also by David Foster Wallace

The Broom of the System
Girl With Curious Hair
Infinite Jest

David Foster Wallace

a supposedly fun thing i'll never do again

essays and arguments

LITTLE, BROWN AND COMPANY
Boston New York Toronto London
To Colin Harrison and Michael Pietsch

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Right now it's Saturday 18 March, and I'm sitting in the extremely full coffee shop of the Fort Lauderdale Airport, killing the four hours between when I had to be off the cruise ship and when my flight to Chicago leaves by trying to summon up a kind of hypnotic sensuous collage of all the stuff I've seen and heard and done as a result of the journalistic assignment just ended.

I have seen sucrose beaches and water a very bright blue. I have seen an all-red leisure suit with flared lapels. I have smelled what suntan lotion smells like spread over 21000 pounds of hot flesh. I have been addressed as "Mon" in three different nations. I have watched 500 upscale Americans dance the Electric Slide. I have seen sunsets that looked computer-enhanced and a tropical moon that looked more like a sort of obscenely large and dangling lemon than like the good old stony U.S. moon I'm used to.

I have (very briefly) joined a Conga Line.

I've got to say I feel like there's been a kind of Peter Principle in effect on this assignment. A certain swanky East-Coast magazine approved of the results of sending me to a plain old simple State Fair last year to do a directionless essayish thing. So now I get offered this tropical plum assignment w/ the exact same paucity of direction or angle. But this time there's this new feeling of pressure; total expenses for the State Fair were $27.00 excluding games of chance. This time Harper's has shelled out over $3000 U.S. before seeing pithy sensuous description one. They keep saying — on the phone, Ship-to-Shore, very patiently — not to fret about it. They are sort of disingenuous, I believe, these magazine people. They say all they want is a sort of really big experiential postcard — go, plow the Caribbean in style, come back, say what you've seen.

I have seen a lot of really big white ships. I have seen schools of little fish with fins that glow. I have seen a toupee on a thirteen-year-old boy. (The glowing fish liked to swarm between our hull and the cement of the pier whenever we docked.) I have seen the north coast of Jamaica. I have seen and smelled all 145 cats inside the Ernest Hemingway Residence in Key West FL. I now know the difference between straight Bingo and Prize-O, and what it is when a Bingo jackpot "snowballs." I have seen camcorders that practically required a dolly; I've seen fluorescent luggage and fluorescent sunglasses and fluorescent pince-nez and over twenty different makes of rubber thong. I have heard steel drums and eaten conch fritters and watched a woman in silver lame projectile-vomit inside a glass elevator. I have pointed rhythmically at the ceiling to the 2:4 beat of the exact same disco music I hated pointing at the ceiling to in 1977.

I have learned that there are actually intensities of blue beyond very, very bright blue. I have eaten more and classier food than I've ever eaten, and eaten this food during a week when I've also learned the difference between "rolling" in heavy seas and "pitching" in heavy seas. I have heard a professional comedian tell folks, without irony, "But seriously." I have seen fuchsia pantsuits and menstrual-pink sportcoats and and maroon-and-purple warm-ups and white loafers worn without socks. I have seen professional blackjack dealers so lovely they make you want to run over to their table and spend every last nickel you've got playing blackjack. I have heard upscale adult U.S. citizens ask the Guest Relations Desk whether snorkeling necessitates getting wet, whether the skeetshooting will be held outside, whether the crew sleeps on board, and what time the Midnight Buffet is. I now know the precise mixological difference between a Slippery Nipple and a Fuzzy Navel. I know what a Coco Loco is. I have in one week been the object of over 1500 professional smiles. I have burned and peeled twice. I have shot skeet at sea. Is this enough? At the time it didn't seem like enough. I have felt the full clothly weight of a subtropical sky. I have jumped a dozen times at the shattering, flatulence-of-the-gods sound of a cruise ship's horn. I have absorbed the
basics of mah-jongg, seen part of a two-day rubber of contract bridge, learned how to secure a life jacket over a tuxedo, and lost at chess to a nine-year-old girl.

(Actually it was more like I shot at skeet at sea.)

I have dickered over trinkets with malnourished children. I now know every conceivable rationale and excuse for somebody spending over $3000 to go on a Caribbean cruise. I have bitten my lip and declined Jamaican pot from an actual Jamaican.

I have seen, one time, from an upper deck’s rail, way below and off the right rear hull, what I believe to have been a hammerhead shark’s distinctive fin, addled by the starboard turbine’s Niagara wake.

I have now heard — and am powerless to describe — reggae elevator music. I have learned what it is to become afraid of one’s own toilet. I have acquired “sea legs” and would like now to lose them. I have tasted caviar and concurred with the little kid sitting next to me that it is: blucky.

I now understand the term “Duty Free.”

I now know the maximum cruising speed of a cruise ship in knots. I have had escargot, duck, Baked Alaska, salmon w/ fennel, a marzipan pelican, and an omelette made with what were alleged to be trace amounts of Etruscan truffle. I have heard people in deck chairs say in all earnestness that it’s the humidity rather than the heat. I have been — thoroughly, professionally, and as promised beforehand — pampered. I have, in dark moods, viewed and logged every type of erythema, keratinosis, pre-melanomic lesion, liver spot, eczema, wart, papular cyst, potbelly, femoral cellulite, varicosity, collagen and silicone enhancement, bad tint, hair transplants that have not taken — i.e. I have seen nearly naked a lot of people I would prefer not to have seen nearly naked. I have felt as bleak as I’ve felt since puberty, and have filled almost three Mead notebooks trying to figure out whether it was Them or Just Me. I have acquired and nurtured a potentially lifelong grudge against the ship’s Hotel Manager — whose name was Mr. Dermatitis and whom

1 (though I never did get clear on just what a knot is)

I now and henceforth christen Mr. Dermatitis — an almost reverent respect for my waiter, and a searing crush on the cabin steward for my part of Deck 10’s port hallway, Petra, she of the dimples and broad candid brow, who always wore a nurse’s starched and rustling whites and smelled of the cedary Norwegian disinfectant she swabbed bathrooms down with, and who cleaned my cabin within a cm of its life at least ten times a day but could never be caught in the actual act of cleaning — a figure of magical and abiding charm, and well worth a postcard all her own.

2

More specifically: From 11 to 18 March 1995 I, voluntarily and for pay, underwent a 7-Night Caribbean (7NC) Cruise on board the m.v. Zenith, a 47,255-ton ship owned by Celebrity Cruises Inc., one of the over twenty cruise lines that currently operate out of south Florida.

2 Somewhere he’d gotten the impression I was an investigative journalist and wouldn’t let me see the galley, Bridge, staff decks, anything, or interview any of the crew or staff in an on-the-record way, and he wore sunglasses inside, and epaulets, and kept talking on the phone for long stretches of time in Greek when I was in his office after I’d skipped the karaoke semifinals in the Rendez-Vous Lounge to make a special appointment to see him; I wish him ill.

3 No wag could possibly resist mentally rechristening the ship the m.v. Nadir the instant he saw the Zenith’s silly name in the Celebrity brochure, so indulge me on this, but the rechristening’s nothing particular against the ship itself.

4 There’s also Windstar and Silversea, Tall Ship Adventures and Windjammer Barefoot Cruises, but these Caribbean Cruises are wildly upscale and smaller. The 20+ cruise lines I’m talking run the “Megalships,” the floating wedding cakes with occupancies in four figures and engine-propellers the size of branch banks. Of the Megalines out of South FL there’s Commodore, Costa, Majesty, Regal, Dolphin, Princess, Royal Caribbean, good old Celebrity. There’s Renaissance, Royal Cruise Line, Holland, Holland America, Cunard, Cunard Crown, Cunard Royal Viking. There’s Norwegian Cruise Line, there’s Crystal, there’s Regency Cruises. There’s the WallMart of the cruise industry, Carnival, which the other lines refer to sometimes as “Carnivore.” I don’t
The vessel and facilities were, from what I now understand of the industry’s standards, absolutely top-hole. The food was superb, the service impeccable, the shore excursions and shipboard activities organized for maximal stimulation down to the tiniest detail. The ship was so clean and so white it looked boiled. The Western Caribbean’s blue varied between baby-blanket and fluorescent; likewise the sky. Temperatures were uterine. The very sun itself seemed preset for our comfort. The crew-to-passenger ratio was 1.2 to 2. It was a Luxury Cruise.

With a few minor niche-adaptive variations, the 7NC Luxury Cruise is essentially generic. All of the Megalines offer the same basic product. This product is not a service or a set of services. It’s not even so much a good time (though it quickly becomes clear that one of the big jobs of the Cruise Director and his staff is to keep reassuring everybody that everybody’s having a good time). It’s more like a feeling. But it’s also still a bona fide product — it’s supposed to be produced in you, this feeling: a blend of relaxation and stimulation, stressless indulgence and frantic tourism, that special mix of servility and condescension that’s marketed under configurations of the verb “to pamper.” This verb positively studs the Megalines’ various brochures: “...as you’ve never been pampered before,” “...to pamper yourself in our jacuzzis and saunas,” “Let us pamper you,” “Pamper yourself in the warm zephyrs of the Bahamas.”

The fact that contemporary adult Americans also tend to associate the word “pamper” with a certain other consumer product is not an accident, I don’t think, and the connotation is not lost on the mass-market Megalines and their advertisers. And there’s good reason for them to iterate the word, and stress it.

This one incident made the Chicago news. Some weeks before I underwent my own Luxury Cruise, a sixteen-year-old male did a Brody off the upper deck of a Megaship — I think a Carnival or Crystal ship — a suicide. The news version was that it had been an unhappy adolescent love thing, a shipboard romance gone bad, etc. I think part of it was something else, something there’s no way a real news story could cover.

There is something about a mass-market Luxury Cruise that’s unbearably sad. Like most unbearably sad things, it seems incredibly elusive and complex in its causes and simple in its effect: on board the Nadir — especially at night, when all the ship’s structured fun and reassurances and gaiety-noise ceased — I felt despair. The word’s overused and banalified now, despair; but it’s a serious word, and I’m using it seriously. For me it denotes a simple admixture — a weird yearning for death combined with a crushing sense of my own smallness and futility that presents as a fear of death. It’s maybe close to what people call dread or angst. But it’s not these things, quite. It’s more like wanting to die in order to escape the unbearable feeling of becoming aware that I’m small and weak and selfish and going without any doubt at all to die. It’s wanting to jump overboard.

I predict this’ll get cut by the editor, but I need to cover some background. I, who had never before this cruise actually been on the ocean, have always associated the ocean with dread and death. As a little kid I used to memorize shark-fatality data. Not just attacks. Fatalities. The Albert Kogler fatality off Baker’s Beach CA in 1959 (Great White). The U.S.S. Indianapolis smorgasbord off the Philippines in
1945 (many varieties, authorities think mostly Tigers and Blues)\(^5\); the most-fatalities-attributed-to-a-single-shark series of incidents around Matawan/Spring Lake NJ in 1916 (Great White again; this time they caught a *carcarias* in Raritan Bay NJ and found human parts in *gastro* (I know which parts, and whose)). In school I ended up writing three different papers on "The Castaway" section of *Moby-Dick*, the chapter where the cabin boy Pip falls overboard and is driven mad by the empty immensity of what he finds himself floating in. And when I teach school now I always teach Crane's horrific "The Open Boat," and I get bent out of shape when the kids find the story dull or jaunty-adventurish: I want them to feel the same marrow-level dread of the oceanic I've always felt, the intuition of the sea as primordial nada, bottomless, depths inhabited by cackling tooth-studded things rising toward you at the rate a feather falls. Anyway, hence the atavistic shark fetish, which I need to admit came back with a long-repressed vengeance on this Luxury Cruise, and that I made such a fuss about the one (possible) dorsal fin I saw off starboard that my companions at supper's Table 64 finally had to tell me, with all possible tact, to shut up about the fin already.

5 I'm doing this from memory. I don't need a book. I can still name every documented *Indianapolis* fatality, including some serial numbers and hometowns. (Hundreds of men lost, 80 classified as Shark, 7–10 August '45; the *Indianapolis* had just delivered Little Boy to the island of Tinian for delivery to Hiroshima, so ironsides take note. Robert Shaw as Quint reprised the whole incident in 1975's *Jaws*, a film that, as you can imagine, was like fetish-porn to me at age thirteen.)

