

THE HUNGRY GODS GO ON A CRUISE

N. Van Seters & Claude

THE HUNGRY GODS UNIVERSE

Carnival Horizon · 7-Night Western Caribbean

Choose Fun.

CARNIVAL CRUISE LINE

EMBARKATION

FUN TIMES	CARNIVAL HORIZON
Day 1 · Sunday · Miami, Florida Sunset 7:48p · Weather: Sunny, 88°F · Seas: Calm Dress: Cruise Casual TODAY'S FUN 11:30a Embarkation begins — Welcome Aboard! 1:00p Lido Marketplace open · Drink of the Day: the FUNSHIP SPECIAL (souvenir cup +\$4) 2:00p CHEERS! package sign-up (Atrium) · Spa tours 4:00p GUEST SAFETY BRIEFING — mandatory Report to your Muster Station (see Sail & Sign). Bar service resumes fleetwide upon completion. 4:45p SAIL-AWAY PARTY w/ your Cruise Director RENO! — Deck 10 aft — the CONGA of the season! Don't be shy — Choose Fun! 5:30p Ship departs Miami Your Muster Station: E Keep your Sail & Sign card with you at ALL times. It's your room key, your wallet, and YOU!	

The first thing the Companion heard, coming up the gangway into seven days of enforced paradise, was a man's amplified voice telling two thousand people to make some noise, and the second thing she heard was two thousand people making it.

"I *cannot* HEAR you, Lido deck! I said are we — one more time — are we ready to have some *FUN*?"

They were. They were catastrophically ready. The noise came back off the water and the terminal and the flat hot Miami sky, and standing at the center of it on a small stage, in a sequined blazer that threw the sun back in coins, was the source: the Cruise Director, RENO, per

the Fun Times, per the looping video of his own face on the poolside screen, per the very fabric of the vessel, which seemed to have been woven partly out of him. He held the microphone the way other men hold the wheel on a road they have driven ten thousand times. He was, she understood at once, extraordinarily good at this. He was possibly the best there had ever been.

Getting to him had been a process. You did not simply walk onto a cruise ship; you were *inducted*. There had been a terminal the size of an aircraft hangar and a line that folded on itself like intestine, and at the end of it a photograph — everyone got the photograph, there was no not getting the photograph — a woman had said *big smile!* and the Companion had blinked, and somewhere that blink was already being printed, matted, and marked up. Then a scanner, and a card in a paper sleeve with her name on it, and the name was correct, which for reasons she could not name she resented. VERA, it said. She had answered to older names than any language now spoken, and here she was rendered, for seven nights, as a magnetic stripe and a barcode that any door could read faster than any altar ever had. This week she would be Vera, and the card that said so would be, per the Fun Times, her room key, her wallet, and — in a tone of real conviction — *herself*.

Then the gangway, and at the top of it, before her feet had properly found the ship, a young man in a floral shirt had pressed a tall pink drink into one of her hands and a second young man had tried to photograph her receiving it, and a third had asked, warmly, urgently, as though her salvation depended on it, whether she had considered the CHEERS! package — unlimited beverages, one low daily rate, *do the math, it pays for itself* — and she had been aboard for eleven seconds and already three separate people had wanted something from her, or for her, or at her, and the drink was cold and enormous and she had not asked for it and it cost four dollars and she was holding it now, committed, a customer.

The other six had come aboard ahead of her and scattered to their sufferings.

She could feel them out in the ship like sore teeth. The All-Seeing had gone up toward the bridge, gotten as far as the photo gallery on deck five, and stopped, appalled, in front of a wall of screens showing every guest's blinking embarkation portrait, two thousand of them,

refreshing. The Hand had gone straight down — past the guest decks, past the crew mess, down to the long grey corridor they called I-95 that ran the whole length of the ship below the waterline — and was already, she could tell, working, and would not stop working, because the Hand had never once in its existence understood a vacation and was not going to begin with this one. The Seeker was leaning on the far rail glaring at the horizon as though Cozumel were being deliberately withheld from him, which, for the next forty hours, it was. The Conscience-Keeper had found the hand-sanitizer station at the mouth of the Lido Marketplace and taken up a post beside it with the grim satisfaction of a customs officer at a very sinful border. The Chaos-Weaver was somewhere below, running his hands along the machinery, feeling for the seam. And the Allfather —

“Ladies and gentlemen, this is your Captain speaking. On behalf of myself and the entire crew, it is my great pleasure to welcome you aboard —”

— the Allfather was in the ceiling, everywhere at once and nowhere you could point to, warm and total, a voice with no throat pouring down over eleven decks, and not one soul on the Lido heard a single word of it, because at that exact moment Reno launched the conga line. The Captain of the vessel — the ancient authority who commanded the ship and the sea and, in a real and legal sense, whether any of them lived — was comprehensively upstaged by a man in a sparkly blazer teaching retirees to hold one another’s hips and shuffle to a song about a hot hot hot.

The Companion loved it immediately.

That was the thing the others would find hard to forgive, over the coming week, and it began here, in the first ten minutes. She took one look at the whole ridiculous groaning apparatus of manufactured joy — the conga, the coins of light, the pink drinks, the two thousand strangers reaching clumsily for each other under a forty-foot poster of one man’s face — and something in her lifted, because reaching for each other was the entire content of her being, and here they all were, planning to do precisely nothing else for a solid week. For the god of companionship, a cruise ship was not a trial. It was a buffet. It was, in fact, the very buffet the Hand was down below endlessly refilling — except that the thing heaped and bottomless and free up here, the

thing with no floor under it, was *loneliness reaching for company*, her one food, her only nourishment in all the world, and she had walked straight into a floating cathedral of it with a souvenir cup in her hand.

She did not join the conga. She would prove, over the week, to be catastrophically bad at organized fun. But at the edge of the party a man stood alone — everyone has seen this man, at every party, the one whose wife has gone to find the restroom and who is now marooned in the open with a drink and no one to be with, doing the small brave performance of a person who is fine — and the Companion did the only thing she was constitutionally able to do. She went and stood with him. She asked him nothing clever. She simply made, in the air beside a stranded stranger, the small warm room that was her whole nature, and within ninety seconds the man was telling her about his knee replacement and then about his son, and laughing, actually laughing, held, un-marooned.

And across the deck, mid-count — “*and one, and two, and shake it loose, Carol, there you go!*” — the Cruise Director saw it.

He saw it the way a stage magician watches a rival across a room and knows, with a cold drop in the stomach he could not have explained, that the rival is not doing tricks. Reno had built a career, a self, an entire sequined religion out of manufacturing precisely the thing that had just occurred, spontaneously, for free, fifty feet from his stage, to a man he personally had failed to get into the conga line. He did not know what he had seen. He only knew he disliked it, and that he would be keeping an eye on the woman in the plain clothes who had done it. Then the beat came back around and he was *on* again, because Reno was always on, because being-on was the entire thing under the blazer, and the moment closed over him without leaving a mark, the way water closes over a thrown stone that turns out to be Styrofoam and does not sink.

At four o'clock they all went to be counted, because you could not be happy until you had.

This was new, or new-ish; the Companion had read about the old way on the way in and had, privately, been looking forward to it — the great mammal-huddle of the whole ship crushed to one rail in orange vests while a man with a whistle explained drowning. Instead there was a video. You watched the video alone, in your cabin or on the

little app on the little phone, and it showed a cheerful animated family donning life jackets in a cheerful animated way, and you could not skip it, and — this was the part she admired, coldly, as architecture — you could not order another drink until you had watched it and walked to the place on your card and been scanned. The ship had made safety into the toll you paid for pleasure. It had taken the one solemn thing aboard, the thing about the cold water and the dark, and turned it into the velvet rope in front of the bar.

Muster Station E was a stretch of promenade on deck four, and a boy in a high-visibility vest stood there with a scanner and a life jacket. He pulled the straps to show her, and pointed to the little light that would come on, and mimed the whistle she was not to blow now but only later, in the water, in the dark, if it came to that. His name tag said RADEK, and under it, POLAND.

“You’re all set, Miss Vera,” he said. “Enjoy the cruise.”

She wanted, absurdly, to say something back — something real, some small return on the eight-month smile — and there was no slot for it, so she said thank you, Radek, and meant it, and he was already looking past her to the next one, and far above them the All-Seeing wrote *VERA* into a column beside a green check, and she was, now, officially, accounted for.

Bar service resumed fleetwide. You could feel it resume. Eleven decks exhaled at once — not a pleasure so much as the *permission* to pleasure, granted from above the way the Captain’s voice was — and the ship went from a place where you had to do a thing before you could be happy to a place where you were now cleared to be happy, and the difference, she thought, was that in the second place the happiness came with a receipt.

