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 minerally 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 prettiness — it’s impossible to describe quite right, but the closest I can come is to say that it all looks: expensive.

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 fragmently by every couple minutes, but other than that it’s just me and the ZnO and hat and about a thousand empty and identically folded high-quality deck chairs. The 12-Aft Towel Guy has almost nobody to exercise his zeal on, and by 1000h. I’m on my fifth new towel.

Here the semi-agoraphobe can stand alone at the ship’s highest port rail and gaze pensively out to sea. The sea off Cozumel is a kind of watery indigo through which you can see the powder-white of the bottom. In the middle distance, underwater coral formations are big cloud-shapes of deep purple. You can see why people say of calm seas that they’re “glassy” at 1000h. the sun assumes a kind of Brewster’s Angle w/r/t the surface and the harbor lights up as far as the eye can see: the water moves a million little ways at once, and each move makes a sparkle. Out past the coral, the water gets progressively darker in orderly bonacision stripes — I think this phenomenon has to do with perspective. It’s all extremely pretty and peaceful. Besides me and the T.G. and the orbiting joggers, there’s only a supine older lady reading Codependent No More and a man standing way up at the fore part of the starboard rail videotaping the sea. This sad and cadaverous guy, who by the second day I’d christened Captain Video, has tall hard gray hair and Birkenstocks and very thin hairless calves, and he is one of the cruise’s more prominent eccentrics. Pretty much everybody on the Nadir qualifies as camera-crazy, but Captain Video camcords absolutely everything, including

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.

It is not “beautiful”; it is “pretty.” There’s a difference.
meals, empty hallways, endless games of geriatric bridge — even leaping onto Deck 11’s raised stage during Pool Party to get the crowd from the musicians’ angle. You can tell that the magnetic record of Captain Video’s Megacruise experience is going to be this Warhollianly dull thing that is exactly as long as the Cruise itself. Captain Video’s the only passenger besides me who I know for a fact is cruising without a relative or companion, and certain additional similarities between C.V. and me (the semi-agoraphobic reluctance to leave the ship in port, for one thing) tend to make me uncomfortable, and I try to avoid him as much as possible.

The semi-agoraphobe can also stand at Deck 12’s starboard rail and look way down at the army of Nadir passengers being disgorged the Deck 3 gangway. They keep pouring out the door and down the narrow gangway. As each person’s sandal hits the pier, a sociolinguistic transformation from cruiser to tourist is effected. At this very moment, 1300+ upscale tourists with currency to unload and experiences to experience and record compose a serpentine line stretching all the way down the Cozumel pier, which pier is poured cement and a good quarter-mile long and leads to the TOURISM CENTER, a kind of mega-Quonset structure where Organized Shore Excursions and cabs

clear plastic walls that enclose the area of Deck 11 that has the pools and Windward Cafe, facing out, i.e. out through the plastic sheeting, watching the ocean and ports like they’re something on TV, and also never once visibly moving.

It seems relevant that most of the Nadir’s eccentrics are eccentric in stasis: what distinguishes them is their doing the same thing hour after hour and day after day without moving. (Captain Video is an active exception. People are surprisingly tolerant of Captain Video until the second-to-last night’s Midnight Caribbean Blow-Out by the pools, when he keeps breaking into the Conga Line and trying to shift its course so that it can be recorded at better advantage; then there is a kind of bloodless but unpleasant uprising against Captain Video, and he lays low for the rest of the Cruise, possibly organizing and editing his tapes.)

(its sign’s in English, significantly)

In Ocho Rios on Monday the big tourist-draw was apparently some sort of waterfall. A whole group of Nadirites could walk up inside with a guide and umbrellas to protect their cameras. In Grand Cayman yesterday the big thing was Duty-Free rum and something called Bernard Passman Black Coral Art. Here in Cozumel it’s supposedly silver jewelry hawked by hard-dickering peddlers, and more Duty-Free liquor, and a

or mopeds into San Miguel are available. The word around good old Table 64 last night was that in primitive and incredibly poor Cozumel the U.S. dollar is treated like a UFO: “They worship it when it lands.”

Locals along the Cozumel pier are offering Nadirites a chance to have their picture taken holding a very large iguana. Yesterday, on the Grand Cayman pier, locals had offered them the chance to have their picture taken with a guy wearing a peg-leg and hook, while off the Nadir’s port bow a fake pirate ship plowed back and forth across the bay all morning, firing blank broadsides and getting on everybody’s nerves.