6 And I'll admit that on the very first night of the 7NC I asked the staff of the *Nadir*'s Five-Star Caravelle Restaurant whether I could maybe have a spare bucket of *au jus* drippings from supper so I could try chewing for sharks off the back rail of the top deck, and that this request struck everybody from the maître d' on down as disturbing and maybe even disturbed, and that it turned out to be a serious journalistic faux pas, because I'm almost positive the maître d' passed this disturbing tidbit on to Mr. Dermattitis and that it was a big reason why I was denied access to stuff like the ship's galley, thereby impoverishing the sensuous scope of this article. (Plus it also revealed how little I understood the *Nadir*'s sheer size: twelve decks and 150 feet up, the *au jus* drippings would have dispersed into a vague red cologne by the time they hit the water, with concentrations of blood inadequate to attract or excite a serious shark, whose fin would have probably looked like a pushpin from that height, anyway.)

I don't think it's an accident that 7NC Luxury Cruises appeal mostly to older people. I don't mean decrepitly old, but I mean like age-50+ people, for whom their own mortality is something more than an abstraction. Most of the exposed bodies to be seen all over the daytime *Nadir* were in various stages of disintegration. And the ocean itself (which I found to be salty as hell, like sore-throat-soothing-gargle-grade salty, its spray so corrosive that one temple-hinge of my glasses is probably going to have to be replaced) turns out to be basically one enormous engine of decay. Seawater corrodes vessels with amazing speed — rusts them, exfoliates paint, strips varnish, dulls shine, coats ships' hulls with barnacles and kelp-clumps and a vague ubiquitous nautical snoot that seems like death incarnate. We saw some real horrors in port, local boats that looked dipped in a mixture of acid and shit, scabbed with rust and goo, ravaged by what they float in.

Not so the Megalines' ships. It's not an accident they're all so white and clean, for they're clearly meant to represent the Calvinist triumph of capital and industry over the primal decay-action of the sea. The *Nadir* seemed to have a whole battalion of wiry little Third World guys who went around the ship in navy-blue jumpsuits scanning for decay to overcome. Writer Frank Conroy, who has an odd little essaymercual in the front of Celebrity Cruises' 7NC brochure, talks about how "It became a private challenge for me to try to find a piece of dull brightwork, a chipped rail, a stain in the deck, a slack cable or anything that wasn't perfectly shipshape. Eventually, toward the end of the trip, I found a capstan\(^7\) with a half-dollar-sized patch of rust on the side facing the sea. My delight in this tiny flaw was interrupted by the arrival, even as I stood there, of a crewman with a roller and a bucket of white paint. I watched as he gave the entire capstan a fresh coat of paint and walked away with a nod."

Here's the thing. A vacation is a respite from unpleasantness, and since consciousness of death and decay are unpleasant, it may seem weird that Americans' ultimate fantasy vacation involves being plunked down in an enormous primordial engine of death and decay. But on a 7NC Luxury Cruise, we are skillfully enabled in the construction

7 (apparently a type of nautical hoist, like a pulley on steroids)
of various fantasies of triumph over just this death and decay. One way to "triumph" is via the rigors of self-improvement; and the crew's amphetamine-like keep of the Nadir is an unsubtle analogue to personal titivitation: diet, exercise, megavitamin supplements, cosmetic surgery, Franklin Quest time-management seminars, etc.

There's another way out, too, w/r/t death. Not titivation but titillation. Not hard work but hard play. The 7NC's constant activities, parties, festivities, gaiety and song: the adrenaline, the excitement, the stimulation. It makes you feel vibrant, alive. It makes your existence seem noncontingent. The hard-play option promises not a transcendence of death-dread so much as just drowning it out: "Sharing a laugh with your friends in the lounge after dinner, you glance at your watch and mention that it's almost showtime... When the curtain comes down after a standing ovation, the talk among your companions turns to, 'What next?' Perhaps a visit to the casino or a little dancing in the disco? Maybe a quiet drink in the piano bar or a starlit stroll around the deck? After discussing all your options, everyone agrees: 'Let's do it all!'"

Dante this isn't, but Celebrity Cruises' 7NC brochure is nevertheless an extremely powerful and ingenious piece of advertising. The brochure is magazine-size, heavy and glossy, beautifully laid out, its text offset by art-quality photos of upscale couples tanned faces locked in a kind of rictus of pleasure. All the Megalines put out brochures, and they're essentially interchangeable. The middle part of the brochures detail the different packages and routes. Basic 7NC's go to the Western Caribbean (Jamaica, Grand Cayman, Cozumel) or the Eastern Caribbean (Puerto Rico, Virgins), or something called the Deep Caribbean (Martinique, Barbados, Mayreau). There are also 10- and 11-Night Ultimate Caribbean packages that hit pretty much every exotic coastline between Miami and the Panama Canal. The brochures' final sections' boilerplate always details costs, passport stuff, Customs regulations, caveats.

But it's the first section of these brochures that really grabs you, the photos and italicized blurbs from Fodor's Cruises and Berlitz, the dreamy mise en scène and breathless prose. Celebrity's brochure, in particular, is a real two-napkin drooler. It has little hypertextish offsets, boxed in gold, that say stuff like INDULGENCE BECOMES EASY and RELAXATION BECOMES SECOND NATURE and STRESS BECOMES A FAINT MEMORY. And these promises point to the third kind of death-and-dread-transcendence the Nadir offers, one that requires neither work nor play, the enticement that is a 7NC's real carrot and stick.

4

"Just standing at the ship's rail looking out to sea has a profoundly soothing effect. As you drift along like a cloud on water, the weight of everyday life is magically lifted away, and you seem to be floating on a sea of smiles. Not just among your fellow guests but on the faces of the ship's staff as well. As a steward cheerfully delivers your drinks, you mention

hour because Jurassic Park was scheduled to run on the TV that night, and I hadn't yet looked at the whole schedule and seen that Jurassic Park would play several dozen times over the coming week.

12 From $2500 to about $4000 for mass-market Megships like the Nadir, unless you want a Presidential Suite with a skylight, wet bar, automatic palm-frods, etc., in which case double that.
all of the smiles among the crew. He explains that every Celebrity staff member takes pleasure in making your cruise a completely carefree experience and treating you as an honored guest.\textsuperscript{13} Besides, he adds, there’s no place they’d rather be. Looking back out to sea, you couldn’t agree more.

Celebrity’s 7NC brochure uses the 2nd-person pronoun throughout. This is extremely appropriate. Because in the brochure’s scenarios the 7NC experience is being not described but evoked. The brochure’s real seduction is not an invitation to fantasize but rather a construction of the fantasy itself. This is advertising, but with a queerly authoritarian twist. In regular adult-market ads, attractive people are shown having a near-illegally good time in some scenario surrounding a product, and you are meant to fantasize that you can project yourself into the ad’s perfect world via purchase of that product. In regular advertising, where your adult agency and freedom of choice have to be flattered, the purchase is prerequisite to the fantasy; it’s the fantasy that’s being sold, not any

\textsuperscript{13} In response to some dogged journalistic querying, Celebrity’s PR firm’s Press Liaison (the charming and Debra Winger–voiced Ms. Wiesen) had this explanation for the cheery service: “The people on board — the staff — are really part of one big family — you probably noticed this when you were on the ship. They really love what they’re doing and love serving people, and they pay attention to what everybody wants and needs.”

This was not what I myself observed. What I myself observed was that the Nadir was one very tight ship, run by an elite cadre of very hard-ass Greek officers and supervisors, and that the preterite staff lived in mortal terror of these Greek bosses who watched them with enormous beadiness at all times, and that the crew worked almost Dickensianly hard, too hard to feel truly cheery about it. My sense was that Cheeriness was up there with Celerity and Servility on the clipboard evaluation sheets the Greek bosses were constantly filling out on them: when they didn’t know any guests were looking, a lot of the workers had the kind of pinched weariness about them that one associates with low-paid service employees in general, plus fear. My sense was that a crewman could get fired for a pretty small lapse, and that getting fired by these Greek officers might well involve a spotlessly shined shoe in the ass and then a really long swim.

What I observed was that the preterite workers did have a sort of affection for the passengers, but that it was a comparative affection — even the most absurdly demanding passenger seemed kind and understanding compared to the martinetim of the Greeks, and the crew seemed genuinely grateful for this, sort of the way we find even very basic human decency moving if we encounter it in NYC or Boston.

A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again

literal projection into the ad’s world. There’s no sense of any real kind of actual promise being made. This is what makes conventional adult advertisements fundamentally coy.

Contrast this coyness with the force of the 7NC brochure’s ads: the near-imperative use of the second person, the specificity of detail that extends even to what you will say (\textit{you will say} “I couldn’t agree more” and “Let’s do it all!”). In the cruise brochure’s ads, you are excused from doing the work of constructing the fantasy. The ads do it for you. The ads, therefore, don’t flatter your adult agency, or even ignore it — they supplant it.

And this authoritarian — near-parental — type of advertising makes a very special sort of promise, a diabolically seductive promise that’s actually kind of honest, because it’s a promise that the Luxury Cruise itself is all about honoring. The promise is not that you can experience great pleasure, but that you will. That they’ll make certain of it. That they’ll micromanage every iota of every pleasure-option so that not even the dreadful corrosive action of your adult consciousness and agency and dread can fuck up your fun. Your troublesome capacities for choice, error, regret, dissatisfaction, and despair will be removed from the equation. The ads promise that you will be able — finally, for once — truly to relax and have a good time, because you will have no choice but to have a good time.\textsuperscript{14}

I am now 33 years old, and it feels like much time has passed and is passing faster and faster every day. Day to day I have to make all sorts of choices about what is good and important and fun, and then I have to live with the forfeiture of all the other options those choices foreclose. And I’m starting to see how as time gains momentum my choices will narrow and their foreclosures multiply exponentially until I arrive at some point on some branch of all life’s sumptuous branching complexity at which I am finally locked in and stuck on one path and time speeds me through stages of stasis and atrophy and decay until I go down for the third time.

\textsuperscript{14} “YOUR PLEASURE,” several Megalines’ slogans go, “IS OUR BUSINESS.” What in a regular ad would be a double entendre is here a triple entendre, and the tertiary connotation — viz. “MIND YOUR OWN BLOODY BUSINESS AND LET US PROFESSIONALS WORRY ABOUT YOUR PLEASURE, FOR CHRIST’S SAKE” — is far from incidental.
all struggle for naught, drowned by time. It is dreadful. But since it's my
own choices that'll lock me in, it seems unavoidable — if I want to be
any kind of grownup, I have to make choices and regret foreclosures and
try to live with them.

Not so on the lush and spotless m.v. Nadir. On a 7NC Luxury
Cruise, I pay for the privilege of handing over to trained professionals
responsibility not just for my experience but for my interpretation of that
experience — i.e. my pleasure. My pleasure is for 7 nights and 6.5 days
wisely and efficiently managed... just as promised in the cruise line's
advertising — nay, just as somehow already accomplished in the ads,
with their 2nd-person imperatives, which make them not promises but
predictions. Aboard the Nadir, just as ringingly foretold in the brochure's
climactic p. 23, I get to do (in gold): "...something you haven't done in
a long, long time: Absolutely Nothing."

How long has it been since you did Absolutely Nothing? I know
exactly how long it's been for me. I know how long it's been since I
had every need met choicelessly from someplace outside me, without
my having to ask or even acknowledge that I needed. And that time I
was floating, too, and the fluid was salty, and warm but not too-, and if
I was conscious at all I'm sure I felt dreadless, and was having a really
good time, and would have sent postcards to everyone wishing they were
here.

5

A 7NC's pampering is a little uneven at first, but it starts at the airport,
where you don't have to go to Baggage Claim because people from the
Megaline get your suitcases for you and take them right to the ship.

A bunch of other Megalines besides Celebrity Cruises operate out of
Fort Lauderdale, and the flight down from O'Hare is full of festive-
looking people dressed for cruising. It turns out the folks sitting next
to me on the plane are booked on the Nadir. They're a retired couple

from Chicago and this is their fourth Luxury Cruise in as many years.
It is they who tell me about the news reports of the kid jumping
overboard, and also about a legendarily nasty outbreak of salmonella
or E. coli or something on a Megaship in the late '70s that gave rise
to the C.D.C.'s Vessel Sanitation program of inspections, plus about a
supposed outbreak of Legionnaire's disease vectored by the jacuzzi on a
7NC Megaship two years ago — it was possibly one of Celebrity's three
cruise ships, the lady (kind of the spokesman for the couple) isn't sure;
it turns out she sort of likes to toss off a horrific detail and then get all
vague and blase when a horrified listener tries to pump her for details.
The husband wears a fishing cap with a long bill and a T-shirt that
says BIG DADDY.