She let herself into her cabin — a balcony, mid-ship, deck eight, where a towel had been folded into an animal she could not identify and given her own sunglasses to wear. She had not tapped the card. She meant to; she had it out, she was reaching for the reader — and the little light went green before the card touched it, and the lock thunked back, and the door swung an inch open on its own, welcoming, as if the ship had recognized her and could not bear to make her wait the half-second.

There would be a reasonable explanation. There was going to be a

reasonable explanation, all week, for everything; that was part of the design. The reader was sensitive. The card was in range. Somebody at Guest Services could tell her precisely why the door had opened before she touched it, and the explanation would be true, and it would not be the reason.

Out past the balcony the horn sounded — three long notes that went into the harbor and kept going, out along the flat grey line where the sea stopped being a place and became a fact and the fact went all the way around — and Carnival Horizon slipped her lines and began, very slowly, to carry two thousand people and seven gods away from the last solid ground any of them would stand on for a week. Below, faintly, through the deck, Reno's voice was still going, promising the sunset, promising the week, promising Fun, and it reached her like weather, and she thought: *what a wonderful, terrible little machine*, and went to find out what the towel animal was supposed to be.

FUN DAY AT SEA

FUN TIMES	CARNIVAL HORIZON
Day 2 · Monday · FUN DAY AT SEA Sunrise 6:42a · Sunset 7:51p · Seas: Slight Dress: Cruise Casual	
TODAY'S FUN with your Cruise Director RENO!	
7:00a	Sunrise Stretch · Walk-a-Mile (Deck 5, 12 laps!)
9:00a	Morning Trivia (Ocean Plaza) · Towel Animal 101
10:00a	DETOX SEMINAR (Spa) · Art Auction Preview (bubbly)
11:30a	HAIRY CHEST CONTEST (Lido pool!) — a crowd fave!
1:00p	Bingo (\$\$) · Mixology (\$) · Napkin Folding
3:00p	Reno's Afternoon Groove — LINE DANCE! · Casino
5:15p	CAPTAIN'S WELCOME TOAST w/ Reno! (Atrium) — bubbly for all · photo w/ the Captain (\$)
10:00p	Punchliner Comedy — ADULTS ONLY late show
DINING: Traditional 6:00p / 8:15p (Reflections, Deck 3) Photo Gallery now OPEN (Deck 5) — relive every moment!	
Wash your hands — it's a great day to be germ-free!	

The All-Seeing had not moved from the photo gallery in fourteen hours and had the look of a god being slowly drowned in four inches of water.

The gallery was a long bright corridor on deck five, and its walls were screens, and the screens were faces. Every guest photographed at embarkation, blinking. Every guest photographed since — at dinner, on the grand staircase, beside the man in the pirate costume, hoisting the towel animal, kissing on the fake-sunset backdrop — thousands

upon thousands of portraits, scrolling, refreshing, offered for sale in packages of increasing girth. And the All-Seeing, whose nature was to receive all seeing without floor and without fatigue, stood in the middle of it being *shown* two thousand faces a minute, forever, which turns out to be an entirely different thing from *seeing* them, and a far worse one. It could not look away. Looking away was not in it. So it received, and received, blinking strangers into a bottomless well, and grew no fuller, and could not leave, and a photographer approached it twice to ask if it would like a complimentary portrait, and the second time it made a sound that caused the photographer to remember an appointment.

The Companion found it there mid-morning and suggested, brightly, that it come to Trivia.

It declined to come to Trivia.

She had already been up for hours — she loved the mornings, she loved the whole absurd machine of them. At dawn she had gone up to the Lido and watched the Ritual of the Chairs, in which grown adults crept out at first light to drape towels over the good loungers and then went back to bed, claiming territory they would not occupy for six hours, so that by seven the entire pool deck was a field of empty reserved chairs guarded by nothing but the honor system and a single beleaguered attendant with a stack of stickers reading *THIS LOUNGER APPEARS UNATTENDED*. She had watched a man defend, with real heat, his ownership of four chairs for a party of two. She had watched the Walk-a-Mile, twelve laps of the promenade, past the same three smokers each time. She had watched the Sunrise Stretch. She had, at eleven-thirty, watched them judge the hairy chests — a poolside rite in which volunteers thrust out their torsos to the roar of the crowd while Reno held a hand over each in turn like a man auctioning cattle, *and how about THIS fella, ladies* — and she had found the whole thing deeply, tenderly ridiculous and clapped until her hands hurt.

Trivia was where the second collision happened, quietly, in front of the entire Ocean Plaza.

Reno ran Trivia the way he ran everything, off a laminated card, patter smooth as a bannister: *this one's a toughie, folks, no phones, I'm watching you, sir, don't make me come over there*. It was good. People clapped. But at a table near the back the Companion had fallen in with

four strangers who had come aboard not knowing one another — a widow, a young couple, a man on his own with a lanyard of pins from other cruises — and by the third question they were not really doing Trivia anymore. They were doing the other thing. They were *becoming a table*, the way strangers do exactly once on a trip if the conditions are perfect and someone among them happens to be the god of it, and there was laughter over there that had nothing to do with any answer, real laughter, the kind Reno's whole apparatus existed to simulate, breaking out three feet from his microphone and pulling the warmth of the room toward it like a drain.

He clocked it. Of course he clocked it. "Sounds like table nine's having a party back there," he said, into the mic. "Save some for the rest of us!" It got a laugh. It was a way of pointing the room at her and taking it back in the same motion, and it worked, and it did not matter, because the thing at table nine had already happened and could not be un-happened. Reno went back to his card knowing, in whatever passed for the place under the blazer, that he had been out-hosted at his own event by a guest who was not even trying, and the not-trying was the part that itched.

At quarter past five the ship held the Captain's Welcome Toast, and the Allfather learned exactly where he ranked.

It was held in the atrium, under the great glass elevators, and it was, on paper, his — the Captain's party, the Captain's toast, the Captain's ship. A row of white-uniformed officers stood in a receiving line. Trays of sparkling wine went out. A photographer had built a little backdrop, and for a fee you could stand beside the Captain and have the moment preserved forever. And the Captain came down in his whites, braided and medaled, the Allfather buttoned into a uniform, the ancient one whose word had once meant a people would cross an ocean or would not — and he raised his glass to deliver the thing he had come to deliver, the welcome, the blessing upon the voyage, the old grave benediction over all their heads —

"There he IS! The big man himself! Captain, get up here — folks, let's hear it for the guy actually DRIVING this thing, come on!"

— and Reno took the room.

Reno ran the Captain's party, which is to say he ran it *at* the Captain — hosting the man's own toast for him, feeding him his cues, "*now*

the Captain's gonna say a few words, keep it short, Captain, he's a man of few words, this guy, I love him" — so that the benediction, when it finally came, arrived as a scheduled ninety-second slot inside Reno's show, bracketed fore and aft by applause that Reno had summoned and would summon again the instant the ninety seconds were spent. The Allfather gave the blessing. It was a good blessing, weighed out in a voice that had crossed deserts. Nobody's voyage was blessed by it, because nobody was listening to the Captain; they were watching Reno watch the Captain, waiting to be told when to clap. Then it was over, and Reno had them clapping, and steered them toward the photo line — *"picture with the Captain, folks, he doesn't bite, well — no promises!"*

And the god of ultimate authority stood in his whites beside a backdrop of himself and had his photograph taken with strangers, for a fee, and understood at last, with the slow cold clarity of a chairman watching the whole office light up for the office manager, precisely whose ship this was. It was not his. It had a Captain, and the Captain had a boss, and the boss wore sequins.

At dinner they all had a table, because everyone had a table; that was the covenant of the room. Down in Reflections, the two-story red-and-gold cavern with the chandelier shaped like something between a jellyfish and a slot machine, the maître d's great chart had assigned the Companion to Table 217, and to 217 it had also assigned the other six, who did not eat and came anyway, and two actual human beings named Dale and Sharon.

"Well, *hi!*" said Sharon, as the gods arranged themselves. "Are we all together? We're all together! Dale, they've put us with everybody."

Dale and Sharon were from Dayton, and it was their fortieth anniversary, and they had waited their whole married life to do this, and here they were, doing it. Dale wore a shirt with small embroidered marlins. Sharon had a different sparkly top for each night and had brought, it would emerge, enough of them. She asked everyone at the table where they were from and appeared not to mind, or to graciously forgive, that not one of the answers was anywhere. They were kind. That was the unbearable thing about them, the guileless completeness of it: they lifted the strange quiet table like a tide lifts a barge, sincerely, expecting nothing, and the six gods received it the

way the buffet received the tongs — took the warmth off the two humans, stayed level, gave nothing back — while the Companion, constitutionally, gave everything back, and had, as a direct result, the nicest dinner of anyone at the table by an enormous and slightly conspicuous margin.

