at him before going back to try to help Victoria. He had been reluctant to leave them but since the raft had been there he was sure that it was best to get into it and find out how he could help. There was no point trying to shout back up to him. The screams from all around them would have made it impossible to hear and, apart from that, there was nothing to say.

The floor was not rigid and it gave way wherever he put weight on it so standing up was out of the question. It was also completely dark inside so he started to crawl around it holding onto handles that were fixed at intervals around the inflated ring that formed the edge, hoping to find an emergency pack of some sort with a light in it. He had only just started when he heard the explosion and also felt the shock wave from it. [His reactions saved him.] He quickly turned around and re-fastened the flap. This time he knew how the catches worked so he had all three secure when the wave hit. As the raft was thrown about in the cascade of water he held on to the handles and praying that nothing heavy or sharp would land on the raft. He felt it lift up so far he expected it to crash into something above it but then it fell down landing hard on its side. Eventually it righted itself and he opened the flap again to see if he could see anything. The emergency lights had all gone out. People were still screaming in the darkness but he couldn't tell where they were. He shouted out to Stephen but got no reply. From the way it seemed to be moving he had an impression that his raft was no longer confined in the narrow width of the corridor.

Fastening the flap again in case another wave came, he now worked quickly around and soon found the emergency supplies including a torch. He went back to look outside. The wave had spread the oil so now every surface that he could see was covered in it and glistened black as he shone the light on it. He could see walls to either side but ahead he could see water reaching away into the darkness and realised that it had risen to the level of the doorways. Looking up he could see the marks on the walls showing that the wave had come far higher, right up above the level where Stephen and Victoria had been. He called for them again but got no answer.

[Looking back] in the emergency pack he found a small paddle that screwed together in sections. The wave had come from the centre of the ship reaching him through the dining room. He guessed that they would have been swept along with it into the corridor leading to the front so he went that way, pushing the other rafts away behind him. He was only just in time moving away – as soon as he was clear he heard another raft drop down behind him. Because the ship had now tipped beyond the horizontal it slid down the ceiling to some extent but when he looked back he could see that it had inflated and seemed to be floating.

The corridor was black and smelled of oil even more strongly than the stairwells. The raft was not easy to manoeuvre. He had to lean out and try to paddle forward for a few strokes and then stop and use the torch to see if he was approaching anything or if his paddling had pulled any floating debris towards him. He remembered the corridor as being short. If you walked down it you wouldn't notice it. But now it seemed to stretch away into the distance. He felt himself stop and looked round to see one of the safety ropes caught around the broken framework for the ceiling tiles. He paddled back as best he could until it came loose and then tried to go forward again. The carpet was hanging off the other side but seemed to have fewer projections to catch on. A few yards on and it was quieter and finally when he called out he heard a faint reply.

When he finally found people he could see that there were far too many to fit in just one raft. They had been thrown forwards by the power of the wave and driven up against the end of the corridor. He reached out for an arm and pulled up and slid

the body over the side of the raft. Soon he was dragging them in without time to talk or even find out how badly they were injured. They were so covered in oil that they just slid away into it before he even had a chance to see who they were.

He kept calling "Stephen" and "Victoria" and even at times for Paul and Velma. Some of the ones in the raft were now calling names as well and occasionally a faint response to somebody's call would come. Each time he felt jealous, almost annoyed about the way their calls had been answered rather than his.

He counted twenty and then had to insist that they went back for a second raft. He half expected some of them to call out or even try to stop him and make him take some more but they were too weak and most were coughing and blinded by the oil. He wondered if he was leaving Stephen or Victoria behind but there was nothing he could do.

As he paddled his raft back along the corridor he could hear them moving about behind him. They had stopped screaming and he could just hear snatches of their conversation. A couple of them seemed to be well enough to move around to some extent and were trying to help. One old lady kept telling them not to bother with her while a much younger sounding man kept saying that he was sure that his leg was broken and they should help him.

Soon he came to an empty raft [which had floated down the corridor]. With a bit of manhandling he was able to get it past them and then he climbed across into it. Before he left he handed the paddle and the torch to the person nearest him and looked back briefly as they shone it inside. They had arranged themselves around the edge and as the light played across them they seemed to shy away from it. He wondered if this was because it hurt their eyes with oil in them or whether they just didn't want to be seen in such a miserable condition.

"We'll be ok, you go back to the others." One of the men said.

The man turned to one of his charges and passed them a bottle of water which had come from the survival kit. "Here try and drink some of this." and then he turned back to explain. "He was under for a long time – swallowed a lot of salt and oil."

They were in such a mess that it was difficult to see if the person with the bottle was male or female. They dutifully swallowed some water and were then violently sick.

"That's good. You get as much of it out as possible." The man said looking down at the appalling mess with telltale dark oily patches in it.

Harry could say nothing as he moved off. He felt that he had seen part of hell and even the devil could not have thought of anything worse.

His next boatload was made up of two extremes. Some of the fittest had waited while their friends were rescued and some of the worst had been left because they were not noticed. Fortunately two of the fitter men took charge and hauled the others out of the water. Harry had moved out of the way onto the outside of the cover and held the torch as they reached down into the black water and grabbed another one and dragged them out and slid them across the bottom of the raft. Soon there were just two remaining lying motionless at the very end of the corridor up against the door. He had visions of them being Stephen and Victoria dead in the oil.