7NC Luxury Cruises always start and finish on Saturday. Right now
it's Saturday 11 March, 1020h., and we are deplaning. Imagine the day
after the Berlin Wall came down if everybody in East Germany was
plump and comfortable-looking and dressed in Caribbean pastels, and
you'll have a pretty good idea what the Fort Lauderdale Airport terminal
looks like today. Over near the back wall, a number of brisk-looking
older ladies in vaguely naval outfits hold up printed signs — HLND,
CELEB, CUND CRN. What you're supposed to do (the Chicago lady
from the plane is kind of talking me through it as Big Daddy
shoulders us a path through the fray) what you're supposed to do is find
your particular Megaline's brisk lady and sort of all coalesce around her
as she walks with printed sign held high to attract still more cruisers
and leads the growing ectoplasm of Nadirites all out to buses that ferry
us to the Piers and what we quixotically believe will be immediate and
hassle-free boarding.

Apparently Ft. Laud. Airport is always just your average sleepy
midsize airport six days a week and then every Saturday resembles the
fall of Saigon. Half the terminal's mob consists of luggage-bearing people
now flying home from 7NCs. They are Syrianly tan, and a lot of them
have eccentric and vaguely hairy-looking souvenirs of various sizes and
functions, and they all have a glazed spacey look about them that the
Chicago lady avers is the telltale look of post-7NC Inner Peace. We pre-
7NCs, on the other hand, all look pasty and stressed and somehow
combat-unready.

Outside, we of the Nadir are directed to deectoplasmize ourselves
and all line up along some sort of tall curb to await the Nadir’s special chartered buses. We are exchanging awkward don’t-know-whether-to-smile-and-wave-or-not glances with a Holland America herd that’s lining up on a grassy median parallel to us, and both groups are looking a little narrow-eyed at a Princess-bound herd whose buses are already pulling up. The Ft. Laud. Airport’s porters and cabbies and whitebandoliered traffic cops and bus drivers are all Cuban. The retired Chicago couple, clearly wily veterans about lines by their fourth Luxury Cruise, has bussed into place way up. A second Celebrity crowd-control lady has a megaphone and repeats over and over not to worry about our luggage, that it will follow us later, which I am apparently alone in finding chilling in its unwitting echo of the Auschwitz-embarkation scene in Schindler’s List.

Where I am in the line: I’m between a squat and chain-smoking black man in an NBC Sports cap and several corporately dressed people wearing badges identifying them as with something called the Engler Corporation.16 Way up ahead, the retired Chicago couple has spread a sort of parasol. There’s a bumpy false ceiling of mackerel clouds moving in from the southwest, but overhead it’s just wispy cirrus, and it’s seriously hot standing and waiting in the sun, even without luggage or luggage-angst, and through a lack of foresight I’m wearing my undertakerish black wool suitcoat and an inadequate hat. But it feels good to perspire. Chicago at dawn was 18° and its sun the sort of wan and impotent March sun you can look right at. It is good to feel serious sun and see trees all frothy with green. We wait rather a long time, and the Nadir line starts to recoalesce into clumps as people’s conversations have time to progress past the waiting-in-line small-talk stage. Either there was a mixup getting enough buses for people in on A.M. flights, or (my theory) the same Celebrity Cruises brain trust responsible for the wildly seductive brochure has decided to make certain elements of pre-embarkation as difficult and unpleasant as possible in order to sharpen the favorable contrast between real life and the 7NC experience.

Now we’re riding to the Piers in a column of eight chartered Greyhounds. Our convoy’s rate of speed and the odd deference other traffic shows gives the whole procession a kind of funeral quality. Ft. Laud. proper looks like one extremely large golf course, but the cruise lines’ Piers are in something called Port Everglades, an industrial area, pretty clearly, zoned for Blight, with warehouses and transformer parks and stacked boxcars and vacant lots full of muscular and evil-looking Florida-type weeds. We pass a huge field of those hammer-shaped automatic oil derricks all bobbing fellatiously, and on the horizon past them is a little fingernail clipping of shiny gray that I’m thinking must be the sea. Several different languages are in use on my bus. Whenever we go over bumps or train tracks, there’s a tremendous mass clicking sound in here from all the cameras around everybody’s neck. I haven’t brought any sort of camera and feel a perverse pride about this.

The Nadir’s traditional berth is Pier 21. “Pier,” though it had conjured for me images of wharfs and cleats and lapping water, turns out to denote something like what airport denotes, viz. a zone and not a thing. There is no real water in sight, no docks, no fishy smell or sodium tang to the air; but there are, as we enter the Pier zone, a lot of really big white ships that blot out most of the sky.

Now I’m writing this sitting in an orange plastic chair at the end of one of Pier 21’s countless bolted rows of orange plastic chairs. We have debused and been herded via megaphone through 21’s big glass doors, whereupon two more completely humorless naval ladies handed us each a little plastic card with a number on it. My card’s number is 7. A few people sitting nearby ask me “what I am,” and I figure out I’m to respond “a 7.” The cards are by no means brand new, and mine has the vestigial whorls of a chocolate thumbprint in one corner.

From inside, Pier 21 seems kind of like a blimpless blimp hangar, high-ceilinged and very echoy. It has walls of unclean windows on three sides, at least 2500 orange chairs in rows of 25, a kind of desultory Snack Bar, and restrooms with very long lines. The acoustics are brutal and it’s tremendously loud. Outside, rain starts coming down even though the sun’s still shining. Some of the people in the rows of chairs appear to

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16 I was never in countless tries able to determine just what the Engler Corporation did or made or was about, but they’d apparently sent a quorum of their execs on this 7NC junket together as a weird kind of working vacation or intracompany convention or something.
have been here for days: they have that glazed encamped look of people
at airports in blizzards.

It's now 1132h., and boarding will not commence one second before
1400 sharp; a PA announcement politely but firmly declares Celebrity's
seriousness about this.\textsuperscript{12} The PA lady's voice is what you imagine a
British supermodel would sound like. Everyone's clutching his
numbered card like the cards are identity papers at Checkpoint Charley.
There's an Ellis Island/pre-Auschwitz aspect to the massed and anxious
waiting, but I'm uncomfortable trying to extend the analogy. A lot of
the people waiting — Caribbeanish clothing notwithstanding — look
Jewish to me, and I'm ashamed to catch myself thinking that I can
determine Jewishness from people's appearance.\textsuperscript{18} Maybe two-thirds
of the total people in here are actually sitting in orange chairs. Pier 21's
pre-boarding blimp hangar's not as bad as, say, Grand Central at 1715h.
on Friday, but it bears little resemblance to any of the stressless pamper-
venues detailed in the Celebrity brochure, which brochure I am not the
only person in here thumbing through and looking at wistfully. A lot
of people are also reading the \textit{Fort Lauderdale Sentinel} and staring with
subwayish blankness at other people. A kid whose T-shirt says SANDY
DUNCAN'S EYE is carving something in the plastic of his chair. There
are quite a few old people all travelling with really desperately old people
who are pretty clearly the old people's parents. A couple different guys
in different rows are field-stripping their camcorders with military-
looking expertise. There's a fair share of WASP-looking passengers, as
well. A lot of the WASPs are couples in their twenties and thirties,
with a honeymoonish aspect to the way their heads rest on each other's
shoulders. Men after a certain age simply should not wear shorts, I've
decided; their legs are hairless in a way that's creepy; the skin seems
denuded and practically crying out for hair, particularly on the calves.
It's just about the only body-area where you actually want more hair
on older men. Is this fibular hairlessness a result of years of chafing in
pants and socks? The significance of the numbered cards turns out to
be that you're supposed to wait here in Pier 21's blimp hangar until
your number is called, then you board in "Lots."\textsuperscript{19} So your number
doesn't stand for you, but rather for the subherd of cruisers
you're part of. Some 7NC-veterans nearby tell me that 7 is not a great
Lot-number and advise me to get comfortable. Somewhere past the big
grey doors behind the restrooms' roiling lines is an umbilical passage
leading to what I assume is the actual \textit{Nadir}, which outside the south
wall's windows presents as a tall wall of total white. In the approximate
center of the hangar is a long table where cream-completed women in
nurish white from Steiner of London Inc. are doing free little makeup
and complexion consultations with women waiting to board, priming
the economic pump.\textsuperscript{20} The Chicago lady and BIG DADDY are in
the hangar's southeasternmost row of chairs playing Uno with another
couple, who turn out to be friends they'd made on a Princess Alaska
Cruise in '93.

Now I'm writing this sort of squatting with my bottom braced up
against the hangar's west wall, which wall is white-painted cinderblocks,
like a budget motel's wall, and also oddly clammy. By this time I'm
down to slacks and T-shirt and tie, and the tie looks like it's been washed
and hand-wrung. Perspiring has already lost its novelty. Part of what
Celebrity Cruises is reminding us we're leaving behind is massed public
waiting areas with no AC and indifferent ventilation. Now it's 1255h.
Though the brochure says the \textit{Nadir} sails at 1630h. EDT and that you

\textsuperscript{17} The reason for the delay won't become apparent until next Saturday, when it takes
until 1000h. to get everybody off the m.v. \textit{Nadir} and vectored to appropriate transpor-
tation, and then from 1000 to 1400h. several battalions of jump-suited Third World
custodial guys will join the stewards in obliterating all evidence of us before the next
1374 passengers come on.

\textsuperscript{18} For me, public places on the U.S. East Coast are full of these nasty little moments
of racist observation and then internal P.C. backlash.

\textsuperscript{19} This term belongs to an eight-cruise veteran, a 50ish guy with blond bangs and a big
ginger beard and what looks weirdly like a T-square sticking out of his carry-on, who's
also the first person who offers me an unsolicited narrative on why he had basically
no emotional choice right now but to come on a 7NC Luxury Cruise.

\textsuperscript{20} Steiner of London'll be on the \textit{Nadir}, it turns out, selling herbal wraps and cellulite-
tensive delipidizing massages and facials and assorted aesthetic pampering — they
have a whole little wing in the top deck's Olympic Health Club, and it seems like they
all but own the Beauty Salon on Deck 5.
I count over a dozen makes of camera just in the little block of orange chairs within camera-make-discrimination range. That's not counting camcorders.

The dress code in here ranges from corporate-informal to tourist-tropical. I am the sweetest and most disheveled person in view, I'm afraid. There is nothing even remotely nautical about the smell of Pier 21. Two male Engler executives excluded from the corporate scrum are sitting together at the end of the nearest row, right leg over left knee and joggling their loafers in perfect unconscious sync. Every infant within earshot has a promising future in professional opera, it sounds like. Also, every infant being carried or held is being carried or held by its female parent. Over 50% of the purses and handbags are wicker/rattan. The women all somehow give the impression of being on magazine diets. The median age here is at least 45.

A Pier person runs by with an enormous roll of crepe. Some sort of fire alarm's been going for the last fifteen minutes, nerve-janglingly, ignored by everyone because the British bombshell at the PA and the Celebrity people with clipboards also appear to be ignoring it. Also now comes what sounds at first like a sort of tuba from hell, two five-second blasts that ripple shirt-fronts and contort everyone's faces. It turns out it's Holland America's S.S. Westerdam's ship's horn outside, announcing All-Ashore-That's-Going because departure is imminent.

Every so often I remove the hat, towel off, and sort of orbit the blimp hangar, eavesdropping, making small-talk. Over half the passengers I chat up turn out to be from right around here in south Florida. Nonchalant eavesdropping provides the most fun and profit, though: an enormous number of small-talk-type conversations are going on all over the hangar. And a major percentage of this overheard chitchat consists of passengers explaining to other passengers why they signed up for this 7NC Cruise. It's like the universal subject of discussion in here, like chitchatting in the dayroom of a mental ward: "So, why are you here?" And the striking constant in all the answers is that not once

21 Going on a 7NC Luxury Cruise is like going to the hospital or college in this respect: it seems to be SOP for a mass of relatives and well-wishers to accompany you right up to the jumping-off point and then have to finally leave, w/ lots of requisite hugs and tears.