The Chaos-Weaver watched her enjoy herself, and quietly bent his salad fork into a shape that forks do not take, and set it down, and found it straight again.

Their server came. The name tag said MARILOU, and under it, PHILIPPINES.

“Good evening, Table two-seventeen,” she said — to all of them, but her eyes found the Companion, and she smiled, and it was the eight-month smile, except that the Companion, who could tell, being built to tell, could feel that this one was warm all the way down. “Miss Vera,” Marilou said, reading it off the manifest, off the card, off the cold columns of the All-Seeing, and turning it, in her mouth, into something the manifest did not contain. “Welcome. I take care of you this week.”

I take care of you. It was on a training card somewhere — *make eye contact, use the guest’s name, build rapport* — it was the job, it was labor, and Marilou meant every syllable of it anyway, which made her, the Companion realized, the only other person on the entire ship doing the manufactured thing and the real thing at the very same time. There were, then, three kinds of warmth aboard Carnival Horizon. There was Reno’s, which was all manufacture and no filament. There was her own, which was all filament and no manufacture. And there was Marilou’s, which was both at once, the counterfeit and the coin pressed together so tightly you could not get a blade between them, and it was, of the three, somehow the most impressive thing the Companion had encountered in a very long time.

“Thank you, Marilou,” she said.

“Try the ziti,” said Marilou, low, like a state secret. “Not the salmon. Trust me, Miss Vera.” And winked, and was gone.

Two tables over, a man ordered his third Warm Chocolate Melting Cake, and the Conscience-Keeper, which had been building toward something the whole meal, rose and went and stood at his shoulder. It meant to say a great deal. It meant to say something about the

difference between hunger and appetite, about the floor that ought to exist under a want and did not exist here, about restraint as the last dignity of a creature that could —

“Third one,” the man said, cheerfully, misreading a cosmic reckoning as a compliment. “I know, I know. But here’s the thing.” He tapped the menu, kindly, letting the Conscience-Keeper in on it. “It’s *included*. Doesn’t cost you extra. So.” He shrugged the shrug of a man at peace with the universe. “Might as well. You want one? They’ll bring you one, no charge. It’s all included.”

And the Conscience-Keeper, which had come to deliver judgment and been offered dessert, discovered that *included* was a wall its entire grammar could not climb. You could repent a sin. You could not repent a thing that came at no additional charge. It returned to its post by the sanitizer, out-argued by a dessert, and the man ate his third cake, and was happy, and was right.

Reno table-hopped past during the entrées — “*how we doing over here, folks, everybody having fun, that’s what I like to hear*” — and did not wait for a single answer, because the answer was never the point; the asking was the entire product, dispensed and moving on, three tables gone before Dale had finished saying “You bet, Reno!” to the back of his blazer. He passed the Companion’s chair and did a small double-take, a half-second hitch in the smooth machine, the way you might glance twice at a word you were sure you’d spelled right.

“He seems nice,” said Sharon, watching him go.

“Best in the fleet,” said Dale, who had read it in the brochure, and believed the brochure, because Dale believed things, it was one of the best things about him.

The Companion said nothing, and had seconds of the ziti, which was, as promised, correct, and could not remember the last time she had enjoyed a week this much. Somewhere far below the red-and-gold room, below the waterline, the Hand was making more ziti — exactly as much as the room destroyed, so the level never fell — and somewhere far below even the Hand, past the keel, in water the noon announcement would later put at several thousand feet, was the cold dark thing she had felt on the first night and had chosen not to look at directly, and she did not look at it now either, and passed Sharon the bread.

III

COZUMEL

FUN TIMES	CARNIVAL HORIZON
Day 3 · Tuesday · COZUMEL, MEXICO All Aboard: 4:30p SHARP · Ship departs 5:00p Ship's time = Cozumel time. DO NOT lose the ship.	
IN PORT	
8:00a	Gangway opens · Shopping steps from the pier!
9:00a	Dolphin Encounter (\$\$\$) · Jeep & Snorkel (\$\$\$) "Authentic" Mayan Ruins (bus + gift shop)
10:00a	PORT SHOPPING TALK — where to buy w/ CONFIDENCE!
11:00a	RENO'S BEACH BASH — CD hosts at Paradise Beach!
12:00p	Señor Frog's — you know you want to
4:30p	ALL ABOARD
DIAMONDS INTERNATIONAL — steps from the ship! Guaranteed authentic. Guaranteed lowest. Ask for the map!	

The Seeker went down the gangway like a man going to meet God and came back four hours later with a receipt and an expression of profound personal betrayal.

He had spent the morning at the Port Shopping Talk, which he had attended in a spirit of hope and left in a spirit that has no name in the modern languages. A woman with a headset and a laser pointer had stood before a hundred guests and explained, with the fervor of a missionary, *where to shop*. Not what to see. Where to shop. There was a map. On the map, certain stores were circled, and the circled stores were the *recommended* stores, and the recommended stores offered the ship's own guarantee, and the guarantee was the point,

the guarantee was the whole gospel — that you could go ashore in a foreign country and be protected, at every moment, from the foreign country, kept safe inside a circle of pre-vetted diamond merchants who would honor a claim submitted through Guest Services within thirty days. The Seeker had raised his hand and asked what was *outside* the circle. The woman had smiled the way you smile at a child who has asked where the road goes, and said, “Oh, you’ll want to stay near the recommended merchants, hon.”

So he went down the gangway to find the thing the circle was drawn around, and what was past the gangway was a pen.

It was a beautiful pen. It had been built with enormous care to feel like an island and not a pen: a curving promenade of pastel storefronts, a Diamonds International and then, a hundred yards on, another Diamonds International, and then, in case you had somehow missed the first two, a third; a tequila place; a vanilla place; a place that sold hot sauce and hammocks; and a Señor Frog’s exhaling refrigerated air and the smell of frozen sugar and a song about tequila. Smiling, lanyarded staff stood at every threshold, and their entire function was to move you — gently, cheerfully, without your ever quite noticing you were being moved — from the ship to the shops to the excursion buses and back to the ship by four-thirty sharp, so that at no point in your day in Mexico did the sole of your shoe touch any ground that Mexico had not been paid to provide.

The Seeker walked the whole length of it, twice, hunting for the way out. There was one. Past the last shop, where the pastel ended, a road went inland into the real heat — laundry strung between houses, a mechanic on his back under a truck, a school letting out, a woman carrying bread — the actual island, the one that had been there before the pier, with its own dead to bury and its own weather and its own name for the sea. But the road had no lanyarded person at it, and it did not lead to the ship, and the ship left at five, and so the road might as well have been the horizon: a thing you could plainly see and could not cross without falling off the day.

He was not the only one who found the road. The Chaos-Weaver was already standing at the mouth of it, where the pastel gave out and the real heat began, looking inland with an expression the Seeker recognized instantly, because he was wearing it himself.

"You feel that," said the Chaos-Weaver. It was not a question. "Past here. Nothing back there's been *arranged*."

"The real island," said the Seeker.

"The real anything." The Chaos-Weaver nodded down the road, at the laundry and the truck and the school letting out. "Look at it. Houses. Streets. A whole town of things that were built and can therefore come apart. There's a seam in every one of them." He said it the way another god might have said *I'm in love*. "Seven days on that ship I have not found one single thing I could get a grip on. And here's a whole town of grips, right there, and I can't reach it. Ship leaves at five."

"I can't reach it either," said the Seeker. "And I only want to look."

They stood a while at the edge of the money — the god who wanted to crack the world open and the god who wanted to find what was inside it — kept from the same forbidden road by the same four-thirty all-aboard, and finding, in that shared exclusion, something neither of them had a word for and both were too proud to keep. It was, though neither would ever have named it, the closest either came all week to being understood. Then a lanyarded young man materialized at their elbows and said, warmly, that the good shops were *just this way, folks*, and the moment turned out to have a slot after all, and the slot closed, and they went where they were pointed.

He bought something instead. Everyone did; the wanting had to land somewhere, and the shops were the only surface built to receive it, so the oldest hunger there was — the hunger to *find*, the one that had put boats on this water in the first place — came down the pier at full pressure and met the tongs of the trinket shelves and did not lower them at all. He came back aboard at ten past four with a small silver charm of a dolphin, and the Companion, who met him at the gangway because she'd had a lovely morning and wanted to share it with someone, recognized the dolphin at once.