As they paddled towards them Harry had to stop himself almost wishing that they were dead. He wondered what good it would do them to drag them out of the water and into hell. They might as well stay. He said nothing and paddled. The two men pulled them out, seemingly lifeless, from the water and started trying to get their throats clear and revive them. To his amazement the first one coughed out a mass of oily water and then started gasping for air. As the oil cleared from their face he leaned forward with his torch but was disappointed to see a face he did not recognise. The man moved to the other body which was sliding around on the soft

floor. This time he could do nothing. He tried for several minutes but there was no life. Harry did not look to see the face.

He looked up at the door in front of him. It was made with heavy steel, but it was badly bent. He could see that the force of the wave had almost burst it open but it had just held. He banged on it with his paddle and shouted. To his amazement Paul and Velma shouted back.

Progress was painfully slow to start with. Paul and Velma had managed to get through the doorway without having to duck right into the oil so, although their clothes were covered in it, their faces and eyes were clear and they were quite fit and able to paddle. They had set off with an almost empty boat and tied another empty one behind and were looking for people to rescue.

The problem was that with the cover in place there was only room for one person to paddle. Harry was doing his best but he had to use a sort of pulling motion to move them in the right direction. It had taken him 15 minutes to get them back to the stair well. They had passed a large number of boats that Karl had dropped down and were moving through the doorway into the dining room.

"We're going to have to risk it." Paul said. "It's not safe in here. The whole ship is breaking up and it could well catch fire. We need to get moving."

With the cover down they had the chance to look round. To one side there were the remains of the decorative ceiling and lighting. To the other the tables remained in their fixed positions. Above them their torches could only just show the outline of the windows right up at the side of the ship. In the water with them there was a mass of debris including all the chairs except a few which they could see precariously hanging on tables above them.

Paul and Harry started paddling with the two paddles they had, one at each side. Velma moved to the front to look for obstructions in the water. She was pushing the chairs out of the way as best she could as they got going and then she looked up further ahead.

"There's some bodies in the water up there" she called out.

"We're going to have to get used to it. There were some back in the corridor but it was too dark for you to see them." Harry replied.

"What do we do with them?"

"Nothing. There's nothing we can do."

An hour before he had never seen a dead body in his life. Now he was simply accepting the idea of leaving them in the water. He tried to convince himself that he was leaving them so he could move on and rescue large numbers of people who were at risk of drowning but still well enough to live.

Emerging into the atrium they suddenly saw the first signs of dawn in the sky above them. A massive jagged rupture had broken through the hull side letting the light penetrate onto the great expanse of black water.

This was the pride of the ship. The atrium was ten decks high and was shown in all the brochures. Paul could remember what it had looked like just eight hours before. At the lowest level people had been sitting on the small groups of chairs enjoying a relaxing drink while listening to the string quartet playing from a balcony above them. Around them the shops were still open with a few customers looking at brightly lit displays of jewellery and fashion. If they went up the curved staircase they would hear the sound of the machines in the casino which opened out two decks above. If they took the glass sided lift and went up to the highest level they could sit in the piano bar and look down over the rail at the vast expanses of ornate marble cladding and glass that covered every wall.

But this wide open space had a cost to the structure of the ship. It had been driven onto a sand bar and as the last air pockets ruptured the full weight was

bending it in half. One hundred thousand tonnes were sinking at each end and this was where it was breaking up so they could.

The water seemed to stretch out endlessly to either side. It was thick with broken furniture and other debris. He couldn't see into the balconies and corridors[to either side] but he could hear hundreds of people all around him. Soon they saw the two rafts in the pool of light in front of them and started shouting for help.

"We are like Gods." Harry said as the first wave of shouting died down. "We can choose who lives and who almost certainly dies."

"That's always assuming we can get out." Paul replied. They both knew that the corridors would have flooded so they couldn't carry on towards the stair well with the rope ladder in it. A large panel of marble cladding fell into the water just in front of them. They looked up at the rupture above them. It had a mass of cabled and pipes hanging down across it and as the gap opened they were pulling tight and tearing off the finishes. They hurried back into the end of the dining room.

As they were moving they hears a crack that was so loud that they thought at first that it was a gun shot.

"Look up." Paul shouted over the screaming. "Something big must have pulled apart." Sheets of steel, inches thick, were tearing apart like paper. The side of the ship was opening up towards the upper decks. Without saying anything they struggled to put the cover back up[] before the waves of water came up from the ends of the ship as the air was forced out of them. Seconds later Harry fastened the flap at the entrance and they lay down against the sides of the raft holding on to the safety lines.

He had lost count of the number of ways they could die. They could drift back out into the atrium and have another panel fall on them. They could land up against something sharp enough to puncture the raft and they could drown. The whole raft could get forced under water as the ship moved or the oil could catch fire. He tried to think of any good reason why God should spare his life as thousands died all around him. He had never thought of himself as a particularly good person. He always did his best to be kind to individuals but he had no reservations about being dishonest when it came to dealing with big organisations.