22 Long story, not worth it.
does somebody say they're going on this 7NC Luxury Cruise just to go on a 7NC Luxury Cruise. Nor does anybody refer to stuff about travel being broadening or a mad desire to parasail. Nobody even mentions being mesmerized by Celebrity's fantasy-slash-promise of pampering in uterine stasis — in fact the word "pamper," so ubiquitous in the Celebrity 7NC brochure, is not once in my hearing uttered. The word that gets used over and over in the explanatory small-talk is: relax. Everybody characterizes the upcoming week as either a long-put-off reward or as a last-ditch effort to salvage sanity and self from some inconceivable crockpot of pressure, or both.24 A lot of the explanatory narratives are long and involved, and some are sort of lurid. Two different conversations involve people who've just finally buried a relative they'd been nursing at home for months as the relative lingered hideously. A floral wholesaler in an aqua MARLINS shirt talks about how he's managed to drag the battered remnants of his soul through the Xmas-to-Valentine rush only by dangling in front of himself the carrot of this week of total relaxation and renewal. A trio of Newark cops all just retired and had promised themselves a Luxury Cruise if they survived their 20. A couple from Fort Lauderdale sketch a scenario in which they've sort of been shamed by friends into 7NC Luxury Cruising, as if they were native New Yorkers and the Nadir the Statue of Liberty.

By the way, I have now empirically verified that I am the only ticketed adult here without some kind of camera equipment.

At some point, unnoticed, Holland's Westerdam's snout has withdrawn from the west window: the window is clear, and a brutal sun is shining through a patchy steam of evaporated rain. The blimp hangar's emptier by half now, and quiet. BIG DADDY and spouse are long gone. They have called Lots 5 through 7 all in a sort of bunch, and

24 I'm pretty sure I know what this syndrome is and how it's related to the brochure's seductive promise of total self-indulgence. What's in play here, I think, is the subtle universal shame that accompanies self-indulgence, the need to explain to just about anybody why the self-indulgence isn't in fact really self-indulgence. Like: I never go get a massage just to get a massage, I go because this old sports-related back injury's killing me and more or less forcing me to get a massage; or like: I never just "want" a cigarette, I always "need" a cigarette.

I and pretty much the whole massed Engler Corporation contingent are now moving in a kind of columnar herd toward Passport Checks and the Deck 325 gangway beyond. And now we are getting greeted (each of us) by not one but two Aryan-looking hostesses from the Hospitality staff, and now moving over plush plum carpet to the interior of what one presumes is the actual Nadir, washed now in high-oxygen AC that seems subtly balsam-scented, pausing for a second, if we wish, to have our pre-Cruise photo taken by the ship's photographer,26 apparently for some kind of Before/After souvenir ensemble they'll try to sell us at week's end; and I start seeing the first of more WATCH YOUR STEP signs this coming week than anyone could count, because a Megaship's architecture's flooring is totally jerryrigged-looking and uneven and everywhere there are sudden little six-inch steplets up and down; and there's the delicious feel of sweat drying and the first nip of AC chill, and I suddenly can't even remember what the squall of a prickly-heated infant sounds like anymore, not in the plushly cushioned little corridors I'm walked through. One of the two Hospitality hostesses seems to have an orthopedic right shoe, and she walks with a very slight limp, and somehow this detail seems terribly moving.

And as Inga and Geli of Hospitality walk me on and in (and it's an endless walk — up, fore, aft, serpentine through bulkheads and steel-
railed corridors with mollified jazz out of little round speakers in a beige-
enamel ceiling I could reach an elbow up and touch, the whole three-
hour pre-cruise gestalt of shame and explanation and Why Are You Here
is transposed utterly, because at intervals on every wall are elaborate
cross-sectioned maps and diagrams, each with a big and reassuringly
jolly red dot with YOU ARE HERE, which assertion preempts all
inquiry and signals that explanations and doubt and guilt are now
left back there with all else we’re leaving behind, handing over to
pros.

And the elevator’s made of glass and is noiseless, and the hostesses
smile slightly and gaze at nothing as all together we ascend, and it’s a
very close race which of these two hostesses smells better in the enclosed
chill.

And now we’re passing little teak-lined shipboard shops with Gucci,
Waterford and Wedgwood, Rolex and Raymond Weil, and there’s a
crackle in the jazz and an announcement in three languages about
Welcome and Willkommen and how there’ll be a Compulsory Lifeboat
Drill an hour after sailing.

At 1515h. I am installed in Nadir Cabin 1009 and immediately eat
almost a whole basket of free fruit and lie on a really nice bed and drum
my fingers on my swollen tummy.

6

Departure at 1630h. turns out to be a not untasteful affair of crepe and
horns. Each deck’s got walkways outside, with railings made of some
kind of really good wood. It’s now overcast, and the ocean way below
is dull-colored and frothy, etc. It smells less fishy or oceanic than just
salty. Our horn is even more planet-shattering than the Westerdam’s
horn. Most of the people exchanging waves with us are cruisers along
the rails of the decks of other 7NC Megaships, also just leaving, so it’s a
surreal little scene — it’s hard not to imagine all of us cruising the whole
Western Caribbean in a parallel pack, all waving at one another the entire
time. Docking and leaving are the two times a Megacruiser’s Captain is
actually steering the ship; and m.v. Nadir Captain G. Panagiotakis has
wheeled us around and pointed our snout at the open sea, and we, large
and white and clean, are under sail.

7

The whole first two days and nights are bad weather, with high-pitched
winds and heaving seas, spume\textsuperscript{27} lashing the porthole’s glass, etc. For
40+ hours it’s more like a Luxury North Sea Cruise, and the Celebrity
staff goes around looking regretful but not apologetic,\textsuperscript{28} and in all fair-
ness it’s hard to find a way to blame Celebrity Cruises Inc. for the weather.\textsuperscript{29}

On gale-force days like the first two, passengers are advised to enjoy
the view from the railings on the lee side of the Nadir. The one other
guy who ever joins me in trying out the non-lee side has his glasses
blown off by the wind, and he does not appreciate my remarking
to him that round-the-ear cable arms are better for high-wind view-
enjoying. I keep waiting to see somebody from the crew wearing the
traditional yellow slicker, but no luck. The railing I do most of my
contemplative gazing from is on Deck 10, so the sea is way below, and
the sounds of it slopping and heaving around are far-away and surflike,
and visually it’s a little like looking down into a flushing toilet. No fins
in view.

In heavy seas, hypochondriacs are kept busy taking their gastric
pulse every couple seconds and wondering whether what they’re feeling
is maybe the onset of seasickness and/or gauging the exact level of
seasickness they’re feeling. Seasickness-wise, though, it turns out that
heavy seas are sort of like battle: there’s no way to know ahead of time
how you’ll react. A test of the deep and involuntary stuff of a man.
I myself turn out not to get seasick. An apparent immunity, deep
and unchosen, and slightly miraculous, given that I have every other

\textsuperscript{27} The single best new vocab word from this week: \textit{spume} (second-best was \textit{scheisser},
which one German retiree called another German retiree who kept beating him at
darts).

\textsuperscript{28} (this expression resembling a kind of facial shoulder-shrug, as at fate)

\textsuperscript{29} (Though I can't help noting that the weather in the Celebrity 7NC brochure was
substantially nicer.)
kind of motion sickness listed in the PDR and cannot take anything for it.\textsuperscript{30} For the whole first rough-sea day I puzzle about the fact that every other passenger on the m.v. \textit{Nadir} looks to have received identical little weird shaving cuts below their left ear — which in the case of female passengers seems especially strange — until I learn that the little round Band-Aidish things on everybody’s neck are these special new nuclear-powered transdermal motion sickness patches, which apparently now nobody with any kind of clue about 7NC Luxury Cruising leaves home without.

Patches notwithstanding, a lot of the passengers get seasick anyway, these first two howling days. It turns out that a seasick person really does look green, though it’s an odd, ghostly green, pasty and toadish, and more than a little corpse alike when the seasick person is dressed in formal dinnerwear.

For the first two nights, who’s feeling seasick and who’s not and who’s not now but was a little while ago or isn’t feeling it yet but thinks it’s maybe coming on, etc., is a big topic of conversation at good old Table 64 in the Five-Star Caravelle Restaurant.\textsuperscript{31} Common suffering and fear of suffering turn out to be a terrific ice-breaker, and ice-breaking is important, because on a 7NC you eat at the same designated table with the same companions all seven nights.\textsuperscript{32} Discussing nausea
to get a description of supper out of the way in a fast footnote and avoid saying much about them for fear of hurting their feelings by noting any weirdness or features that might seem potentially mean. There were some pretty weird aspects to the Table 64 ensemble, though. For one thing, they all had thick and unmistakable NYC accents, and yet they swore up and down that they’d all been born and raised in south Florida (although it did turn out that all the T64 adults’ own parents had been New Yorkers, which when you think about it is compelling evidence of the durability of a good thick NYC accent). Besides me there were five women and two men, and both men were completely silent except on the subjects of golf, business, transdermal motion sickness prophylaxis, and the legalities of getting stuff through Customs. The women carried Table 64’s conversational ball. One of the reasons I liked all these women (except Mona) so much was because they laughed really hard at my jokes, even lame or very obscure jokes; although they all had this curious way of laughing where they sort of screamed before they laughed. I mean really and discernibly screamed, so that for one exorcising second you could never tell whether they were getting ready to laugh or whether they were seeing something hideous and screamworthy over your shoulder across the 5\(\times\)5C.R., and this was disconcerting all week. Also, like many other 7NC Luxury Cruise passengers I observed, they all seemed to be uniformly starry at anecdotes and stories and extended-set-up jokes, employing both hands and faces to maximum dramatic effect, knowing when to pause and when to go run-on, how to double-take and how to set up a straight man.

My favorite tablemate was Trudy, whose husband was back home in Tamarac managing some sudden crisis at the couple’s cellular phone business and had given his ticket to Alice, their heavy and very well-dressed daughter, who was on spring break from Miami U, and who was for some reason extremely anxious to communicate to me that she had a Serious Boyfriend, the name of which boyfriend was Patrick. Alice’s part of most of our interfaces consisted of remarks like: “You hate fennel? What a coincidence: my boyfriend Patrick absolutely detests fennel”; “You’re from Illinois? What a coincidence: my boyfriend Patrick has an aunt whose first husband was from Indiana, which is right near Illinois”; “You have four limbs? What a coincidence: . . .”, and so on. Alice’s continual assertion of her relationship-status may have been a defensive tactic against Trudy, who kept pulling professionally retouched 4\(\times\)5 glossies of Alice out of her purse and showing them to me with Alice sitting right there, and who, every time Alice mentioned Patrick, suffered some sort of weird facial tic or grimace where one side’s canine tooth showed and the other side’s didn’t. Trudy was 56, the same age as my own dear personal Mom, and looked — Trudy did, and I mean this in the nicest possible way — like Jackie Gleason in drag, and had a particularly loud pre-laugh scream that was a real arrhythmia-producer, and was the one who coerced me into Wednesday night’s Conga Line, and got me strung out on Snowball Jackpot Bingo, and also was an incredible lay authority on 7NC Luxury Cruises, this being her sixth in a decade — she and her friend Esther (thin-faced, subtly ravaged-looking, the distaff part of the couple from Miami) had tales to tell about Carnival, Princess, Crystal, and Cunard too fraught with libel-potential to reproduce here, and one long review of what was apparently the worst cruise line in 7NC history — one “American

\textsuperscript{30} I have a deep and involuntary reaction to Dramamine whereby it sends me pitching forward to lie prone and twitching wherever I am when the drug kicks in, so I’m sailing the \textit{Nadir} cold turkey.

\textsuperscript{31} This is on Deck 7, the serious dining room, and it’s never called just the “Caravelle Restaurant” (and never just “the Restaurant”) — it’s always “The Five-Star Caravelle Restaurant.”

\textsuperscript{32} There were seven other people with me at good old Table 64, all from south Florida — Miami, Tamarac, Fort Lauderdale itself. Four of the people knew each other in private landlocked life and had requested to be at the same table. The other three people were an old couple and their granddaughter, whose name was Mona.

I was the only first-time Luxury Cruiser at Table 64, and also the only person who referred to the evening meal as “supper;” a childhood habit I could not seem to be teased out of.

With the conspicuous exception of Mona, I liked all my tablemates a lot, and I want
Family Cruises,” which folded after just sixteen months — involving outrages too literally incredible to be believed from any duo less knowledgeable and discerning than Trudy and Esther.