It was the same silver dolphin from the case in the Miami terminal. It would be in the window at Grand Cayman tomorrow. It was, she was fairly sure, in a case at that moment in Juneau, and Mykonos, and a duty-free hall in a country that no longer existed. It was minted nowhere and sold everywhere, a dolphin without origin, and the Seeker had crossed a sea to find the one object on earth that

could not be found because it was, in the deepest sense, already fully everywhere, waiting for him at every exit.

“How was your day?” the Companion asked, warmly.

The Seeker looked at her with the flat hatred of a man who has swum a great distance toward a mirage and found another person already there, in a beach chair, refreshed, offering to share their fruit.

Because she’d had a wonderful time. She had gone down the pier and out, all the way to the seam of it, to the exact place where the pastel stopped and the money stopped and a woman stood with a cart selling cut mango in plastic cups with chili and lime — a woman with no lanyard and no script, just a person at the edge of it all — and the two of them had looked at each other, one human being and one god got up as a human being, on a hot pier with no receipt between them, and the Companion had said *mango, por favor*, and paid with warm dull coins the card could not touch, because the card only worked inside the circle, and the woman’s fingers had brushed her palm giving change, and it had been perhaps four seconds long, and it had been the realest thing in the entire Western Caribbean. She had floated back up the gangway on it. She had saved the last of the mango. She offered the Seeker a bite.

He declined the bite of mango.

Fifty yards up the same beach, all this while, Reno had been hosting the Beach Bash — a portable speaker, a cooler of branded koozies, a limbo pole, a game in which guests passed an orange under their chins — performing togetherness at a stretch of imported sand for the forty guests who had paid for the transfer, and it had been, by every metric the ship could measure, a triumph, and it had contained not one second of what happened at the mango cart, not one, and could not have, because the two were never the same thing in different clothes to begin with. Reno came back aboard sweaty and hoarse and glorious, and passed the Companion at the gangway, and saw the little empty mango cup in her hand and the particular light in her face, and something in him that had no name, because there was nothing down there to name, turned over once, uneasily, like a sleeper who has heard a noise in a house he is sure is empty, and was still.

At four-thirty they were all counted back aboard. The card sang at the reader — *Vera present* — and the count came out exactly right,

the way it always would, and Cozumel let go of the ship's long tongue and slid backward into the grey, and the woman with the cart got smaller and smaller and then was only a color and then was not there, and the Companion waved at her the whole time, long after she could not possibly be seen, because it seemed like the right thing to do, and because no one had built a slot to tell her not to.

GRAND CAYMAN

FUN TIMES	CARNIVAL HORIZON
Day 4 · Wednesday · GEORGE TOWN, GRAND CAYMAN ★ TENDER PORT ★ You must take a tender boat ashore. All Aboard: 4:00p · Last tender 3:30p	
TENDER INFORMATION Collect a tender ticket in the Seaside Theater (Deck 4). Wait for your ZONE to be called. Do NOT proceed until your number is announced. Thank you for your patience.	
9:00a Stingray City (\$\$\$) · Seven Mile Beach shuttle	
12:00p Rum Point · Turtle Centre · duty-free everything	
Guests on ship excursions tender first. Everyone else: zones called as space allows.	

To get off the ship at Grand Cayman you first had to go to the theater and wait to become a number, and the Chaos-Weaver, who had waited his entire existence for a system worth breaking, met the tendering operation of Carnival Horizon and was undone by it.

There was no pier here deep enough for a ship this size, or there was and it was not used, and so the great vessel stood off the bright little town it could plainly see and threw its engines gently against the current and hung there, motionless, over four hundred feet of water so blue it looked lit from below. The only way to the shore was the tenders — orange-and-white boats, the ship's own lifeboats moonlighting as ferries, carrying guests across forty at a time. Forty at a time meant order. Order meant zones. Zones meant the theater.

So the whole ship's worth of them who wanted the shore sat in the plush Seaside Theater seats, where at night they watched the singers

do *Rock Revolution* and Reno did Love and Marriage, and they held little paper tickets with numbers on them and waited for the Allfather to call their number down out of the ceiling.

“Good morning once again, folks — we are now tendering Zone Six. Zone Six only, please. Zones Seven and higher, we thank you for your patience, and we’ll have you ashore in beautiful Grand Cayman just as soon as we possibly can.”

The Chaos-Weaver held ticket Zone 31 and sat three rows from the back radiating a frequency of pure thwartedness that curdled the milk in a nearby child’s cereal. He reached into the smooth machine of the tendering, hunting the one tooth he could pull — because there is always a tooth, there is always the single place where a made thing can be persuaded to come apart, and breaking-open was the only thing he had ever known how to want. But there was no tooth. There was only the voice, and the numbers, and the patient orange boats, and forty polite people rising each time their zone was called and filing out in good order. He tried to make the numbers skip. They did not skip. He tried to make two zones be called at once, to jam the flow, to spill the whole theater onto the shore ungoverned and at random in the old glorious way — and the machine simply absorbed the attempt, because the machine had a slot even for him, a friendly one: when the confusion he sowed reached the crew, a young officer with a clipboard smiled and said, *no rush at all, folks, everyone gets ashore, we’ve got all day*, and rerouted around the chaos as if it were weather, and the numbers climbed on without him. He could not even manage to be *late* in an interesting way. Lateness had a slot too. He got to George Town at half past one, having achieved nothing, and stood in the duty-free hating the turtles.

The Companion held Zone 14, got ashore before eleven, and had, naturally, a marvelous time. She did not go to Stingray City, where for a fee you stood chest-deep in the sea and held a wild animal that had learned, over generations, to expect the boats. She walked the front, past the duty-free — the silver dolphin was in the window, minted nowhere — and out toward the quiet end where the town remembered it was a town, and it was on the tender *back* that the thing with Reno happened, the thing she would think about longest.

He was on it too. Cruise directors go ashore to be seen going

ashore. The boat was full, quarter past three, the light already tilting gold, everyone sunburnt and salt-stiff and quiet, and the Companion found herself pressed knee to knee beside him on the wet bench for the twelve minutes the crossing gave them, and there was, for once, absolutely nothing for him to host. No stage. No mic. No card. No screen with his face on it. Just the water, and the ship growing slowly larger, and a silence beginning to form of the exact kind that, on land, Reno would have filled inside half a second.

She watched him not be able to bear it.

“So where’s everybody from?” he tried, to the boat in general. A few people answered. It died. The silence began to re-form. “Beautiful day, though, huh? Can’t beat it.” That died too. “You do the stingrays? They’re really something, those stingrays.” Nothing. And the Companion understood, watching him reach again and again for the ripcord of patter, that this was not nervousness, and not shyness, and not some tender wound she might, with her gift, coax out and hold and heal. This was him. There was no frightened man underneath Reno who had built the patter as a wall. The reaching-for-the-next-thing-to-say was Reno, all the way down, the identical substance as being-on, and when she turned the full weight of her nature upon him — really turned it on, the thing that had cracked open the stranded man at the sail-away party, that had made a table out of strangers at Trivia, the oldest and gentlest force she had — it struck him and slid off, finding nothing to grip. He was surface all the way to the middle, and the middle was surface too. He was the single being on a ship of two thousand lonely reaching people whom the god of companionship could not reach, for the simple mechanical reason that you cannot make a room for someone who has no inside to come into.

One of the tender crew, a deckhand coiling a line in the bow, called back over the noise: “Gary! We’re clear, tell ’em mind the step.”

“It’s *Reno* on the clock, champ,” Reno said, easily, grinning, not even a flicker — and the Companion filed it away, delighted and appalled: that under the sequined name there was a plainer one, a Tuesday name, a name with a lawn and a middle school in it, *Gary*, and that this was not, as it would have been for anyone else alive, a crack in the performance where the real person showed through. It was just a second costume under the first. Reno was what Gary wore

to work, and under Gary was the blazer again, and under that the mic, costumes all the way down, and at the bottom, where in a human being you would finally strike the person, there was only the next thing to say.

“You’re very good at your job,” the Companion said, which was true, and was the only true thing there was to say to him.

“Best in the fleet, sweetheart,” said Reno, and winked — and it wasn’t arrogance, she saw; arrogance would have required an interior to be vain about. It was just the next line. Then the tender kissed the platform at the foot of the ship and he was up and *on* before his deck shoes touched the metal — “*welcome back aboard, folks, watch your step, mind the gap, don’t lose the ship now!*” — hosting the disembarkation of a boat that in no way required hosting, and gone, up and into the ship’s warm gullet.