He felt the raft lift up on the wave and start moving. He remembered how many times he had worked out that there was absolutely no evidence that God intervened in any way to help people he considered to be good. He could hear Velma frantically praying as she clung onto the safety line.

They crashed into something and he was thrown hard against the outside ring of the raft but he heard no rush of air to say it had been punctured. He realised that the light must be far stronger outside because it was showing through as a dull yellow glow, just bright enough for him to see Paul and Velma starting to sit up.[]

They quickly opened up the cover and saw that the whole deck had split open and water and oil was pouring out through the gap into the sea beyond. The crowds of people were still there all around them shouting at them to be rescued.

Paul untied the second raft that was still towing along behind them.

"I suggest we push this one in before we try going in ourselves." He said turning it around so he could open up the cover. "I think we're going to have to just choose a group at random." They pushed it towards one of the groups standing on the wall of a stair well. He thought about Harry's idea of them being like Gods to choose who survived. As far as he could see Harry thought God chose people to save in a completely random way so they might as well follow his example

The raft floated in past a glistening ornate handrail narrowly missing a chair which was rocking slightly as waves came in through the gap in the deck. As soon as it came near people started to grab hold of it and scramble in. Fights broke out. One large man was throwing people out of the way as he tried to get his family onto it. He jumped on after then and tried to push away but somebody had a firm hold of

one of the ropes. More and more people climbed in until eventually the whole thing overturned.

Without saying a word Paul and Harry paddled the raft as fast as they could towards the open water. They ignored the shouts that came from all around them as they pushed through the log-jam of furniture and emerged to see the rising sun.

“We’re just like they were on the Titanic.” Velma said looking back. “I used to think how evil those people had been in their half empty boats saying they would be swamped if they went back in to try to rescue people.”

The chaplain entered slowly, studying his congregation. Generally his duties were not difficult, although talking to some of the elderly patients in the sick bay could not be described as easy. The weekly midnight mass was, however, always difficult on any ship, and he dreaded it.

Only about half of the seats in the chapel were taken, but still it felt claustrophobic. It had no windows but somehow during the day it felt light and airy. Now the colourful pictures with their bright spotlights seemed defeated by the gloom.

“Charles, it is Charles isn’t it?”

The question drew him out of his thoughts. A grey-haired woman in an improbably low cut dress was looking up at [appraising?] him. Huge diamonds shone from her necklace and ear rings. He looked down, trying to show recognition without smiling and continued past her.

Reaching the altar he turned to see the faces of his flock. They were looking at him intently, as if hoping that he would make their lives as exciting as they thought they should be.

“Good evening.” He started and, before his dignified pause was finished, she was right in with “good evening Charles”, defiantly returning the resulting stares. He tried to give a stern look past all the diamonds.

The service wasn’t really a mass; it was strictly multi-denominational and could even be adapted for other religions if he thought there were any followers present.

During the first hymn the steward entered. This was the chaplain’s well-rehearsed method for dealing with, meaning ejecting, problems. They all had problems, he could feel them flowing out at him, but this man could not help. He gave a discrete signal with his hymn book and the man left.

Reciting some words from a prayer that came to mind he got as far as a psalm. They had done quite well with the hymn so he decided to let them try to sing it. He started the recorded organ music and they were making a bold effort at it.

He scarcely recognised any of them from his daytime services. He couldn’t escape from the thought that they were sad; many single, some couples, but all trying to find some elusive joy that money had clearly failed to buy them. Wondering if they might do better in the casino, he found himself making eye contact; trying to understand what they wanted from him, or God, or both.

It may have been the glass of wine he had enjoyed earlier, or it may have been the sheer melancholy of the group, but he felt he had to give them a talk. This would not be a sermon; he always wrote them in advance, just a short talk which he did from time to time to cheer them up.

He opened with a description of the Bishop blessing the ship and all who would sail in it. “Do you feel blessed?” he asked, making it sound like more of a question than he had intended.

Fingers, heavy with rings, clutched at the diamonds, but no response came. Looking around he saw another, not speaking, but slowly shaking their head.

“Why should God bless this ship?” he asked. “When there are so many on earth who clearly need his blessing so much more that we do in this cocoon of luxury.”

“This ship has been described as a miracle of modern technology.” He continued. “It is one of the largest moving objects mankind has ever built and probably the most complex. But does that make it a miracle of God? Is it a creation of God or of man?”

He sensed them looking at him with an intensity that showed that they knew he was trying to help them. It seemed to give them even more faith in him as their contact with God and salvation.

“We say that God has a purpose for everything. What is his purpose for this ship?”

Now his audience were beginning to look as if they were really interested.

“God is pleased with this ship and pleased that it has brought you here together with me for a purpose. He has brought us together so I can reassure you that the many good things I am sure you have done in your life have not been wasted. God cares for you and he has given his solemn promise that he will continue to care for you even beyond death.”

This cheered them up immensely.

“God needs our help in the fight against evil. Some of you may wish to confess later.” He looked at the small confessional neatly built into the back corner of the room. Most of the audience looked away. “But the main thing is to ask yourself whether you truly believe that God is here with us and can work miracles if we place our trust in him.”