Plus it started to strike me that I had never before been party to such a minute and exacting analysis of the food and service of a meal I was just at that moment eating. Nothing escaped the attention of T and E — the symmetry of the parsley sprigs atop the boiled baby carrots, the consistency of the bread, the flavor and mastication-friendliness of various cuts of meat, theelerity and flambe technique of the various pastry guys in tall white hats who appeared tableside when items had to be set on fire (a major percentage of the desserts in the 5★C.R. had to be set on fire), and so on. The waiter and busboy kept circling the table, going “Finish? Finish?” while Esther and Trudy had exchanges like:

“Honey you don’t look happy with the conch, what’s the problem.”
“I’m fine. It’s fine. Everything’s fine.”
“Don’t lie. Honey with that face who could lie. Frank am I right? This is a person with a face incapable of lying. Is it the potatoes or the conch? Is it the conch?”
“There’s nothing wrong Esther darling I swear it.”
“You’re not happy with the conch.”
“All right. I’ve got a problem with the conch.”
“Did I tell you? Frank did I tell her?”
[Frank silently prods own ear with pinkie.]
“Was I right? I could tell just by looking you weren’t happy.”
“I’m fine with the potatoes. It’s the conch.”
“Did I tell you about seasonal fish on ships? What did I tell you?”
“The potatoes are good.”

Mona is eighteen. Her grandparents have been taking her on a Luxury Cruise every spring since she was five. Mona always sleeps through both breakfast and lunch and spends all night at the Scorpio Disco and in the Mayfair Casino playing the slots. She’s 6’2” if she’s an inch. She’s going to attend Penn State next fall because the agreement was that she’d receive a 4-Wheel-Drive vehicle if she went someplace where there might be snow. She was unabashed in recounting this college-selection criterion. She was an incredibly demanding passenger and diner, but her complaints about slight aesthetic and gustatory imperfections at table lacked Trudy and Esther’s discernment and integrity and came off as simply churlish. Mona was also kind of strange-looking: a body like Brigitte Nielsen or some centerfold on steroids, and above it, framed in resplendent and frizzless blond hair, the tiny delicate pale unhappy face of a kind of corrupt doll. Her grandparents, who retired every night right after supper, always made a small ceremony after dessert of handing Mona $100 to “go have some fun” with. This $100 bill was always in one of those little ceremonial bank envelopes that has B. Franklin’s face staring out of a porthole-like window in the front, and written on the envelope in red Magic Marker was always “We Love You, Honey.” Mona never once said thank you for the money. She also rolled her eyes at just about everything her grandparents said, a habit that quickly drove me up the wall.

and vomiting while eating intricately prepared and heavy gourmet foods doesn’t seem to bother anybody.

Even in heavy seas, 7NC Megaships don’t yaw or throw you around or send bowls of soup sliding across tables. Only a certain subtle unreality to your footing lets you know you’re not on land. At sea, a room’s floor feels somehow 3-D, and your footing demands a slight attention good old planar static land never needs. You don’t ever quite hear the ship’s big engines, but when your feet are planted you can feel them, a kind of spinal throbbing — it’s oddly soothing.

Walking is a little dreamy also. There are constant slight shifts in torque from the waves’ action. When heavy waves come straight at a Megaship’s snout, the ship goes up and down along its long axis — this is called pitching. It produces a disorienting deal where you feel like you’re walking on a very slight downhill grade and then level and then on a very slight uphill grade. Some evolutionary retrograde reptile-brain part of the CNS is apparently reawakened, though, and manages all this so automatically that it requires a good deal of attention to notice anything more than that walking feels a little dreamy.

I find I’m not as worried about saying potentially mean stuff about Mona as I am about Trudy and Alice and Esther and Esther’s mute smiling husband Frank.

Apparently Mona’s special customary little gig on 7NC Luxury Cruises is to lie to the waiter and maître d’ and say that Thursday is her birthday, so that at the Formal supper on Thursday she gets bunting and a heart-shaped helium balloon tied to her chair and her own cake and pretty much the whole restaurant staff comes out and forms a circle around her and sings to her. Her real birthday, she informs me on Monday, is 29 July, and when I observe that 29 July is also the birthday of Benito Mussolini, Mona’s grandmother shoots me kind of a death-look, though Mona herself is excited at the coincidence, apparently confusing the names Mussolini and Maserati. Because it just so happens that Thursday 16 March really is the birthday of Trudy’s daughter Alice, and because Mona declines to forfeit her fake birthday claim and instead counterclaims that her and Alice’s sharing bunting and natal attentions at 3/16’s Formal supper promises to be “radical,” Alice has decided that she wishes Mona all kinds of ill, and by Tuesday 14 March Alice and I have established a kind of anti-Mona alliance, and we amuse each other across Table 64 by making subtly disguised little strangling and stabbing motions whenever Mona says anything, a set of disguised motions Alice told me she learned at various excruciating public supper in Miami with her Serious Boyfriend Patrick, who apparently hates almost everyone he eats with.
Rolling, on the other hand, is when waves hit the ship from the side and make it go up and down along its crosswise axis. When the m.v. Nadir rolls, what you feel is a very slight increase in the demands placed on the muscles of your left leg, then a strange absence of all demand, then demands on the right leg. The demands shift at the rate of a very long thing swinging, and again the action is usually so subtle that it’s almost a meditative exercise to stay conscious of what’s going on.

We never pitch badly, but every once in a while some really big Poseidon Adventure—grade single wave must come and hit the Nadir’s side, because every once in a while the asymmetric leg-demands won’t stop or reverse and you keep having to put more and more weight on one leg until you’re exquisitely close to tipping over and have to grab something. It happens very quickly and never twice in a row.

The cruise’s first night features some really big waves from starboard, and in the casino after supper it’s hard to tell who’s had too much of the ’71 Richebourg and who’s just doing a roll-related stagger. Add in the fact that most of the women are wearing high heels, and you can imagine some of the vertiginous staggering/flailing/clutching that goes on. Almost everyone on the Nadir has come on in couples, and when they walk during heavy seas they tend to hang on each other like freshman steadies. You can tell they like it — the women have this trick of sort of folding themselves into the men and snuggling as they walk, and the men’s postures improve and their faces firm up and you can tell they feel unusually solid and protective. A 7NC Luxury Cruise is full of these odd little unexpected romantic nuggets like trying to help each other walk when the ship rolls — you can sort of tell why older couples like to cruise.

33 (Which, again, w/ a Megaship like this is subtle — even at its worst, the rolling never made chandeliers tinkle or anything fall off surfaces, though it did keep a slightly unplumb drawer in Cabin 1009’s complex Wondercloset rattling madly in its track even after several insertions of Kleenex at strategic points.)

34 This on-the-edge moment’s exquisiteness is something like the couple seconds between knowing you’re going to sneeze and actually sneezing, some kind of marvelous distended moment of transferring control to large automatic forces. (The sneeze-analogy thing might sound freaky, but it’s true, and Trudy’s said she’ll back me up.)

Heavy seas are also great for sleep, it turns out. The first two mornings, there’s hardly anybody at Early Seating Breakfast. Everybody sleeps in. People with insomnia of years’ standing report uninterrupted sleep of nine hours, ten hours. Their eyes are wide and childlike with wonder as they report this. Everybody looks younger when they’ve had a lot of sleep. There’s rampant daytime napping, too. By week’s end, when we’d had all manner of weather, I finally saw what it was about heavy seas and marvelous rest: in heavy seas you feel rocked to sleep, with the windows’ spume a gentle shushing, the engines’ throb a mother’s pulse.

Did I mention that famous writer and Iowa Writers Workshop Chairperson Frank Conroy has his own experiential essay about cruising right there in Celebrity’s 7NC brochure? Well he does, and the thing starts out on the Pier 21 gangway that first Saturday with his family: 35

With that single, easy step, we entered a new world, a sort of alternate reality to the one on shore. Smiles, handshakes, and we were whisked away to our cabin by a friendly young woman from Guest Relations.

Then they’re outside along the rail for the Nadir’s sailing:

35 Conroy took the same Luxury Cruise as I, the Seven-Night Western Caribbean on the good old Nadir, in May ’94. He and his family cruised for free. I know details like this because Conroy talked to me on the phone, and answered nosy questions, and was frank and forthcoming and in general just totally decent-seeming about the whole thing.
... We became aware that the ship was pulling away. We had felt no warning, no trembling of the deck, throbbing of the engines or the like. It was as if the land were magically receding, like some ever-so-slow reverse zoom in the movies.

This is pretty much what Conroy’s whole “My Celebrity Cruise, or ‘All This and a Tan, Too’” is like. Its full implications didn’t hit me until I reread it supine on Deck 12 the first sunny day. Conroy’s essay is graceful and lapidary and attractive and assuasive. I submit that it is also completely sinister and despair-producing and bad. Its badness does not consist so much in its constant and mesmeric references to fantasy and alternate realities and the palliative powers of pro pampering —

I’d come on board after two months of intense and moderately stressful work, but now it seemed a distant memory.

I realized it had been a week since I’d washed a dish, cooked a meal, gone to the market, done an errand or, in fact, anything at all requiring a minimum of thought and effort. My toughest decisions had been whether to catch the afternoon showing of Mrs. Doubtfire or play bingo.

— nor in the surfeit of happy adjectives, nor so much in the tone of breathless approval throughout —

For all of us, our fantasies and expectations were to be exceeded, to say the least.

When it comes to service, Celebrity Cruises seems ready and able to deal with anything.

Bright sun, warm still air, the brilliant blue-green of the Caribbean under the vast lapis lazuli dome of the sky. . . .

The training must be rigorous, indeed, because the truth is, the service was impeccable, and impeccable in every aspect from the cabin steward to the sommelier, from the on-deck waiter to the Guest Relations manager, from the ordinary seaman who goes out of his way to get your deck chair to the third mate who shows you the way to the library. It is hard to imagine a more professional, polished operation, and I doubt that many in the world can equal it.

Rather, part of the essay’s real badness can be found in the way it reveals once again the Megaline’s sale-to-sail agenda of micromanaging not only one’s perceptions of a 7NC Luxury Cruise but even one’s own interpretation and articulation of those perceptions. In other words, Celebrity’s PR people go and get one of the U.S.A.’s most respected writers to pre-articulate and -endorse the 7NC experience, and to do it with a professional eloquence and authority that few lay perceivers and articulators could hope to equal.36

But the really major badness is that the project and placement of “My Celebrity Cruise . . .” are sneaky and duplicitous and far beyond whatever eroded pales still exist in terms of literary ethics. Conroy’s “essay” appears as an insert, on skinnier pages and with different margins than the rest of the brochure, creating the impression that it has been excerpted from some large and objective thing Conroy wrote. But it hasn’t been. The truth is that Celebrity Cruises paid Frank Conroy up-

36 E.g. after reading Conroy’s essay on board, whenever I’d look up at the sky it wouldn’t be the sky I was seeing, it was the vast lapis lazuli dome of the sky.
A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again

ad's appeal is by its very nature calculated — and this is part of why our state of receptivity is different, more guarded, when we get ready to read an ad.38

In the case of Frank Conroy’s “essay,” Celebrity Cruises39 is trying to position an ad in such a way that we come to it with the lowered guard and leading chin we properly reserve for coming to an essay, for something that is art (or that is at least trying to be art). An ad that pretends to be art is — at absolute best — like somebody who smiles warmly at you only because he wants something from you. This is dishonest, but what's sinister is the cumulative effect that such dishonesty has on us: since it offers a perfect facsimile or simulacrum of goodwill without goodwill’s real spirit, it messes with our heads and eventually starts upping our defenses even in cases of genuine smiles and real art and true goodwill. It makes us feel confused and lonely and impotent and angry and scared. It causes despair.40

38 This is the reason why even a really beautiful, ingenious, powerful ad (of which there are a lot) can never be any kind of real art: an ad has no status as gift, i.e. it's never really for the person it's directed at.

39 (with the active complicity of Professor Conroy, I'm afraid)

40 This is related to the phenomenon of the Professional Smile, a national pandemic in the service industry; and no place in my experience have I been on the receiving end of as many Professional Smiles as I am on the Nadir, maître d's, Chief Stewards, Hotel Managers' minions, Cruise Director — their P. S.'s all come on like switches at my approach. But also back on land at banks, restaurants, airline ticket counters, on and on. You know this smile — the stenuous contraction of circumanal fascia w/ incomplete zygomatic involvement — the smile that doesn't quite reach the smiler's eyes and that signifies nothing more than a calculated attempt to advance the smiler's own interests by pretending to like the smilee. Why do employers and supervisors force professional service people to broadcast the Professional Smile? Am I the only consumer in whom high doses of such a smile produce despair? Am I the only person who's sure that the growing number of cases in which totally average-looking people suddenly open up with automatic weapons in shopping malls and insurance offices and medical complexes and McDonald's is somehow causally related to the fact that these venues are well-known dissemination-loci of the Professional Smile?

Who do they think is fooled by the Professional Smile?