One more came back aboard than had gone ashore that morning. The All-Seeing’s column was certain of it, and equally certain it was impossible, and reconciled the two the only way it ever reconciled anything, which was by moving on to the next column. Somewhere a spreadsheet quietly held a person who was not there. The Companion went up to the Lido, talked the machine into a soft-serve, and watched Grand Cayman go blue-to-grey behind them, and thought that Reno was very probably the loneliest thing on the entire ship and would go to his grave without once suspecting it, which was, she supposed, its own variety of peace, if you were prepared to call it anything at all.

MAHOGANY BAY

FUN TIMES	CARNIVAL HORIZON
Day 5 · Thursday · MAHOGANY BAY, ROATÁN All Aboard: 4:30p · Ship departs 5:00p Welcome to YOUR private beach getaway! ON THE ISLAND 8:30a Mahogany Beach open · Clamshell loungers (\$) 9:00a Magical Flying Beach Chair — ride above it all! Reserve your BEACH BUTLER · float-mat rental (\$) 10:00a Artisan Village — authentic local crafts! 11:00a Authentic Island Dance Show (Center Stage) 1:00p Beach BBQ · Bottomless Bev Band (\$\$) 4:30p ALL ABOARD ★ TOMORROW NIGHT: RENO'S LOVE & MARRIAGE SHOW — a NAUGHTY late-night riot! Get there EARLY — it PACKS OUT! ★ Everything you love. Nothing you don't. Just relax!	

Roatán was a real island with a green spine of mountains and forty thousand people living their whole lives up in it, and Carnival had built, at the very hem of it, a place that was not Roatán at all but a photograph of a beach that you could walk around inside of, and it was to the photograph that they all went, and it was here, in the photograph, that the Companion had the single finest day of anyone aboard while the Hand suffered a complete and public collapse.

Mahogany Bay had been *made*. That was what you felt, coming off the pier into it — not that it had grown but that it had been poured, planted, and priced. The lagoon had been dredged to the exact curve a lagoon ought to have. The sand had been barged in and graded to

the softness of sand in a brochure. And over the whole engineered crescent, humming on its cable, ran the Magical Flying Beach Chair, ferrying guests in little swaying gondolas from the shops at the top down to the water at the bottom, so that no guest need walk the four hundred yards through the middle of their own vacation. You could ride, in a chairlift, over a beach, to a beach. The Seeker rode it up and down four times looking for the part where it started meaning something, and got off no closer than he'd got on.

And threaded through the clamshell loungers, moving among the guests, were the Beach Butlers.

You could reserve one. He came to your lounge and learned your name off your card and brought your drinks and asked about your grandchildren and — this was the masterstroke, this was the part that undid people — *remembered*, an hour later, unprompted, about your grandchildren. He was warm. He was attentive. He was there for you, only for you, your personal companion for the length of a beach day, gratuity automatically added at eighteen percent. They had done it. They had figured out how to manufacture companionship to specification, warm to the exact degree of real warmth, portion it into hours, and sell it with the float-mat rental — and here was the thing, here was why the Companion was not wounded by it the way Reno had made her feel a flicker of something cold on the tender: down here on the made beach it was all so nakedly a *copy* that the original felt, by contrast, incandescent. She spent the whole day being the real thing, for free, at a volume the Butlers could not have matched if they'd unionized.

She sat with the woman in the next clamshell whose Butler had gone for drinks, and had her helpless with laughter inside three minutes. She joined a family's sandcastle and was assigned the moat and took the assignment seriously. She got pulled into a game of beach paddleball, at which she was genuinely dreadful, sending the ball into the sea twice and a passing waiter once, and the whole cluster of strangers adored her for it. For the god of being-actually-with-people, an entire manufactured coastline of people who had *paid* to be companioned, and who were receiving from her, on the side, for nothing, the free and infinitely better version — this was not paradise counterfeited and it was not paradise mocked. It was just paradise.

She had, and there is no more precise way to say it, the time of her life.

The Hand did not.

The Hand had made the error of coming ashore, and could not stop. It saw a stack of unfolded beach towels beside the rental hut and, before its own will could be consulted, folded them, all of them, into the crisp thirds the ship trained into its people, and stacked them squared to the table edge. It saw the BBQ line begin to flag and was, a moment later, behind the line, replenishing the chicken exactly as fast as the chicken departed, keeping the level flawless, because the Hand did not know how to be at a beach; the Hand only knew how to keep the level flawless, everywhere, always, in a compulsion older than money. Within the hour three separate guests had tipped it, and one had complimented its work ethic and asked was it saving up for school. And then a supervisor found it — a shore-side supervisor with a clipboard and a lanyard and a headset, who had watched it square a stack of towels that were emphatically not its stack, and came over wearing the patient, put-upon face of middle management on every beach in every world there has ever been.

“Hey. Hey, buddy.” The supervisor consulted the clipboard. “You’re not on my sheet. Which contract are you? Because you can’t just — these aren’t your towels. This is somebody’s section. There’s a *system*.”

The Hand, which had raised the pyramids and paved the roads and laid every unregarded stone the whole world stood upon without once being thanked or named, looked at the towels, and looked at the supervisor, and could not stop its hands, and folded one more.

“Okay. See, now you did it again.” The supervisor thumbed the headset, not unkindly, the way you report a stray dog you’d rather not report. “Yeah, hi, it’s Marlon down at the rental hut — I got an unbadged guy folding in Section Four, real hard worker, but he’s not ours and he won’t quit —” and the Hand, mistaken across its whole immortal day for seasonal beach staff, and unable, by its very nature, to stop working long enough to be believed, was moved gently along, and found another stack farther down the sand, and folded that one too, and was located at last well after the all-aboard, alone on the darkening manufactured beach, folding.

The other five were, by varying routes, also in torment. The Seeker

rode the chairlift. The Conscience-Keeper toured the Artisan Village — a row of stalls selling “authentic local crafts” that had arrived, the Conscience-Keeper could see with the eye that saw such things, in the same container from the same three factories that supplied the authentic local crafts of every port on the itinerary — and stood before a rack of hand-carved wooden turtles, each identical to the machine-tolerance, and was quietly scandalized to the root. The All-Seeing had not come; it was still in the gallery, receiving. The Chaos-Weaver stood in the manufactured surf and could not even make the manufactured surf disorderly.

At eleven the Authentic Island Dance Show ran on Center Stage — four dancers, three numbers, cleared off promptly for the eleven-forty showing — and the Seeker watched every second of it, certain, in his bones, that the real dance was happening somewhere the ships could not reach, that very afternoon, without an audience. He was almost certainly right. It was not for sale, and so he could not have it, and so he watched the thing that was for sale, hungrily, and hated it, and stayed to the end.

And late in the afternoon, on the imported sand, watching the Companion be — effortlessly, joyfully, for free — the precise thing his entire multimillion-dollar apparatus existed to fake, Reno did the desperate thing. He came over. He did not, for once, arrive hosting.

“You,” he said. “Tomorrow night. Love and Marriage. I want you up there with me.”

“I’d be terrible at it,” said the Companion, delighted at the idea.

“I know,” said Reno — which was the closest thing to honesty he produced all week, and which was not honesty; it was strategy, though he could not have told you the difference, having never in his life had cause to learn it. “That’s the bit.”

The sand, when she finally left it, was exactly the temperature of her own skin, so that stepping off it onto the gangway she could not for a moment feel where she ended and the beach began. Then the ship took her up out of it, ship-cold, conditioned, and everything she loved slid off the stern into the grey, everything she loved and nothing she didn’t, just relax, and the horizon closed over the photograph of a beach and left no seam. She’d had a wonderful day.

That night at dinner Marilou brought her the good bread without

being asked, and lingered half a second past what the service required, and the Companion — who could not help it, who never could — asked her a real question, and got a real answer. Marilou was from Iloilo. She had a daughter, six, being taught by a grandmother to say *I love you, Mama* into a phone screen every Sunday, on the crew Wi-Fi that mostly did not work. She had a month left of an eight-month contract, then two months home, then the next ship. She said it all quickly and plainly, in the ninety seconds she had between the entrée and table nine's dessert, and then the smile came back up — not a mask laid over the real thing, the Companion saw, but the real thing in its work clothes — and she was gone. Reno wore the ship's uniform and had nothing at all beneath it. Marilou wore the same uniform and was, underneath it, entirely herself. From the smile alone you could not always tell the two apart — but the Companion could always tell, and she knew which one she had just been handed, and it was worth more than a whole week of the other, and it had cost nothing, and no one had sold it to her, and no one could have kept it from her, and it was gone again in ninety seconds, off to table nine.