Imperceptibly at first, the deck started to tip beneath his feet. He wasn't worried, this had happened a few times on ships he had been on. He quickly reassured his audience before continuing.

“God has made a covenant with us that if we place our trust in him we need fear no evil”. He knew he had lost them, he knew that he had slipped into the language of a normal sermon, but that wasn't the problem.

“Don't worry.” He said again. “They often do this. It will soon be back on the level”. He decided he couldn't get their attention so he would have to wait until the ship was upright before continuing with the service.

“Now let us take a minute”. He suggested. “To consider all the good things God has blessed us with on this ship and to thank him for them”.

In the silence it seemed worse. The tipping was continuing, quite fast now, it was worse than anything he had known before. The announcement came over the public address system. They all listened carefully but did not look reassured. He was beginning to find it slightly difficult to stand upright.

Just a few days before he had helped set up the cross on the altar. It had been difficult to lift from its packing case because the weight in its base was heavy enough to hold it in place in any storm. Now it slid off, crashing onto the carpet before rolling against the bulkhead. His instinct was to evacuate but the instructions given in training were clear, he must not move until the signal sounded.

The woman with the jewels was standing as best she could in her high heels. “We must pray urgently”. She said. “Pray to God to right the ship and stand his cross back on his altar.” Others were standing with her. They made a start on the Lord's prayer. He wondered what they would do if God did miraculously stand the cross up again. Did they really believe?

She was holding the pew but even with support he could see her falling. He reached her just in time, holding her arm. He tried to help her to sit but she would not, she insisted on kneeling, smiling at him disarmingly as he let go. “You must lead us.” She said. You are the man of God, with your help we can save this ship with His power.”

“Our father.” She started again, loud enough for all to hear.

All he could think of doing was to pick up the cross. He stood it up carefully, still on the carpet, wedged in so it could not fall again.

Some at the back were moving towards the door. He told them to assemble at their muster stations which would be in the main lounges on promenade deck.

“You must not leave”. The woman shouted. “We need you to pray with us to save the ship. We have been told that God has blessed it and we must place our trust in him.”

The group at the back hesitated. He waved at them to go but he felt he could not join them.

There were about ten remaining, all kneeling and mumbling prayers.

“You told us to put our trust in God.” She was calmer now, calm but firm, looking around for support and knowing it was there.

The silence was broken by the dull crash, just audible through the ship, the containers had hit. The lean increased. He looked towards the door.

"You must not abandon us. You know that only the power of God can save us. We must stay here in this blessed place on this blessed ship and work hard to save it."

He was struggling for an answer. "I asked you to decide whether this ship is a work of God or of man. The truth is that it is a work of man and the blessing he has given it will help the people in it but will not necessarily help the ship. We must get ready to move to our muster stations."

She was ignoring him. "We must pray for you. Your faith is weak. You must rekindle your faith and pray with us to save the ship." He started to move but she leaned out of her pew and reached for the one opposite where one of the others managed to hold her hand, blocking the aisle.

"If prayer could put right every wrong this would be a perfect world. But it isn't. However strong our faith we must take action to save ourselves."

A second crash. Louder. The patrol boat hit. He could still feel the vibration of the ship's engines on full power. He wanted to run to the bridge, to tell them to stop so the crew could launch the lifeboats.

It felt unreal. He was in his chapel where he normally felt security and tranquillity, but now it felt like a trap. "This isn't a game." He told them. "This is for real. I have never known a ship go anywhere near this far over. I don't know why the signal for muster stations has not been sounded but we should go. God will not save us here."

He knew immediately that he had not been firm enough. She latched onto his comment about the signal. "It's a message to us to stay here and pray." She proudly announced. He wondered if she had been drinking – but surely not all ten of them.

"Are you in shock?" he asked, wondering if anybody knew when they were in shock. The altar table was moving. Sliding across the floor. I should have been bolted down. Another job not done. How many more?

At last they heard the ship's horn and counted the seven blasts. Action was needed so he pushed through to the door. Holding onto the frame for support he saw the woman trying to stand. He told her to kick her shoes off. "Lord bless you" he said without thinking as she did so and followed him. The corridor outside led them to a cross passage which opened onto the promenade deck at either side and the stair well and some lifts in the centre. There was shouting in the distance but it was strangely quiet. He turned to go down the slope to the lower side. Some went the opposite way.

"You can't launch lifeboats from that side." He insisted. "It may look better further from the water but you must come this way. God will preserve us if you follow me." He felt cheap adding the last comment. It was a trick to get them to do what he wanted. He had just told them the opposite, but they came. He knew the rules said go to muster stations. He ignored the rules.

Pushing out through the heavy doors he could hear the sea and smell the salt splashing up. Crew members were lowering a boat. It was ready for embarkation but they were almost the only passengers there. Even the people who had left the chapel a few minutes before had disappeared. He pictured them struggling around the ship looking for a deserted muster station in a lounge. He couldn't go searching for them.

There was a wide gap between the boat and the ship because it was leaning so far over that the boat had swung out on its davits. They had to wait while the crew raised the davit slightly to bring it in. A wave splashed up and the spray burned his face. He looked up and saw the balconies reaching far out above him and then down to see the sea sweeping past. If the boat didn't capsize when it hit the fast moving water the ship would surely fall right over and crush it. He found himself praying,

mumbling words of the first prayer that came to mind. The woman saw him and smiled.