And yet the Professional Smile's absence now also causes despair. Anybody who's ever bought a pack of gum in a Manhattan cigar store or asked for something to be stamped FRAGILE at a Chicago post office or tried to obtain a glass of water from a

front to write it,37 even though nowhere in or around the essay is there anything acknowledging that it's a paid endorsement, not even one of the little “So-and-so has been compensated for his services” that flashes at your TV screen's lower right during celebrity-hosted infomercials. Instead, inset on this weird essaymercials’ first page is an author-photograph shot of Conroy brooding in a black turtleneck, and below the photo is an author-bio with a list of Conroy’s books that includes the 1967 classic Stop-Time, which is arguably the best literary memoir of the twentieth century and is one of the books that first made poor old yours truly want to try to be a writer.

In other words, Celebrity Cruises is presenting Conroy's review of his 7NC Cruise as an essay and not a commercial. This is extremely bad. Here is the argument for why it’s bad. Whether it honors them well or not, an essay's fundamental obligations are supposed to be to the reader. The reader, on however unconscious a level, understands this, and thus tends to approach an essay with a relatively high level of openness and credulity. But a commercial is a very different animal. Advertisements have certain formal, legal obligations to truthfulness, but these are broad enough to allow for a great deal of rhetorical maneuvering in the fulfillment of an advertisement's primary obligation, which is to serve the financial interests of its sponsor. Whatever attempts an advertisement makes to interest and appeal to its readers are not, finally, for the reader's benefit. And the reader of an ad knows all this, too — that an

37 Pier 21 having seasoned me as a recipient of explanatory/justificatory narratives, I was able to make some serious journalistic phone inquiries about how Professor Conroy’s essymercials came to be, yielding two separate narratives:

(1) From Celebrity Cruises’s PR liaison Ms. Wieson (after a two-day silence that I've come to understand as the PR-equivalent of covering the microphone with your hand and leaning over to confer w/ counsel): "Celebrity saw an article he wrote in Travel and Leisure magazine, and they were really impressed with how he could create these mental postcards, so they went to ask him to write about his Cruise experience for people who'd never been on a Cruise before, and they did pay him to write the article, and they really took a gamble, really, because he'd never been on a Cruise before, and they had to pay him whether he liked it or not, and whether they liked the article or not, but...[dry little chuckle] obviously they liked the article, and he did a good job, so that's the Mr. Conroy story, and those are his perspectives on his experience."

(2) From Frank Conroy (with the small sigh that precedes a certain kind of weary candor): "I prostituted myself."
At any rate, for this particular 7NC consumer, Conroy’s ad-essay ends up having a truthfulness about it that I’m quite sure is unintentional. As my week on the Nadir wore on, I began to see this essayrical as a perfect ironic reflection of the mass-market-Cruise experience itself. The essay is polished, powerful, impressive, clearly the best that money can buy. It presents itself as for my benefit. It manages my experiences and my interpretation of those experiences and takes care of them in advance for me. It seems to care about me. But it doesn’t, not really, because first and foremost it wants something from me. So does the Cruise itself. The pretty setting and glittering ship and dashing staff and sedulous servants and solicitous fun-managers all want something from me, and it’s not just the price of my ticket — they’ve already got that. Just what it is that they want is hard to pin down, but by early in the week I can feel it, and building: it circles the ship like a fin.

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Celebrity’s fiendish brochure does not lie or exaggerate, however, in the luxury department. I now confront the journalistic problem of not being sure how many examples I need to list in order to communicate the atmosphere of sybaritic and nearly insanity-producing pampering on board the m.v. Nadir.

How about for just one example Saturday 11 March, right after sailing but before the North Sea weather hits, when I want to go out to Deck 10’s port rail for some introductory vista-gazing and thus decide I need some zinc oxide for my peel-prone nose. My zinc oxide’s still in my big duffel bag, which at that point is piled with all Deck 10’s other luggage

in the little area between the 10-Fore elevator and the 10-Fore staircase while little men in cadet-blue Celebrity jumpsuits, porters — entirely Lebanese, this squad seemed to be — are cross-checking the luggage tags with the Nadir’s passenger list Lot #5 and organizing the luggage and taking it all up the Port and Starboard halls to people’s cabins.

And but so I come out and spot my duffel among the luggage, and I start to grab and haul it out of the towering pile of leather and nylon, with the idea that I can just whisk the bag back to 1009 myself and root through it and find my good old ZnO; and one of the porters sees me starting to grab the bag, and he dumps all four of the massive pieces of luggage he’s staggering with and leaps to intercept me. At first I’m afraid he thinks I’m some kind of baggage thief and wants to see my claim-check or something. But it turns out that what he wants is my duffel: he wants to carry it to 1009 for me. And I, who am about half again this poor herniated little guy’s size (as is the duffel bag itself), protest politely, trying to be considerate, saying Don’t Fret, Not a Big Deal, Just Need My Good Old ZnO. I indicate to the porter that I can see they have some sort of incredibly organized ordinal luggage-dispersal system under way here and that I don’t mean to disrupt it or make him carry a Lot #7 bag before a Lot #2 bag or anything, and no I’ll just get the big old heavy weatherstained sucker out of here myself and give the little guy that much less work to do.

And then now a very strange argument indeed ensues, me v. the Lebanese porter, because it turns out I am putting this guy, who barely speaks English, in a terrible kind of sedulous-service double-bind, a paradox of pampering: viz. the The-Passenger’s-Always-Right-versus-Never-Let-A-Passenger-Carry-His-Own-Bag paradox. Clueless at the time about what this poor little Lebanese man is going through, I wave off both his high-pitched protests and his agonized expression as mere servile courtesy, and I extract the duffel and lug it up the hall to 1009 and slather the old beak with ZnO and go outside to watch the coast of Florida recede cinematically à la F. Conroy.

Only later did I understand what I’d done. Only later did I learn that

South Boston waitress knows well the soul-crushing effect of a service worker’s scowl, i.e. the humiliation and resentment of being denied the Professional Smile. And the Professional Smile has by now skewed even my resentment at the dreaded Professional Scowl: I walk away from the Manhattan tobacconist resenting not the counterman’s character or absence of goodwill but his lack of professionalism in denying me the Smile. What a fucking mess.

41 (Which by the way trust me, I used to lifeguard part-time, and fuck this SPF hoo-haa: good old ZnO will keep your nose looking like a newborn’s.)
that little Lebanese Deck 10 porter had his head just about chewed off by the (also Lebanese) Deck 10 Head Porter, who'd had his own head chewed off by the Austrian Chief Steward, who'd received confirmed reports that a Deck 10 passenger had been seen carrying his own luggage up the Port hallway of Deck 10 and now demanded rolling Lebanese heads for this clear indication of portly dereliction, and had reported (the Austrian Chief Steward did) the incident (as is apparently SOP) to an officer in the Guest Relations Dept., a Greek officer with Revo shades and a walkie-talkie and officerial epaulets so complex I never did figure out what his rank was; and this high-ranking Greek guy actually came around to 1009 after Saturday's supper to apologize on behalf of practically the entire Chandris shipping line and to assure me that ragged-necked Lebanese heads were even at that moment rolling down various corridors in piacular recompense for my having had to carry my own bag. And even though this Greek officer's English was in lots of ways better than mine, it took me no less than ten minutes to express my own horror and to claim responsibility and to detail the double-bind I'd put the porter in — brandishing at relevant moments the actual tube of ZnO that had caused the whole snafu — ten or more minutes before I could get enough of a promise from the Greek officer that various chewed-off heads would be reattached and employee records unbesmirched to feel comfortable enough to allow the officer to leave; and the whole incident was incredibly frazzling and angst-fraught and filled almost a whole Mead notebook and is here recounted in only its barest psychoskeletal outline.

It is everywhere on the Nadir you look: evidence of a steely determination to indulge the passenger in ways that go far beyond any halfway-sane passenger's own expectations. Some wholly random examples: My cabin bathroom has plenty of thick fluffy towels, but when I go up to lie in the sun I don't have to take any of my cabin's towels, because the two upper decks' sun areas have big carts loaded with even thicker and fluffier towels. These carts are stationed at convenient intervals along endless rows of gymnastically adjustable deck chairs that are themselves phenomenally fine deck chairs, sturdy enough for even the portliest sunbather but also narcoleptically comfortable, with heavy-alloy skeletons over which is stretched some exotic material that combines canvas's quick-drying durability with cotton's absorbency and comfort — the material's precise composition is mysterious, but it's a welcome step up from public pools' deck chairs' surface of Kmartish plastic that sticks and produces farty suction-noises whenever you shift your sweaty weight on it — and the Nadir's chairs' material is not striated or cross-hatched in some web but is a solid expanse stretched drum-tight over the frame, so that you don't get those weird pink chair-striipes on the side you're lying on. Oh, and each upper deck's carts are manned by a special squad of full-time Towel Guys, so that, when you're well-done on both sides and ready to quit and spring easily out of the deck chair, you don't have to pick up your towel and take it with you or even bus it into the cart's Used Towel slot, because a Towel Guy materializes the minute your fanny leaves the chair and removes your towel for you and deposits it in the slot. (Actually the Towel Guys are such overachievers about removing used towels that even if you just get up for a second to reapply ZnO or gaze contemplatively out over the railing, often when you turn back around your towel's gone, and your deck chair's refolded to the uniform 45° at-rest angle, and you have to readjust your chair all over again and go to the cart to get a fresh fluffy towel, of which there's admittedly not a short supply.)

Down in the Five-Star Caravelle Restaurant, the waiter will not only bring you, e.g., lobster — as well as seconds and even thirds on

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42 In further retrospection, I think the only thing I really persuaded the Greek officer of was that I was very weird, and possibly unstable, which impression I'm sure was shared with Mr. Dermatitis and combined with that same first night's au-jus-as-shark-bait request to destroy my credibility with Dermatitis before I even got in to see him.

43 One of Celebrity Cruises' slogans asserts that they Look Forward To Exceeding Your Expectations — they say it a lot, and they are sincere, though they are either disingenuous about or innocent of this Excess's psychic consequences.

44 (to either Deck 11's pools or Deck 12's Temple of Ra)

45 Table 64's waiter is Tibor, a Hungarian and a truly exceptional person, about whom if there's any editorial justice you will learn a lot more someplace below.
lobster\textsuperscript{46} — with methamphetamineic speed, but he'll also incline over you\textsuperscript{47} with gleaming claw-cracker and surgical fork and dismantle the lobster for you, saving you the green goopy work that's the only remotely rigorous thing about lobster.

At the Windsurf Cafe, up on Deck 11 by the pools, where there's always an informal buffet lunch, there's never that bovine line that makes most cafeterias such a downer, and there are about 73 varieties of entrée alone, and incredibly good coffee; and if you're carrying a bunch of notebooks or even just have too many things on your tray, a waiter will materialize as you peel away from the buffet and will carry your tray — i.e. even though it's a cafeteria there're all these waiters standing around, all with Nehruesque jackets and white towels draped over left arms that are always held in the position of broken or withered arms, watching you, the waiters, not quite making eye-contact but scanning for any little way to be of service, plus plum-jacketed sommeliers walking around to see if you need a non-buffet libation . . . plus a whole other crew of maître d's and supervisors watching the waiters and sommeliers and tall-hatted buffet-servers to make sure they're not even thinking of letting you do something for yourself that they could be doing for you.\textsuperscript{48}

Every public surface on the m.v. Nadir that isn't stainless steel or glass or varnished parquet or dense and good-smelling sauna-type wood is plush blue carpet that never naps and never has a chance to accumulate even one flecklet of lint because jumpsuited Third World guys are always at it with Siemens A.G. high-suction vacuums. The elevators are Euroglass and yellow steel and stainless steel and a kind of wood-

\textsuperscript{46} Not until Tuesday's lobster night at the 5½:C.R. did I really emphatically understand the Roman phenomenon of the vomitorium.

\textsuperscript{47} (not invasively or obtrusively or condescendingly)

\textsuperscript{48} Again, you never have to bus your tray after eating at the Windsurf, because the waiters leap to take them, and again the zeal can be a hassle, because if you get up just to go get another peach or something and still have a cup of coffee and some yummy sandwich crusts you've been saving for last a lot of times you come back and the tray and the crusts are gone, and I personally start to attribute this oversedulous busing to the reign of Hellenic terror the waiters labor under.

grain material that looks too shiny to be real wood but makes a sound when you thump it that's an awful lot like real wood.\textsuperscript{49} The elevators and stairways between decks\textsuperscript{50} seem to be the particular objects of the anal retention of a whole special Elevator-and-Staircase custodial crew.\textsuperscript{51,52}

And let's not forget Room Service, which on a 7NC luxury cruise is called Cabin Service. Cabin Service is in addition to the eleven scheduled daily opportunities for public eating, and it's available 24/7, and it's free: all you have to do is hit x72 on the bedside phone, and

\textsuperscript{49} The many things on the Nadir that were wood-grain but not real wood were such marvelous and painstaking imitations of wood that a lot of times it seemed like it would have been simpler and less expensive simply to have used real wood.