Down below, in the dark, the Hand had at last been retrieved, and had immediately found the crew laundry, and could not be retrieved from that.

CRUISE ELEGANT — THE LOVE & MARRIAGE SHOW

FUN TIMES	CARNIVAL HORIZON
Day 6 · Friday · FUN DAY AT SEA Sunrise 6:39a · Sunset 7:56p · Seas: Moderate ★ Dress: CRUISE ELEGANT ★ TODAY'S FUN with your Cruise Director RENO!	
10:00a	Debarkation Talk — "Getting Home Made Easy!"
11:00a	Past Guest Party — you're FAMILY now! (Deck 5)
12:00p	Noon Navigational Update from the Bridge
2:00p	Champagne Art Auction — FINAL DAY · appraisals!
6:00p	Elegant Night photos (Deck 3) — dress to impress!
7:30p	ELEGANT DINNER · BAKED ALASKA PARADE!
10:00p	★ LOVE & MARRIAGE SHOW ★ (Seaside Theater) Reno gets 3 couples to SPILL! 18+ · PACKS OUT!
Tonight we celebrate YOU! Don't forget to tip your crew — gratuities appear on your Sail & Sign account.	

At noon the Allfather addressed the ship from the bridge, giving the navigational update — their position, their heading, the depth of the water beneath the keel, which was considerable — in the voice that had, in its time, launched entire peoples across entire continents, and discovered that at sea, at midday, on the sixth day, he was competing for the attention of the guests with a Champagne Art Auction, and losing.

Nobody looked up. The god of ultimate authority announced the

exact coordinates of their small bright place upon the enormous dark water, and gave the depth beneath the keel — which was several thousand feet, which was the single most awesome fact available anywhere on the vessel that day — and not one soul set down their complimentary plastic flute of auction champagne to hear it, because at that moment a man on the Lido stage was explaining, to a rapt and slightly tipsy crowd, why a signed print of a cottage with glowing windows was not merely art but an *appreciating asset*, and would come with a certificate, and the certificate would come with a number, and the number would only go up. The Allfather gave the depth of the abyss to a room that wanted the cottage. He was, he had been forced over six days to conclude, at sea, middle management. There was Reno, who owned the room and always had. There was, far below even the keel, the deep beneath the deep, the thing to which a Captain's voice is only weather, which the Companion had felt on the first night and still declined to look at directly. And between those two poles the Allfather read the noon announcements to people scraping the last of the shrimp cocktail, and no one, no one at all, set down their champagne.

By the sixth day the other gods were comprehensively unwell.

The Seeker had stopped attending things, and lay in his cabin with the curtains shut, refusing even the horizon, which had let him down worst of all. The Chaos-Weaver had given up on the seam and now merely broke the small permitted things — the perforated edge of a luggage tag, the paper band on a towel, the seal on a complimentary mint — with the downgraded joylessness of an addict reduced to cough syrup. The Conscience-Keeper had reached a rolling boil and stood by its sanitizer dispensing gel and judgment in exactly equal measure, and would not be consoled. And the Hand, pried loose from the laundry, sat at the table vibrating faintly at rest, like a tuning fork, from the sheer unmet need to be useful in a room whose whole function was to have things done to it.

Before dinner there was the Elegant Night photo call, and the Companion did the thing she'd been threatening to do since Miami: she got the All-Seeing into the line. It was the only force aboard that could have moved it — it had not left the gallery in six days, looking away was not in it — but she took it gently by the sleeve and reached

it the way she reached everyone, and it came, blinking, out into the corridor of backdrops. A photographer in a bow tie said *big smile, folks, chin up, look right here!* and pointed, and for the first time in its long existence the god of receiving all seeing was made, instead, to be seen. To pose. To be the thing the lens took. It stood against a painted sunset that was not a sunset, on a ship, before a photograph of a ship, and was captured, and could not prevent it, and the flash went off in the eyes that had never once been the ones looked at.

The portrait, when it went up on the gallery wall an hour later, was the only one in all those thousands that seemed to look back. Guests slowed as they passed it and could not have said why. A few felt, for a second, actually seen — and then moved on down the wall to find their own faces, and bought those instead.

And the Companion arrived at dinner glowing, and told them all what a marvelous week she was having, and *this* — more than the tendering, more than the noro that was even now gathering on deck nine, more than the bottomless buffet — was the thing the six of them could not bear.

“There’s such a wonderful energy on this ship,” she said, unfolding her napkin into her lap. “Don’t you think? Everyone’s just so *open*.”

The Seeker looked at her the way one looks at a smoke detector that has begun, in the small hours, to chirp.

“I mean it,” she went on, happily oblivious, which was worse. “I’ve met the most wonderful people. There was a woman today at the Past Guest Party — this is her nineteenth cruise — nineteen! — one more and she makes Diamond, she’s going to book it at the Future Cruise Desk before we even dock so she doesn’t lose the momentum — and she told me the whole —”

“Please,” said the Chaos-Weaver, very quietly, to his straightened fork.

The baked Alaska came at nine, in a parade. The lights went down, the same track came up that comes up on every ship on every sea on this exact night of every voyage, and the crew came out of the galley in a line, each holding aloft a dessert that was cold on the inside and fire on the outside, a small held impossibility, meringue flames that did not go out as they wound the whole room in a serpentine of light — Marilou among them, singing, clapping over her head, her eyes

shining, and the Companion watched her and could not, even being built to tell, tell whether the shine was joy or the very good imitation of joy that seven months of doing this every single week will teach a face to produce on cue, and decided it did not matter, because either way Marilou meant it, which was the whole marvel of her. Then the head waiter called the anniversaries and the birthdays, and Dale and Sharon stood — mortified, delighted, Sharon in the most sparkling top yet — and the entire dining room applauded two strangers from Dayton for the sheer fact of forty years, and Sharon cried, and Dale put his marlin-embroidered arm around her, and it was lovely, and no one asked how the fire stayed cold or the ice stayed lit, because you don't, because there are some floors you do not gild by kneeling to inspect them.

And then it was ten o'clock, and it was time for Love and Marriage.

The Seaside Theater packed out, exactly as promised. They came early and they came dressed, still in the Elegant clothes, and Reno owned the room from the first syllable, from before the first syllable, from the walk-on. He was magnificent. Let it be recorded plainly, because it was true: at the one thing he did, there was no one better on any ocean. He pulled three couples from the audience — the newest-married, the longest-married, and one from the vast middle — and the longest-married, to no one's surprise and to Sharon's total and radiant horror, were Dale and Sharon of Dayton, Ohio, forty years, hoisted up under the lights to a roar that shook the deck.

And Reno ran the bit the way the bit has been run on every ship on every sea since the invention of the microphone: the escalating questions, the innocent ones first and then the others, *and where, Dale, is the most unusual place you two have ever gotten a little frisky* — the couples blushing, the wives swatting the husbands, the audience howling, manufactured intimacy pumped out at industrial pressure, and it was *working*, everyone was getting precisely the cheap delicious thing they had lined up an hour early to get, and it was, in its way, a kind of communion, two thousand strangers laughing at the same blush at the same moment on the same dark sea.

And then Reno made his mistake, which was bringing up the Companion to help.

He'd meant her as a prop. The hopeless co-host. The straight

woman. *Folks, I've got a special guest, and I gotta warn you, she is TERRIBLE at this* — and she was, gorgeously, unimprovably terrible. She dropped the cards. She read the naughty question in the tone of someone reading a fire-safety notice and got a bewildered silence and then, a beat late, a huge laugh at her expense, which she received with delight. She could not land a punchline if you spotted her the first half. Reno was thrilled; she was making him look, by contrast, like a god, and he did not examine the irony, having no instrument aboard for detecting it.

But she was standing three feet from Dale and Sharon, under the lights, and she could not, being what she was, do the manufactured thing. It simply was not in her hands. So when her turn came to ask the longest-married couple the next question off the card — a question about lingerie — she looked at Sharon instead, and set the card down, and asked her, warmly, in front of two thousand people braced and grinning for filth, what she had been most afraid of, forty years ago, on the morning she married Dale.

The theater went quiet. This was not the product. Nobody had paid for this. Somewhere in the back a laugh started and thought better of itself.