“God really will preserve us.” She said.

He climbed on board, standing by the gangway, helped his congregation across.

The announcement came over the public address speakers from the captain. He was trying to right the ship and that they should not launch the boats.

“We can’t go until the boat is full.” He said. “It’s the most important rule. We must wait.” But as he said it the ship had leaned so far that the water had come up to meet the hull of the lifeboat. It suddenly lurched backwards spinning around as it did and then it slewed across to crash against the ship’s railing. They were thrown from their seats, but as he went down he grabbed the lever he had seen crew men use to release the hooks.

The boat flew off from the cables and landed in the water almost upside down before crashing into the ship again. Then there was silence.

Holding onto the lever he had managed to stay standing. The boat was rocking in a rough sea and the wake of the ship. Some of his flock had reached their seats and managed to hold on but others were lying on the floor. They were all screaming.

He shouted. “God has rescued us.” This shocked them into silence. “If you look behind us you can see the lights of the ship. You can see that it is leaning. It is dangerous, but we are well away from it.”

“But we are lost at sea.” The woman shouted back. “How can we be found? We can’t row this great big boat.”

“We are completely safe.” He replied. “Now let’s help the others.” In the rocking boat it took a few minutes to get everybody back to a seat. Some of them looked badly bruised but as far as he could tell there were no broken bones.

“The boat had an engine and plenty of fuel.” He told them, looking at the instructions on the console. “It also has a radio and a satellite beacon and you can see the lights on the shore anyway”. He added. He also pointed out that he had a signal on his phone.

He began to regret his comment about God rescuing them. He knew he didn’t believe it and they had all latched onto it and were telling him how their faith and prayers had done it. But he had more important things to worry about. He had to follow the ship to pick up survivors when it sank, as it surely would.

He soon had the engine started. It was easy to turn the boat in the direction of the ship. The passengers were beginning to suffer from sea-sickness but he told them to have faith; he was finding this easier each time. Looking ahead he was seeing the ship from the side. It was leaning towards him. He could see the brilliantly illuminated decks and the funnel leaning at a frightening angle. He wondered how long it would last. He tried to guess which direction to go as it began to circle round. He decided not to switch on the satellite beacon because he was feeling guilty. He was safe in his boat while thousands would drown trapped in the ship, he must not divert any rescuers away.

The woman noticed that he was not heading for the shore and started to complain. She was looking very sick, panicking. But he felt calm, he must face the future, the accusations could not hurt him.[not like drowning]

“God has helped us.” He started, wondering why he kept up the pretence. “Now we must do our duty to God.”

One of them had managed to phone a friend on the ship. They had called to reassure the friend that they were safe but, hearing a confused message about the chaos in one of the lounges, they soon realised that their problems were worse.

With the ship circling at great speed he had no idea which way to go. He watched as it came close, going right around him. He had to move away to keep clear as it sped past. This time he could see very few lights and then he saw the

great expanse of hull, dirty with weed and barnacles. A group at the rail was looking back at him. The helicopter flew over. He saw them filming him he felt terrible guilt about being in the almost empty boat.

The stabiliser caught his eye. He had never seen one before. He knew what it was, projecting out through the exposed hull like a small wing; turning all the time in a purposeful looking way. He pointed it out.

"They are trying to save the ship." He said. "It's very clever of them to use the stabiliser that way."

"Is it going to work?"

He knew then that he should have expected the question. He was wondering what to say when he suddenly knew with absolute clarity that it was his duty to be honest.

"No." He said clearly. "I can't see how it can possibly work. The ship is going to roll over and thousands will be trapped inside when it sinks." It felt to him almost as if another person had said it. Was this God guiding him for some mysterious reason?

The passengers were now shouting at him. Tearful and incoherent. Telling him to go faster to catch up with the ship.

But the ship was no longer circling. It had gone past them. He could see one of the propellers with a rudder behind it was well clear of the water. It had stopped turning. It was moving away, up the coast, far faster than his boat could move. Black smoke was pouring from the funnel. He was sure he could smell it, acid diesel smoke, the dying breath of the ship.

The passengers had quietened down. They were praying again. He felt a responsibility to tell them what was going to happen. Most of the people on the ship would die in their cabins. By now it had tipped too far for them even to get as far as their cabin door, let alone reach an outside deck. They might survive for a few hours in an air lock but then they would drown. As he went on he realised that there was nothing good about what he was doing by talking about it. He just needed people to share his thoughts because they frightened him. God was not guiding him. He stopped quite suddenly.

"Where are they going?" a man asked.

"To hell." He replied without thinking. He was staring at the ship. It was stern-on, dead ahead. He could see the full extent of the lean. There was surely no way it could survive.

The waves were coming from behind them. The motion of the lifeboat was kinder and his passengers could stand up. They gathered on the raised deck near the helm, standing next to him, crowded, pushing against him, all eyes on the ship.

"We must pray for everybody on the ship." He said. "Seven thousand of them. Even the ones that were with us in the chapel. I told them to go to muster stations not the boats. They will die because of me."