\textsuperscript{50} Two broad staircases, Fore and Aft, both of which reverse their zag-angle at each landing, and the landings themselves have mirrored walls, which is wickedly great because via the mirrors you can check out female bottoms in cocktail dresses ascending one flight above you without appearing to be one of thoseicky types who check out female bottoms on staircases.

\textsuperscript{51} During the first two days of rough seas, when people vomited a lot (especially after supper and apparently extra-especially on the elevators and stairways), these puddles of vomit inspired a varied feeding frenzy of Wet/Dry Vacs and spot-remover and all-trace-of-odor-eradicator chemicals applied by this Elite Special Forces—type crew.

\textsuperscript{52} By the way, the ethnic makeup of the Nadir's crew is a melting-pot mélange on the order of like a Benetton commercial, and it's a constant challenge to trace the racio-geographical makeup of the employees' various hierarchies. All the big-time officers are Greek, but then it's a Greek-owned ship so what do you expect. Them aside, it at first seems like there's some basic Eurocentric caste system in force: waiters, bus-boys, beverage waitresses, sommeliers, casino dealers, entertainers, and stewards seem mostly to be Arysians, while the porters and custodians and swabbies tend to be your swarthier types — Arabs and Filipinos, Cubans, West Indian blacks. But it turns out to be more complex than that, because the Chief Stewards and Chief Sommeliers and maître d's who so easily oversee the Aryan servants are themselves swarthy and non-Aryan — e.g. our maître d' at the 5½:C.R. is Portuguese, with the bull neck and heavy-lidded grin of a Teamsters official, and gives the impression of needing only some very subtle prearranged signal to have a $10000-an-hour prostitute or unimaginable substances delivered to your cabin; and our whole T64 totally loathes him for no single pinpointable reason, and we've all agreed in advance to f**k him royally on the tip at week's end.
ten or fifteen minutes later a guy who wouldn’t even *dream* of hitting you up for a gratuity appears with this ... this *tray*: “Thinly Sliced Ham and Swiss Cheese on White Bread with Dijon Mustard.” “The Combo: Cajun Chicken with Pasta Salad, and Spicy Salsa,” on and on, a whole page of sandwiches and platters in the Services Directory — and the stuff deserves to be capitalized, believe me. As a kind of semi-agoraphobe who spends massive amounts of time in my cabin, I come to have a really complex dependency/shame relationship with Cabin Service. Since finally getting around to reading the Services Directory and finding out about it Monday night, I’ve ended up availing myself of Cabin Service every night — more like twice a night, to be honest — even though I find it extremely embarrassing to be calling up x72 asking to have even *more* rich food brought to me when there’ve already been eleven gourmet eating-ops that day.53 Usually what I do is spread out my notebooks and *Fielding’s Guide to Worldwide Cruising 1995* and pens and various materials all over the bed, so when the Cabin Service guy appears at the door he’ll see all this belletristic material and figure I’m working really hard on something belletristic right here in the cabin and have doubtless been too busy to have hit all the public meals and am thus legitimately entitled to the indulgence of Cabin Service.54

But it’s my experience with the cabin cleaning that’s maybe the ultimate example of stress from a pampering so extravagant that it messes with your head. Searing crush or no, the fact of the matter is I rarely even see 1009’s cabin steward, the diaphanous and epicantically doe-eyed Petra. But I have good reason to believe she sees me. Because every time I leave 1009 for more than like half an hour, when I get back it’s totally cleaned and dusted down again and the towels replaced and the bathroom agleam. Don’t get me wrong: in a way it’s great. I am kind of a slob, and I’m in Cabin 1009 a lot, and I also come and go a lot, and when I’m in here in 1009 I sit in bed and write in bed while eating fruit and generally mess up the bed. But then whenever I dart out and then come back, the bed is freshly made up and hospital-cornered and there’s another mint-centered chocolate on the pillow.55

I fully grant that mysterious invisible room-cleaning is in a way great, every true slob’s fantasy, somebody materializing and deslobbing your room and then dematerializing — like having a mom without the guilt. But there is also, I think, a creeping guilt here, a deep accretive uneasiness, a discomfort that presents — at least in my own case — as a weird kind of pampering-paranoia.

Because after a couple days of this fabulous invisible room-cleaning, I start to wonder how exactly Petra knows when I’m in 1009 and when I’m not. It’s now that it occurs to me how rarely I ever see her. For a while I try experiments like all of a sudden darting out into the 10-Port hallway to see if I can see Petra hunched somewhere keeping track of who is decabining, and I scour the whole hallway-and-ceiling area for evidence of some kind of camera or monitor tracking movements outside the cabin doors — zilch on both fronts. But then I realize that the mystery’s even more complex and unsettling than I’d first thought, because my cabin gets cleaned always and only during intervals where I’m gone more than half an hour. When I go out, how can Petra or her supervisors possibly know how long I’m going to be gone? I try leaving 1009 a couple times and then dashing back after 10 or 15 minutes to see

53 This is counting the Midnight Buffet, which tends to be a kind of lamely lavish Theme-slash-Costume-Partyish thing, w/ Theme-related foods — Oriental, Caribbean, Tex-Mex — and which I plan in this essay to mostly skip except to say that Tex-Mex Night out by the pools featured what must have been a seven-foot-high ice sculpture of Pancho Villa that spent the whole party dripping steadily onto the mammoth sombrero of Tibor, Table 64’s beloved and extremely cool Hungarian waiter, whose contract forces him on Tex-Mex Night to wear a serape and a straw sombrero with a 17” radius and to dispense Four Alarm chili from a steam table placed right underneath an ice sculpture, and whose pink and birdlike face on occasions like this expressed a combination of mortification and dignity that seem somehow to sum up the whole plight of postwar Eastern Europe.

53a (He let me measure it when the reptilian maitre d’ wasn’t looking.)

54 (I know, like I’m sure this guy even cares.)

55 This was primarily because of the semi-agoraphobia — I’d have to sort of psych myself up to leave the cabin and go accumulate experiences, and then pretty quickly out there in the general population my will would break and I’d find some sort of excuse to scuttle back to 1009. This happened quite a few times a day.

56 (This FN right here’s being written almost a week after the Cruise ended, and I’m still living mainly on these hoarded mint-centered chocolates.)
whether I can catch Petra in delicto, but she’s never there. I try making a truly unholy mess in 1009 and then leaving and hiding somewhere on a lower deck and then dashing back after exactly 29 minutes — and again when I come bursting through the door there’s no Petra and no cleaning. Then I leave the cabin with exactly the same expression and appurtenances as before and this time stay hidden for 31 minutes and then haul ass back — and this time again no sighting of Petra, but now 1009 is sterilized and gleaming and there’s a mint on the pillow’s fresh new case. Know that I carefully scrutinize every inch of every surface I pass as I circle the deck during these little experiments — no cameras or motion sensors or anything in evidence anywhere that would explain how They know.57 So now for a while I theorize that somehow a special crewman is assigned to each passenger and follows that passenger at all times, using extremely sophisticated techniques of personal surveillance and reporting the passenger’s movements and activities and projected time of cabin-return back to Steward HQ or something, and so for about a day I try taking extreme evasion actions — whirling suddenly to check behind me, popping around corners, darting in and out of Gift Shops via different doors, etc. — never one sign of anybody engaged in surveillance. I never develop even a plausible theory about how They do it. By the time I quit trying, I’m feeling half-crazed, and my counter-surveillance measures are drawing frightened looks and even some temple-tapping from 10-Port’s other guests.

I submit that there’s something deeply mind-fucking about the Type-A-personality service and pampering on the Nadir, and that the manic invisible cabin-cleaning provides the clearest example of what’s creepy about it. Because, deep down, it’s not really like having a mom. Pace the guilt and nagging, etc., a mom cleans up after you largely because she loves you — you are the point, the object of the cleaning somehow.

On the Nadir, though, once the novelty and convenience have worn off, I begin to see that the phenomenal cleaning really has nothing to do with me. (It’s been particularly traumatic for me to realize that Petra is cleaning Cabin 1009 so phenomenally well simply because she’s under orders to do so, and thus (obviously) that she’s not doing it for me or because she likes me or thinks I’m No Problem or A Funny Thing — in fact she’d clean my cabin just as phenomenally well even if I were a dork — and maybe conceivably behind the smile does consider me a dork, in which case what if in fact I really am a dork? — I mean, if pampering and radical kindness don’t seem motivated by strong affection and thus don’t somehow affirm one or help assure one that one is not, finally, a dork, of what final and significant value is all this indulgence and cleaning?)

The feeling’s not all that dissimilar to the experience of being a guest in the home of somebody who does things like sneak in in the a.m. and make your guest bed up for you while you’re in the shower and fold your dirty clothes or even launder them without being asked to, or who empties your ashtray after each cigarette you smoke, etc. For a while, with a host like this, it seems great, and you feel cared about and prized and affirmed and worthwhile, etc. But then after a while you begin to intuit that the host isn’t acting out of regard or affection for you so much as simply going around obeying the imperatives of some personal neurosis having to do with domestic cleanliness and order . . . which means that, since the ultimate point and object of the cleaning isn’t you but rather cleanliness and order, it’s going to be a relief for her when you leave. Meaning her hygienic pampering of you is actually evidence that she doesn’t want you around. The Nadir doesn’t have the Scotchguarded carpet or plastic-wrapped furniture of a true anal-type host like this, but the psychic aura’s the same, and so’s the projected relief of getting out.

57 The answer to why I don’t just ask Petra how she does it is that Petra’s English is extremely limited and primitive, and in sad fact I’m afraid my whole deep feeling of attraction and connection to Petra the Slavonian steward has been erected on the flimsy foundation of the only two English clauses she seems to know, one or the other of which clauses she uses in response to every statement, question, joke, or protestation of undying devotion: “Is no problem” and “You are a funny thing.”

10

I don’t know how a well a claustraphobe would do, but for the agoraphobe a 7NC Luxury Megacruiser presents a whole array of attractively enclosing options. The agoraphobe can choose not to leave
the ship, or can restrict herself only to certain decks, or can decline to leave the particular deck her cabin is on, or can eschew the view-conducive open-air railings on either side of that certain deck and keep exclusively to the deck’s interior enclosed part. Or the agoraphobe can simply not leave her cabin at all.

I — who am not a true, can’t-even-go-to-the-supermarket-type agoraphobe, but am what might be called a “borderline” or “semi-agoraphobe” — come nevertheless to love very deeply Cabin 1009, Exterior Port. It is made of a fawn-colored enameling polymer and its walls are extremely thick and solid: I can drum annoyingly on the wall above my bed for up to five minutes before my aft neighbors pound (very faintly) back in annoyance. The cabin is thirteen size-11 Keds long by twelve Keds wide, with a little peninsular vestibule protruding out toward a cabin door that’s got three separate locking technologies and trilingual lifeboat instructions bolted to its inside and a whole deck of DO NOT DISTURB cards hanging from the inside knob. The vestibule is one-and-one-half times as wide as I. The cabin’s bathroom is off one side of the vestibule, and off the other side is the Wondercloset, a complicated honeycomb of shelves and drawers and hangers and cubbyholes and Personal Fireproof Safe. The Wondercloset is so intricate in its utilization of every available cubic cm that all I can say is it must have been designed by a very organized person indeed.

All the way across the cabin, there’s a deep enamel ledge running

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58 (At sea this is small agorapotatoes, but in port, once the doors open and the gangway extends, it represents a true choice and is thus agoraphobically valid.)

59 “1009” indicates that it’s on Deck 10, and “Port” refers to the side of the ship it’s on, and “Exterior” means that I have a window. There are also, of course, “Interior” cabins off the inner sides of the decks’ halls, but I hereby advise any prospective 7NC passenger with claustrophobic tendencies to make sure and specify “Exterior” when making cabin-reservations.

60 The non-U.S. agoraphobe will be heartened to know that this deck includes “BITTE NICHT STÖREN,” “PRIÈRE DE NE PAS DÉRANGER,” “SI PREGA NON DISTURBARE,” and (my personal favorite) “FAVOR DE NO MOLESTAR.”