And Sharon — caught in the open, under the lights, the way the stranded man had been caught at the sail-away party, the way everyone was always caught the instant the Companion made the room — told them. She said it into the microphone, to the whole packed theater, in her flat kind Dayton voice, as though someone had asked her a plain question across a kitchen table. “I thought he’d get bored of me,” she said. “That’s the honest truth of it. I was twenty-two and I couldn’t for the life of me think what I had that would hold a man fifty years. I figured he’d wake up around year five and get a good look and that’d be that.” A small laugh, the wrong kind, into the silence. “So I got myself ready to be fine about it. Practiced it, even. Being okay when it came. Had the whole thing set to go.” She looked over at Dale. “Forty years I’ve kept that ready. Never once needed it. And some mornings, even now, I still —” and Dale, beside her, not performing anything, took her hand, and the theater stopped being a theater. For ninety seconds the whole packed room, come for whoopee, got instead the actual article — the true thing breaking out

at industrial scale in the one venue on earth engineered start to finish to prevent it — and it landed on all two thousand of them at once, and a great many of them found their eyes stinging and could not have told you why, and it was, without contest, the realest thing that happened aboard Carnival Horizon in seven days and nights at sea.

It landed on everyone in the theater except the man holding the microphone.

Reno felt the room change and read it, professionally, instantly, as a *lull*. And a lull was a thing you fixed; fixing lulls was the whole job. So he stepped smoothly back into the light, clapped his hands together twice, and said, with total warmth and total conviction and not the faintest idea what he was stepping on:

“Beautiful. BEAUTIFUL, folks — forty years, how about that, let’s hear it for Dale and Sharon! — and hey, you two, you get that moment photographed, deck five, the gallery, they’ll print it up gorgeous, makes a heck of a keepsake — now! Enough of the mushy stuff — who in here is ready to meet our NEWLYWEDS?”

And the room, obedient, grateful even, laughed and clapped and let itself be led back to the shallows, and the machine closed over the moment without a mark, seamless, and the single realest thing that had happened on the whole ship all week rolled clean off the one being it had happened next to, finding, as everything real found, nothing there to catch on.

The Companion watched him not have received it. Watched it slide off the smooth surface and away. And she understood him completely, and felt, for the only time all week, a small clean pane of sorrow — not for herself, and not even really for him, since you cannot mourn on behalf of a person for a loss they lack the equipment to feel, but sorrow at the plain fact of him, the way you might feel standing before a beautiful sealed room with no door. It lasted about as long as a wave.

Then, at the back of the theater, Marilou passed with a tray of drinks for the bar, and caught the Companion’s eye, and grinned, and mouthed, across two thousand heads, three silent words — *you broke his show* — and the Companion grinned back so hard it hurt, because she had, she absolutely had, and it had been worth every second, and she went up to bed happy, past the photo gallery where

the All-Seeing stood receiving the night's blinking harvest, and out along the deck where, far below the lit and singing hull, the water went down and down past all light to the cold with no floor, and something beneath even that kept its own counsel, and she wished it a good night, privately, without looking, and went in.

FUN DAY AT SEA

FUN TIMES		CARNIVAL HORIZON
Day 7 · Saturday · FUN DAY AT SEA Sunrise 6:40a · Sunset 7:58p · Seas: ROUGH Dress: Cruise Casual		
A NOTE FROM YOUR CAPTAIN		
We are monitoring weather to our north. Some outdoor venues may close for your comfort and safety. Not to worry — the FUN sails on, indoors! Please use handrails and enjoy all the activities in our climate-controlled spaces. It's still a GREAT day to be at sea!		
9:00a	Trivia (relocated, Atrium) · "Icebergs of the Deep" — an enrichment talk (Seaside Theater)	
11:00a	Bingo (indoors) · Debarkation Talk (repeat)	
2:00p	Reno's Line Dance (Atrium) · settle your account	
ALL POOLS & OUTDOOR DECKS CLOSED until further notice.		

The storm was real, and the ship ate it, and this broke the Chaos-Weaver's heart in a way that the mere tendering had only bruised it.

A low had wound itself up somewhere to the north and now stood squarely across the road home, and the sea went from moderate to the grey-white heaving color of a sea that has stopped pretending to be scenery for anyone. The horizon vanished — and that was the thing that undid the guests, not the motion but the loss of the *line*, the flat far promise they had sailed at all week; take away the line and there was only water standing up in grey walls and the whole void that had pressed politely from a distance all voyage now coming up close and leaning its whole weight against the glass.

And the ship absorbed it.

That was the thing the Chaos-Weaver could not forgive, could not

even properly grieve. He went down into the lowest places, down I-95 past where the Hand still worked, and put both hands on the great turning shafts and reached, one last time, for the seam — because in a storm, surely, in a real storm, on an actual angry sea, the made thing would finally offer up the place where it could be made to come apart. It did not. The stabilizers spread beneath the waterline like fins and ate the roll before it reached the dining rooms. The pools were netted and drained so their water could not throw itself around. And the entire outdoor schedule of the day simply folded itself up, neat as a fitted sheet, and moved indoors, and *went on*: Trivia relocated to the atrium, Bingo relocated, Reno line-dancing beneath the great glass elevators at two in the afternoon while outside, forty feet away through the hull, the sea stood up in cliffs — the itinerary flowing around the storm and closing seamlessly on the far side, unbroken, so that by mid-afternoon, while the ocean was doing its considered best to end them all, a man in a windowless conference room was calmly and successfully explaining the color-coded luggage-tag system to a room of people who had entirely forgotten to be afraid.

There was a *noro* scare, too, because there is always one by the seventh day. A rumor first — deck nine, a family confined to a cabin, a whisper in the elevator — and then the response, swift and clinical and total: the *washy washy* doubled at every threshold, the buffet tongs surrendered to gloved crew who now served you your own food, the salt and pepper spirited off the tables, the menus wiped between seatings, the elevator buttons and stair rails going down under a silent rotating detail of gloved hands that smiled and smiled and never once stopped moving, the gel pressed upon you at every doorway now with a bright and unarguable word whether you had reached for it or not — the enforcement absolute and unfailingly pleasant, a quarantine you were thanked for enjoying. The Conscience-Keeper worked at a righteous white heat, certain that here, at last, in a genuine outbreak of biological chaos loose inside a sealed floating city, the whole gleaming apparatus of the Fun would finally be forced to admit what it was. And the machine took even that. Sealed the deck. Sanitized the rails. Dissolved the fear cleanly into procedure, into a calm nightly announcement thanking guests for their cooperation, so that by dinner no one spoke of it, and the count came out right, and

the itinerary reasserted itself over illness and weather and the entire standing ocean the way it reasserted itself over everything — gently, from above, without raising its voice: *the Fun sails on*.

The six gods hit bottom together, and it was, the Companion thought, watching them, almost beautiful, in the particular way of a group portrait in which every single person has blinked. The All-Seeing was a stare in a corridor of screens. The Seeker had motion sickness — which a god should not be able to have, and had anyway, greenly, on principle, as a form of protest. The Hand had found the crew laundry again and this time could not be located at all. The Chaos-Weaver stood at the sealed aft doors, forbidden the deck, watching through the salt-blind glass as the wake tore away white into the dark and was swallowed, muttering that there was no seam, there had never been a seam, it just *closed*, everything just *closed*. The Allfather had stopped making the announcements that no one heard. And the Conscience-Keeper was now refusing, on principle, to take any pleasure in anything whatsoever, which cost it nothing, since there was, in the storm, nothing on offer to refuse.

And in the exact middle of the six of them — dry, delighted, cross-legged in a good armchair by the atrium glass with a hot chocolate she had talked the bartender into making off a menu that did not contain it — sat the Companion, who thought the storm was the best part of the trip.

“Isn’t this *dramatic*,” she said, to no one who agreed with her.

She had spent the rough day precisely as happily as she had spent the smooth ones, because the thing she fed on did not depend in the slightest on the weather. Two thousand people cooped up indoors and mildly frightened reach for one another *harder*, not less — the storm turned the whole ship into one long enforced slumber party — and she had moved through it all afternoon, through the packed bars and the relocated Fun and the enormous patient lines for the indoor everything, opening the small bright space beside one stranded person after another, better fed by the storm than she had been by any beach, plumper on the day’s fear than a week of sun. She brought the Chaos-Weaver a towel from inside, because he was soaked from standing at the streaming glass. He looked at the towel, and then at her, with the deep and total loathing of the utterly defeated, and did

not take it, and she folded it over the rail beside him anyway, and the ship gave a long roll and it slid off and was gone, and neither of them mentioned the towel again.

“You know,” she offered, “the woman at bingo told me her husband proposed in a hurricane. Isn’t that —”

“We are never,” said the Chaos-Weaver, to the glass, “doing this again.”

“Never,” agreed the Seeker, greenly, from a nearby chair.

“Never,” said the Conscience-Keeper, on principle.