He listened to the noise of the engine below him and felt the motion of the boat in the sea. He liked boats and the feel of it lifted his spirits for a fraction of time before he focused again on the ghost ship ahead of him.

"We prayed for God to help us and he rescued us. He even sent the wave that dragged us away from the ship." It was the woman again, still there with all the jewels. He tried to ignore her but then he could see it, she would be out there talking to the press. The helicopter would be the first of dozens. He would be the hero, the man who saved them with prayer. He couldn't face it.

"We shall get to the ship before it sinks." He said. "We shall go back on it if we can. We shall try to rescue people or die in the attempt. Why should we survive?" [more dialog – complaints – suction]

In two minutes the ship was half a mile ahead of them, but it was sinking. They could see a plume of water from the port side propeller, now part-submerged, flying high behind it. The stern was half under water, it was only the enormous power

of the engines that seemed to be defying the inevitable and stopping it sinking by brute force. Then suddenly they stopped and there was nothing. The pall of smoke from the funnel started to drift away. They watched in horror as the great ship slowed down and started to roll over and settle into the water.

"My God." He said without thinking. "It's going. Nothing can help it now."

The funnel was now almost horizontal.

"Are we witnessing the wrath of God?" The woman asked. "What did they all do to deserve this? I keep thinking of my cabin. The water will be bursting in the balcony door. They will be trapped like rats. What if I had been in it?"

"You would have drowned like the rest of them." It was a man who had not spoken before. He was close to tears.

The chaplain pushed at the throttle lever, [his] knuckles white [and his] hand shaking. "We must get there before it goes under, we must try."

"The suction will be enormous." The man said. "It will make huge waves and could drag us down with it."

"Yes it could make a big wave." He agreed. "Everybody get back to your seats and hold on." But nobody did. They were all crowding up near the helm so they could see the ship. "Anyway." He added, seeing no movement. "It will take quite a long time to sink. It may even roll right over and float upside down for days. We must get there and help."

"We could pray for them." The woman suggested.

He [was silent] [didn't know how to reply]. He pictured them in their boat a few yards away from the ship, doing nothing to help, saying prayers and possibly singing a hymn or two. The absurdity of it annoyed him. He did believe in his religion but that wasn't it. The thought a being filmed from a helicopter appalled him.

Progress seemed painfully slow. He was concentrating on minute adjustments to the helm to get through the waves as fast as possible. Each time he looked up he expected to see the ship sinking, bow first or stern first it could be either before she slipped under, but he saw nothing. He told the man to look in the lockers for some binoculars.

"There are people out on the side of the hull." The man said, struggling to focus on them. "They seem to be lowering a rope down to a small boat."

"Perhaps they're trying to get down to it." He said, just able to see the rope.

They watched as the rope ladder was pulled up and then saw people climbing up and pulling the ladder up behind them. He felt worse. There were brave people going onto the ship to help and he couldn't follow them.

Minutes later and they were close. To the left there was the vast expanse of the hull with no way to climb onto it. To the right there were decks which offered more hope, but straight ahead, as well as the half submerged propeller on one side they could see windows on the other. There was a searchlight mounted by the screen in front of him. He found the switch. Inside the window he could see just two people hanging onto some tables above the water. He steered the boat straight at the glass.

"Watch out." The man shouted.

"It's strong glass." He shouted back. "We must break it." At the last minute he put the engine astern to slow them down but he miscalculated and a wave took them so hard that everybody was thrown forwards against the bulkhead.

The man ran forward to see the damage. Seconds later he ran back. "Idiot." He shouted. "You could have sunk us. I can't see [any] damage but we may be sinking."

The chaplain was shaking. The boat was slowly pulling away with the engine full astern. Looking up he saw the window wasn't even broken. He couldn't face going to look for damage in the boat. If the hull was cracked they would see water on the floor soon enough.

They moved towards the top deck and suddenly the woman shouted out to look at the water flowing past the rail. "That's the tide." She said. "Flowing up the coast. And it means the ship isn't moving."

It was so obvious to him now. That was where the ship had been going, to find a sandbank. He felt like a fool.

They were past the rail now, alongside an area of deck with a swimming pool in the middle. It was deserted so they moved on towards the funnel. Just ahead there was a bar with the stools still in place and the cabinets piled up behind with bottles visible through glass doors as the waves crashed against them. He was steering away from it, scared of hitting again. He forced himself to look down. The floor was still dry.

Moving away they could see the steps leading up to the next deck.

"Where are we going?" The man asked. "What are you trying to do? We can all see now that this ship isn't going anywhere. It isn't sinking. Everybody will have seen the pictures from the helicopter and there'll be dozens of proper rescue boats out soon. You've already almost sunk us."

The chaplain slowed the engine and turned the boat into the swell so it would hold in place.. He had to think.

"We have a duty to God to try to help." The woman with the jewels replied. "God rescued us and now we must help."

"Rescued us? What do you mean? If we were still in the chapel we would be fine."