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61 If you’re either a little kid or an anorectic you can probably sit on this ledge to do your dreamy contemplative sea-gazing, but a raised and buttock-hostile lip at the ledge’s outer border makes this impractical for a full-size adult.

62 There are also continual showings of about a dozen second-run movies, via what I get the sense is a VCR somewhere right here on board, because certain irregularities in tracking show up in certain films over and over. The movies run 24/7, and I end up watching several of them so many times that I can now do their dialogue verbatim. These movies include It Could Happen to You (the It’s a Wonderful Life-w/-lottery twist along the port wall under a window that I think is called my porthole. As are the portholes in ships on TV, this porthole is indeed round, but it is not small, and in terms of its importance to the room’s mood and raison it resembles a cathedral’s rose window. It’s made of that kind of very thick glass that Drive-Up bank tellers stand behind. In the corner of the porthole’s glass is this:

![Triangle with letters]

C.C. Jensen
Denmark

You can thump the glass with your fist w/o give or vibration. It’s really good glass. Every morning at exactly 0834h. a Filipino guy in a blue jumpsuit stands on one of the lifeboats that hang in rows between Decks 9 and 10 and sprays my porthole with a hose, to get the salt off, which is fun to watch.

Cabin 1009’s dimensions are just barely on the good side of the line between very very snug and cramped. Packed into its near-square are a big good bed and two bedside tables w/ lamps and an 18” TV with five At-Sea Cable® options, two of which show continuous loops of the Simpson trial. There’s also a white enamel desk that doubles as a vanity, and a round glass table on which is a basket that’s alternately
filled with fresh fruit and with husks and rinds of same. I don’t know whether it’s SOP or a subtle journalistic perq, but every time I leave the cabin for more than the requisite half-hour I come back to find a new basket of fruit, covered in snug blue-tinted Saran, on the glass table. It’s good fresh fruit and it’s always there. I’ve never eaten so much fruit in my life.

Cabin 1009’s bathroom deserves extravagant praise. I’ve seen more than my share of bathrooms, and this is one bitchingly nice bathroom. It is five-and-a-half Keds to the edge of the shower’s step up and sign to Watch Your Step. The room’s done in white enamel and gleaming brushed and stainless steel. Its overhead lighting is luxury lighting, some kind of blue-intensive Eurofluorescence that’s run through a diffusion filter so it’s diagnostically acute without being brutal. Right by the light switch is an Alisco Sirocco-brand hairdryer that’s brazed right onto the wall and comes on automatically when you take it out of the mount; the Sirocco’s High setting just about takes your head off. Next to the hairdryer there’s both 115v and 230v sockets, plus a grounded 110v for razors.

The sink is huge and its bowl deep without seeming precipitous or ungentle of grade. Good C.C. Jensen plate mirror covers the whole wall over the sink. The steel soap dish is striated to let sog-water out and minimize that annoying underside-of-the-bar slime. The ingenious consideration of the anti-slime soap dish is particularly affecting.

Keep in mind that 1009 is a mid-price single cabin. The mind positively reels at what a luxury-penthouse-type cabin’s bathroom must be like.\textsuperscript{64}

And so but simply enter 1009’s bathroom and hit the overhead lights and on comes an automatic exhaust fan whose force and aerodynamism give steam or your more offensive-type odors just no quarter at all.\textsuperscript{65} The fan’s suction is such that if you stand right underneath its louvered vent it makes your hair stand straight up on your head, which together with the concussive and abundantly rippling action of the Sirocco hairdryer makes for hours of fun in the lavishly lit mirror.

The shower itself overachieves in a big way. The Hot setting’s water is exfoliatingly hot, but it takes only one preset manipulation of the shower-knob to get perfect 98.6° water. My own personal home should have such water pressure: the showerhead’s force pins you helplessly to the stall’s opposite wall, and at 98.6° the head’s MASSAGE setting makes your eyes roll up and your sphincter just about give.\textsuperscript{66} The showerhead and its flexible steel line are also detachable, so you can hold the head and direct its punishing stream just at e.g. your particularly dirty right knee or something.\textsuperscript{67}

\textsuperscript{64} Attempts to get to see a luxury cabin’s loo were consistently misconstrued and rebuffed by upscale penthouse-type \textit{Nadirites} — there are disadvantages to Luxury Cruising as a civilian and not identifiable Press.

\textsuperscript{65} 1009’s bathroom always smells of a strange but not unnice Norwegian disinfectant whose scent resembles what it would smell like if someone who knew the exact organochemical composition of a lemon but had never in fact smelled a lemon tried to synthesize the scent of a lemon. Kind of the same relation to a real lemon as a Bayer’s Children’s Aspirin to a real orange.

The cabin itself, on the other hand, after it’s been cleaned, has no odor. None. Not in the carpets, the bedding, the insides of the desk’s drawers, the wood of the Wondercloset’s doors: nothing. One of the very few totally odorless places I’ve ever been in. This, too, eventually starts giving me the creeps.

\textsuperscript{66} Perhaps designed with this in mind, the shower’s floor has a 10° grade from all sides to the center’s drain, which drain is the size of a lunch plate and has audibly aggressive suction.

\textsuperscript{67} This detachable and concussive showerhead can allegedly also be employed for non-hygienic and even prurient purposes, apparently. I overheard guys from a small U. of Texas spring-break contingent (the only college-age group on the whole \textit{Nadir})
Toiletry-wise, flanking the sink’s mirror are broad shallow bolted steel minibaskets with all sorts of free stuff in them. There’s Caswell-Massey Conditioning Shampoo in a convenient airplane-liquor-size bottle. There’s Caswell-Massey Almond and Aloe Hand and Body Emulsion With Silk. There’s a sturdy plastic shoehorn and a chamois mitt for either eyeglasses or light shoe shinning — both these items are the navy-blue-on-searing-white that are Celebrity’s colors. There’s not one but two fresh showercaps at all times. There’s good old unpertinacious unshwy Safeguard soap. There’s washcloths w/o nubble or nap, and of course towels you want to propose to.

In the vestibule’s Wondercloset are extra chamois blankets and, hypoallergenic pillows and plastic CELEBRITY CRUISES—emblazoned bags of all different sizes and configurations for your laundry and optional dry cleaning, etc.

But all this is still small potatoes compared to 1009’s fascinating and potentially malevolent toilet. A harmonious concordance of elegant form and vigorous function, flanked by rolls of tissue so soft as to be without the usual perforates for tearing, my toilet has above it this sign:

THIS TOILET IS CONNECTED TO A VACUUM SEWAGE SYSTEM.
PLEASE DO NOT THROW INTO THE TOILET ANYTHING THAN ORDINARY TOILET WASTE AND TOILET PAPER

regale each other about their ingenuity with the showerhead. One guy in particular was fixated on the idea that somehow the shower’s technology could be rigged to administer fellatio if he could just get access to a “metric ratchet set” — your guess here is as good as mine.

68 The Nadir itself is navy trim on a white field, and all the Megalines have their own trademark color schemes — lime-green on white, aqua on white, robin’s-egg on white, barn-red on white (white apparently being a constant).

69 You can apparently get “Butler Service” and automatic-send-out dry cleaning and shoe shinning, all at prices that I’m told are not out of line, but the forms you have to fill out and hang on your door for all this are wildly complex, and I’m scared of setting in motion mechanisms of service that seem potentially overwhelming.

70 The missing predicative preposition here is sic — ditto what looks to be an implied image of thrown excrement — but the mistakes seem somehow endearing, humanizing, and this toilet needed all the humanizing it could get.

71 It’s pretty hard not to see connections between the exhaust fan and the toilet’s vacuum — an almost Final Solution—like eradication of animal wastes and odors (wastes and odors that are by all rights a natural consequence of Henry VIII-like meals and unlimited free Cabin Service and fruit baskets) — and the death-denial-transcendence fantasies that the NNC Luxury Megacruise is trying to enable.

72 The Nadir’s VACUUM SEWAGE SYSTEM begins after a while to hold such a fascination for me that I end up going hat in hand back to Hotel Manager Dermatitus to ask once again for access to the ship’s nether parts, and once again I pull a boner with Dermatitus: I innocently mention my specific fascination with the ship’s VACUUM SEWAGE SYSTEM — which boner is consequent to another and prior boner by which I’d failed to discover in my pre-boarding researches that there’d been, just a few months before this, a tremendous scandal in which the I think QE2 Megaship had been discovered dumping waste over the side in mid-voyage, in violation of numerous national and maritime codes, and had been videotaped doing this by a couple of passengers who subsequently apparently sold the videotape to some network newsmagazine, and so the whole Megacruise industry was in a state of almost Nixonian paranoia about unscrupulous journalists trying to manufacture scandals about Megaships’ handling of waste. Even behind his mirrored sunglasses I can tell that Mr. Dermatitus is severely upset about my interest in sewage, and he denies my request to eyeball the V.S.S. with a complex defensiveness that I couldn’t even begin to chart out here. It is only later that night (Wednesday 3/15), at supper, at good old Table 64 in the 5°C.R., that my cruise-savvy tablemates fill me in on the QE2 waste-scandal, and they scream with mirth at the clay-footed naiveté with which I’d gone to Dermatitus with what was in fact an innocent if puerile fascination with hermetically-evacuated waste; and such is my own embarrassment and hatred of Mr. Dermatitus by this time that I begin to feel like if the Hotel Manager really does think I’m some kind of investigative journalist with a hard-on for shark dangers and sewage scandals then he might think it would be worth the risk to have me harmed in some way; and through a set of neurotic connections I won’t even try to defend, I, for about a day and a half, begin to fear that the Nadir’s Greek episcopate will somehow contrive to use the incredibly
11

Traveling at sea for the first time is a chance to realize that the ocean is not one ocean. The water changes. The Atlantic that seethes off the eastern U.S. is glaucous and lightless and looks mean. Around Jamaica, though, it’s more like a milky aquamarine, and translucent. Off the Cayman Islands it’s an electric blue, and off Cozumel it’s almost purple. Same sort of deal with the beaches. You can tell right away that south Florida’s sand is descended from rocks: it hurts your bare feet and has that sort of mineral glitter to it. But Ocho Rios’s beach is more like dirty sugar, and Cozumel’s is like clean sugar, and at places along the coast of Grand Cayman the sand’s texture is more like flour, silicate, its white as dreamy and vaporous as clouds’ white. The only real constant to the nautical topography of the m.v. Nadir’s Caribbean is something about its unreal and almost retouched-looking prettiness73 — it’s impossible to describe quite right, but the closest I can come is to say that it all looks: expensive.

12

Mornings in port are a special time for the semi-agoraphobe, because just about everybody else gets off the ship and goes ashore for Organized Shore Excursions or for unstructured peripatetic tourist stuff, and the m.v. Nadir’s upper decks have the eerily delicious deserted quality of your folks’ house when you’re home sick as a kid and everybody else is off at work and school, etc. Right now it’s 0930h. on 15 March (Ides Wednesday) and we’re docked off Cozumel, Mexico. I’m on Deck 12. A couple guys in software-company T-shirts jog fragrantly by every couple

potent and forceful 1009 toilet itself for the assassination — I don’t know, that they’ll like somehow lubricate the bowl and up the suction to where not just my waste but I myself will be sucked down through the seat’s opening and hurled into some kind of abstract septic holding-tank.

72a (literally)

73 It is not “beautiful”; it is “pretty.” There’s a difference.

74 Seven times around Deck 12 is a mile, and I’m one of very few Nadirites under about 70 who doesn’t jog like a fiend up here now that the weather’s nice. Early A.M. is the annular rush-hour of Deck 12 jogging. I’ve already seen a couple of juicy and Keystone-quality jogging collisions.

75 Other eccentricities on this 7NC include: the thirteen-year-old kid with the toupee, who wears his big orange life jacket all week and sits on the wood floor of the upper decks reading Joe Philip Farmer paperbacks with three different boxes of Kleenex around him at all times; the bloated and dead-eyed guy who sits in the same chair at the same 21 table in the Mayfair Casino every day from 1200h. to 0300h., drinking Long Island Iced Tea and playing 21 at a narcotized underwater pace. There’s The Guy Who Sleeps By The Pool, who does just what his name suggests, except he does it all the time, even in the rain, a hairy-stomached guy of maybe 50, a copy of Megareads open on his chest, sleeping w/o sunglasses or sunblock, w/o moving, for hours and hours, in full and high-watt sun, and never in my sight burns or wakes up (I suspect that at night they move him down to his room on a gurney). There’s also the two unbelievably old and cloudy-eyed couples who sit in a quartet in upright chairs just inside the