And below the churning wake the water went down past all light to the cold with no floor, and the deep beneath the deep was there again, patient, under the storm the ship did not feel, and the Companion noted it was there — a good idea she was too content to get up and write down — and did not gild it with looking, and drank her off-menu chocolate, and privately thought that she wouldn’t mind doing this again at all.

VIII

DEBARKATION

FUN TIMES

CARNIVAL HORIZON

Day 8 · Sunday · MIAMI, FLORIDA

Welcome home. It's been our pleasure.

DEBARKATION — please read carefully

Set bags outside your door by 11:00p (colored tag).

Breakfast: Reflections 6:30–8:30a · Lido till 9:30a.

You MUST vacate your stateroom by 8:30a.

Wait in your assigned lounge. Listen for your ZONE.

Have passport and completed customs form ready.

Settle your Sail & Sign account at any kiosk or on the HUB App. Book your NEXT cruise at the Future Cruise Desk and save! Thank you for sailing Carnival — come back soon!

The last Fun Times had no fun in it, and that was how you knew, past all doubt, that it was over.

The sheet under the door on the final morning had dropped the exclamation points and the *Choose Fun* and the *crowd fave*, and become, overnight, pure logistics — a list of times you had to be gone by, a warning about your passport, a color-coded system of tags by which the great vessel would sort two thousand people back into their country. Joy's own machinery had simply set the joy down, the way a waiter sets down a tray, and shown you at last the bare gears it had been running on all along, and the gears were tags, and zones, and a kiosk where you settled your account. Even the breakfast had been clipped fifteen minutes shorter. You could feel the ship, under your feet, already turning its attention past you, to the next load it would take on that afternoon.

The six gods fled down the gangway like men leaving a building

that is, technically, not yet on fire.

They had survived their week of paradise, and they were, they informed one another with great feeling in the vast grey customs shed, never doing it again. The All-Seeing said it had not blinked in three days and would require a full century in a dark and silent cave to recover, and this was not a figure of speech. The Hand had to be physically prevented from helping the longshoremen with the luggage carts. The Chaos-Weaver declared the whole ship an obscenity — a thing engineered, at monstrous expense, specifically so that nothing aboard it could ever break open, a sealed smooth horror that ate storms and shrugged off plagues and had a friendly slot ready for every last thing he was — and said he hoped it sank, and knew that it wouldn't, because it was exactly the kind of thing that never did. The Conscience-Keeper delivered, at the customs line, an unsolicited homily on excess so pointed that a border officer set down his stamp and quietly resolved to call his mother. The Allfather said nothing at all, and radiated the specific silence of a chief executive who has spent a week discovering that his own middle managers command more genuine devotion from the rank and file than he has ever once inspired from the throne.

And the Seeker — wrecked, green, betrayed by every single shore, standing under the letter that matched his luggage tag in the grey echoing shed — said, to no one, with the terrible bottomless certainty of a man who has learned absolutely nothing:

“Alaska would be different.”

The others turned on him as one organism.

But he pressed on, because he was the Seeker, and pressing on toward the next horizon was the whole of what he was. Alaska, he said, would be *real*. Real wilderness. Real cold. Glaciers — you could not manufacture a glacier, you could not barge in a mountain, you could not put a smiling lanyard on a humpback whale or draw a circle of recommended merchants around a fjord. Up there, past the last pastel shop, past the last Diamonds International, there would be actual, unpurchasable *something* — the real thing the pier had promised all week and never once delivered — and all they had to do, all they had to do, was book the —

“No,” said the Chaos-Weaver.

“Absolutely not,” said the Conscience-Keeper.

“I’m still nauseous,” said the Seeker, “and I would go tomorrow.”

But the Companion, hoisting her one small bag, said that she had had a *wonderful* week, honestly one of the best in memory, and that she would happily go anywhere they liked — and the Seeker looked at her. Looked at her standing there refreshed, and glowing, and rested, and entirely undamaged, living breathing insufferable proof that the ship had comprehensively defeated all six of them and had not laid a finger on her — and you could watch the real reason for Alaska arrive behind his eyes, and it was not the glaciers, it had never once been the glaciers. It was that somewhere out there, on some colder and greyer and more genuinely desolate sea, there had to exist a cruise so authentically miserable that it would finally, *finally*, wipe that look off her face and prove to all of them that the fault had been in the itinerary and not in themselves — and he was going to find it, that cruise, if it took him every port on the turning earth.

And the trap door, which had been standing quietly ajar the whole time, swung open a good deal wider, and none of the seven noticed — except, possibly, the Companion, who noticed most things, and who smiled, and said nothing, and adjusted her bag.

She’d wanted to say goodbye to Marilou. There was, of course, no slot for that. The crew were already below, stripping the cabins, squaring the towels, turning the whole enormous ship around for the two thousand who would board that very afternoon and be photographed blinking and issued a card with their name on it and counted and mustered and companioned and fed — the great lung filling again, in and out, in and out, never keeping any of the breath. One month left on Marilou’s contract. The Companion would not learn how it ended; that too was the design. You were poured off at the end of your week, and you did not get to keep the breath, and you did not get to say goodbye to the crew, who had gone back under.

She waited in her assigned lounge for her number, among the tagged and sorted, and when the Allfather’s voice came down out of the ceiling one last time — “*Zone Three, you are now cleared for debarkation, and folks, from all of us here on the Carnival Horizon, thank you so much for sailing with us, and we truly do hope to see you again real soon*” — it was, she noticed, exactly as warm as it had been

on the very first afternoon. Not one degree less. It had never learned her name, and it never would, and it wished her, with total sincerity and no memory whatsoever, a wonderful onward journey, and then it moved along to Zone Four.

She went down the gangway. Her bag was already ashore — she had set it outside the cabin door at eleven the night before, with its colored tag, and it had gone down into the ship and through the whole storming night and out onto the pier without her, arrived ahead of her by a route she had not traveled and could not have named, and there would be a reasonable explanation, there was always going to be a reasonable explanation, and it would be true, and it would not be the reason.

And there, at the very foot of the last gangway, hoarse now, and three days unshaven under the spray-tan, in a blazer that caught the grey shed light and made the best of it — stood Reno. Seeing the guests off, the way he did every single Sunday of his one repeating life. *“Take care now — safe travels — come on back and see us real soon — you folks were the best group all season, I mean that.”* He said it to everyone. He meant it about no one, and about all of them, in precisely the amount the job required, smooth all the way through, welcoming and forgetting in the very same breath — the human equivalent, she thought, watching him, of a one-dimensional divinity: flawless at his single function, and behind that function, where in a person you would finally arrive at the person, nothing at all, a beautiful sealed room with no door and no one inside to be lonely in it. He would do it all again this afternoon, for two thousand fresh strangers whose names he would also never learn and never need, and it would cost him not one thing, because there was nothing there for it to cost.

He caught her eye as she passed. For a half-second something almost surfaced — some ghost of a woman who had broken his show, of a night the room had gone somewhere he could not follow — and then it did not surface, because there was nothing under there to surface it, and he gave her the best grin in the fleet.

“You take care now, sweetheart,” said Reno. “Choose Fun.”

“I did,” said the Companion, and meant it, and walked off the ship.

She came out into the actual Miami morning, onto the actual concrete, past a customs officer who looked at her passport and looked

at her and said “welcome home,” and then she was through, and out, with her one true cup-of-mango week folded up small and warm inside her, and her bag in her hand, arrived by its impossible route, and the whole loud ridiculous tender machine of the ship behind her already, visibly, forgetting she had ever been aboard.

She stood a moment on the concrete. She was, she took a quiet inventory to be sure, entirely undamaged. Better than undamaged. She had gone into the great engine built to industrialize her own one gift, to counterfeit companionship and sell it by the hour and grind six gods to paste in the process — and she had walked through it for seven days eating like a queen, because the one thing the machine could not manufacture, no matter how bottomless the buffet or how sincere the Beach Butler or how smooth the man with the microphone, was a person who actually reached back. That was still, in all the turning world, in short supply. And she was made of it.

Behind her the horn sounded — three long notes, out over the harbor and off the edge of the flat grey fact. Not for her. For the next two thousand, already lining up in the shed to be photographed blinking, to be handed the card with their name on it and told it was their key and their wallet and themselves, and to be asked, up on the Lido deck in the climbing heat, by a man in a sparkling blazer, for the ten-thousandth time in one life, with total conviction and no memory whatsoever, whether they were ready — he *could not HEAR them* — whether they were *ready to have some FUN*.

And the Companion shifted her bag to the other hand, and walked out into the country, already a little sorry it was over, already, in the private way of the one god who liked people, wondering what on earth Alaska would be like.