The chaplain stopped to think about this. The man was right, the chapel was on the starboard side and it had gone over to port so it was probably still dry. "If we were still in there we would all be piled up on the back wall behind the altar and unable to get out. We would actually technically be safe, provided she doesn't roll over any more or sink into the sand, but we would be completely terrified because we wouldn't know. We're better off here."

The boat suddenly shook as it hit something in the water. They all looked over as a large wooden table floated by.

"OK so we're better off here than inside." The man replied. "But let's go before we run into something big enough to sink us."

"Such as?" He replied without thinking. His training had never prepared him for arguments with his congregation. They were supposed to have faith in him.

The man said nothing.

They had drifted down slightly and were now level with the next swimming pool on the higher deck. He scanned it with the searchlight. The pool had a pile of sun-loungers in it. They looked as if the waves would soon wash them out. He swept the light across the rest of the deck. It was deserted and completely empty, looking as if it had been cleared for dancing, except for the unreal angle it was leaning at.

"Go back to the pool." The woman said suddenly.

He did his best. With the boat rocking it was difficult to hold the light on one spot.

"Look." She said. "There's something else in there with the loungers."

It was true. At the forward end in the corner there was what just looked like a dark mass.

"Forget it." The man said. "It's just a pile of towels."

"No. All the towels are cleared away at night." He was already turning the boat. With the current running past he only needed to turn the helm slightly and they moved in sideways. The woman was holding the searchlight now.

"It moved. I'm sure it moved. We've got to help."

He didn't know whether to believe her. He was concentrating on steering the boat. They were just a few yards off. He looked across. The waves were breaking into the pool. Coming from aft. Swirling around the forward end. The lounges would

soon be out. Shaking with each wave. And there it was. Several loungers below the top of the pile. It could be anything. They were getting closer.

“Get some oars.” He shouted. “There’s got to be a pile of them somewhere.”

They all went to look. Even the complaining man. Soon they were outside with them and ready to try to fend off. All they had was two wires, stretched between slender stanchions, to stop them falling in.

A wave came out of the darkness, throwing them in towards the ship. He could see now, there were handrails to help people into the pool; now jutting out towards them, ready to punch a hole in the fibreglass of his boat. He put the helm over, took them out.

He tried again. They had to get close enough to reach the loungers and pull them away. He was trying to hold them steady so they held level with the pool, just enough power to make the helm respond.

He saw one of the men with a rope. “No.” He shouted. “Don’t try to tie us on. It would pull us down if the ship moves.”

The man dropped his rope and went back to his oar. He managed to get the first lounge away. Someone had a torch. A body.

The man, the one who had complained. He was there. He had found a boat hook. He was leaning out over the wires. Someone held onto his legs. Now he had it. It was moving wildly as he pulled on its belt.

They hit hard, on the handrail. Maybe some damage, he couldn’t see. The man was pulling the body in. He steered them away.

Someone was screaming. “Jonathan, Jonathan”. It was a woman, the body they had pulled in. She was screaming at him. “My boy, my baby, go back.” Her arms were bent round at impossible angles, her face was covered in blood, but somehow she was able to scream.

The man was running down the deck saying there was a hole in the hull, above the waterline but taking in water on each wave. “Nobody else could survive in the pool” he said. The rest of the pile is all under water.

The chaplain looked down. There was water on the floor below him, splashing back and forth against the legs of the seats.

He turned the helm back in. He had a few seconds to think. Was he doing the will of God? He would never know.

The man was at the bow now, with another to help him, fending off with oars.

The boat was close when the wave came. It threw them forward, past the rail, crashing into the deck. Then another. He had the engine hard astern. The staircase ahead had more rails, strong steel. Their boat was like an eggshell. He was holding onto the wheel but they were not moving so the rudder did nothing. He felt the crash. They bounced away and finally out. The man was rushing back again. They were lucky, they had hit the stem this time, no more damage.

Now they could see the pool again. All the loungers had been washed out and were sinking. There was only clear water, no baby.

“He was there”. She was shouting. “Holding on to me. Holding my arm. He’s there, if we look.”

She tried to move towards the rail. He thought for a moment she would jump but she couldn’t. She collapsed in tears, down onto the exposed deck with the waves lapping onto her. He watched them carry her in, feeling helpless. The man offered to take the wheel.

“I’ll take it a minute.” He said calmly. “I have a boat, I’ll be ok. You are a man of God, she needs you.”

Without thinking he stepped down. She was lying on a row of seats, her broken arms laying limp beside her. They stepped aside and he stood [beside her] with the water now up to his ankles. She was looking into his eyes. Pleading. He couldn’t face it.

“God is with you.” He said, [knowing how hopeless it sounded]. “God will look after you and.” He stopped. He couldn’t say “and your baby”.

He heard the engine note increase. They must be moving away. He was glad he had left the decision to the other man.

“We’ll get you to a hospital”. He said, trying to sound positive. “They’ll look after you and you’ll soon be better.”

But then the engine note dropped again. He ran back up to see. They were back in by the ship.

“There’s a chair.” The man said. “Hung up on that rail.”

It was wooden, large, and with cushions still fixed to it. That was all he could see. No baby.

“We think it was in the pool.” The man said.

He grabbed an oar and ran out to the deck. The man seemed confident at the wheel.

The oar was wrenched back as he held it against the side of the pool, the other end smashing into the [side of the] wheelhouse, but it jammed there, keeping them off the rail. They had a boat hook on the chair but it was heavy, the cushions weighing it down. He leaned out over the safety wires, his foot wedged against the cabin door. Arms in the water as the boat rolled he reached out, pulling as hard as he could.

The chair came up out of the water, plain and dark. The boat veered off leaving them trying to hold it. The cushions were black. No sign of life. He had hold of an arm, solid heavy wood. The man next to him had the other arm. The boat rocked and his fingers slipped. But there was someone pushing in between them. Grabbing a cushion to see underneath.

The dawn showed on the horizon as they approached the harbour. He had expected to see activity, flashing lights and rescuers, but there were just a few curious locals looking out at the helicopters and lifeboats. He had spent most of the journey back steering the boat as the others struggled to block the water flooding in. The woman was asleep, the baby beside her. [The man, sitting near, exhausted but deep in prayer]

The cathedral was packed with the families of the bereaved. Just a few rows on one side at the front were sufficient for the survivors and opposite them a small group of officials and dignitaries. Conspicuous among these were the directors of the cruise line. The chairman looked the broken man he was. The newspapers had described in graphic detail how bookings had plummeted and half of his fleet had been confined to harbour awaiting safety modifications. The company was bankrupt, and with his personal holding valueless, his yacht and his houses were all on the market.

Given the size of the congregation, they had made a rather feeble attempt at two hymns and now the archbishop was stepping up to the lectern to give his sermon. Paul wondered what the man could possibly say. He couldn't give a stirring speech about the deaths being in a worthy cause on the road to defeating evil because they hadn't. He couldn't give a standard funeral type address because all the funerals had already happened and this was just a memorial. He couldn't even praise any heroes because there really weren't any. The officer who had managed to get the ship onto the sand bar was the same one who had helped cause the problem in the first place. The only other possible hero was Karl who had set up the life rafts. A newspaper which had to openly accused him of being a drug smuggler and blamed him for the accident was currently facing a bill for libel; but everybody knew the story was true.

The congregation fell silent and the sermon began. "Many of you may have found that your Christian beliefs have been severely challenged by this, the worst maritime disaster in history." Paul was acutely aware that the cathedral was festooned with television cameras which were providing a live feed to dozens of channels. If it had not been for this he would have laughed out loud. If any of them had had any Christian beliefs before this then surely they would have given them up by now. Any sane man would see it all as a joke. How could the archbishop really carry on when there was no way to explain how his God could have let it happen.

The theme of the sermon was soon revealed. It was to be "faith in the face of adversity". It was all about following the example of Christ on the cross and keeping to the faith despite everything. Paul was unimpressed. The archbishop wasn't even going to try to explain how God let the accident happen. Many reasons were put forward for the crucifixion but they all revolved around testing and setting an example. None of this could apply to the ship so he wasn't even going to try.

Velma enjoyed the sermon. It was helping her to understand her life after the accident. It had tested her faith but the sermon helped realise that she was not alone. Faith was all about being tested and she was sure that hers would grow even stronger than it had been before. God's plans were a mystery that few humans could ever understand. Everything had a reason but it could take years to be revealed or might never be revealed at all. At the time her faith had been shaken but now she was certain that God had a purpose for everything he did. When Christ died on the cross he probably didn't know exactly what would happen later but he had complete faith.

Harry found it difficult to concentrate on the sermon. He had little time for religious books and there were continuous quotes from the bible in support of every part of the argument. Like Paul he found it strange that the most important part of the problem was being ignored. He had complete faith that God had done his best. It was just that his best wasn't good enough and the devil had won. He looked across at the dignitaries and tried to decide if he thought that they were evil. It would be simple to think of the chairman of the cruise line as the man who sacrificed lives for profit. But there would be others there from the maritime safety agencies who had inspected the ship and approved it and then there were the designers and builders. According to Paul's description Karl had done a lot of damage as well. He decided that it would run against his Christian principles to think evil of any of them.

All he had seen was yet more proof that his understanding of God and the devil was correct.

Karl kept a close eye on the cameras. Whenever they pointed his way he tried to look appropriately sombre and he also discretely nudged Helen to get her to look up. She looked very attractive in black but he has possible been too generous with her pills at breakfast so she was not looking very wide awake. The pills were expensive. He had to buy them now. With all the media attention and the libel case he couldn't deal any more. The shipment he had sent away in the speedboat was his last. The libel award had been derisory and his legal costs had been high so he had lost a lot of money. But he had become a celebrity. He was the man everybody loved to hate who had redeemed himself by saving lives. He was making a fortune from it. He looked around the cathedral trying to hide his disdain of those around him. They had faith in God but did God have any faith in them? Had they earned any faith? God created the world and helped humanity but to get anywhere humanity had to be smart. God was not there to help the useless. His understanding of this was even stronger now than it had been before. God had enabled him to save himself. God had had faith in him and he had delivered and shown that the confidence was well placed by saving the lives of many of the people who were with him in the congregation. He waited for the sermon to end and when the Lord's prayer was recited even the archbishop standing at the altar 20 yards away could hear him saying the words.