The Nadir’s crowds move in couples and quartets and groups and packs; the line undulates complexly. Everybody’s shirt is some kind of pastel and is festooned with the cases of recording equipment, and 85% of the females have white visors and wicker purses. And everybody down below has on sunglasses with this year’s fashionable accessory, a padded fluorescent cord that attaches to the glasses’ arms so the glasses can hang around your neck and you can put them on and take them off a lot.78

Off to my right (southeast), now, another Megacruiser is moving in for docking someplace that must be pretty close to us, judging by its approach-vector. It moves like a force of nature and resists the idea that so much mass is being steered by anything like a hand on a tiller. I can’t imagine what trying to maneuver one of these puppies into the pier is like. Parallel parking a semi into a spot the same size as the semi with a blindfold on and four tabs of LSD in you might come close. There’s no empirical way to know: they won’t even let me near the ship’s Bridge, not after the au-jus snafu. Our docking this morning at sunrise involved an antlike frenzy of crewmen and shore personnel and an anchor79 that spilled from the ship’s navel and upward of a dozen ropes complexly

fabled bar in San Miguel called Carlos and Charlie’s where they allegedly give you shots of something that’s mostly lighter fluid.

78 Apparently it’s no longer in fashion to push the frames of the sunglasses up to where they ride just above the crown of your skull, which is what I used to see upscale sunglasses-wearers do a lot; the habit has now gone the way of tying your white Lacoste tennis sweater’s arms across your chest and wearing it like a cape.

79 The anchor is gigantic and must weigh a hundred tons, and — delightfully — it really is anchor-shaped, i.e. the same shape as anchors in tattoos.
knotted onto what look like giant railroad ties studding the pier. The crew insist on calling the ropes “lines” even though each one is at least the same diameter as a tourist’s head.

I cannot convey to you the sheer and surreal scale of everything: the towering ship, the ropes, the ties, the anchor, the pier, the vast lapis lazuli dome of the sky. The Caribbean is, as ever, odorless. The floor of Deck 12 is tight-fitted planks of the same kind of corky and good-smelling wood you see in saunas.

Looking down from a great height at your countrymen waddling in expensive sandals into poverty-stricken ports is not one of the funner moments of a 7NC Luxury Cruise, however. There is something inescapably bovine about an American tourist in motion as part of a group. A certain greedy placidity about them. Us, rather. In port we automatically become Peregrinator americanus, Die Lumpenamerikaner. The Ugly Ones. For me, boviscopophobia is an even stronger motive than semi-agoraphobia for staying on the ship when we’re in port. It’s in port that I feel most implicated, guilty by perceived association. I’ve barely been out of the U.S.A. before, and never as part of a high-income herd, and in port — even up here above it all on Deck 12, just watching — I’m newly and unpleasantly conscious of being an American, the same way I’m always suddenly conscious of being white every time I’m around a lot of nonwhite people. I cannot help imagining us as we appear to them, the impassive Jamaicans and Mexicans, or especially to the non-Aryan preterite crew of the Nadir. All week I’ve

found myself doing everything I can to distance myself in the crew’s eyes from the bovine herd I’m part of, to somehow unimplicate myself: I eschew cameras and sunglasses and pastel Caribbean wear; I make a big deal of carrying my own cafeteria tray and am effusive in my thanks for the slightest service. Since so many of my shipmates shout, I make it a point of special pride to speak extra-quietly to crewmen whose English is poor.

At 1035h. there are just one or two small clouds in a sky so blue here it hurts. Every dawn so far in port has been overcast. Then the ascending sun gathers force and disperses the clouds somehow, and for an hour or so the sky looks shredded. Then by 0800h. an endless blue opens up like an eye and stays that way all A.M., one or two clouds always in the distance, as if for scale.

There are massed formicatory maneuvers among pier workers with ropes and walkie-talkies down there now as this other bright-white Megaship moves slowly in toward the pier from the right.

And then in the late A.M. the isolate clouds overhead start moving toward one another, and in the early P.M. they begin very slowly interlocking like jigsaw pieces, and by evening the puzzle will be solved and the sky will be the color of old dimes.

But of course all this ostensibly unimplicating behavior on my part is itself motivated by a self-conscious and somewhat condescending concern about how I appear to others that is (this concern) 100% upscale American. Part of the overall despair of this Luxury Cruise is that no matter what I do I cannot escape my own essential and newly unpleasant Americaness. This despair reaches its peak in port, at the rail, looking down at what I can’t help being one of. Whether up here or down there, I am an American tourist, and am thus *ex officio* large, fleshy, red, loud, coarse, condescending, self-absorbed, spoiled, appearance-conscious, ashamed, despairing, and greedy: the world’s only known species of bovine carnivore.

---

80 (= the morbid fear of being seen as bovine)

81 And in my head I go around and around about whether my fellow Nadirites suffer the same steep self-disgust. From a height, watching them, I usually imagine that the other passengers are oblivious to the impassively contemptuous gaze of the local merchants, service people, photo-op—with-lizard vendors, etc. I usually imagine that my fellow tourists are too bovinely self-absorbed to even notice how we’re looked at. At other times, though, it occurs to me that the other Americans on board quite possibly feel the same vague discomfort about their bovine-American role in port that I do, but that they refuse to let their boviscopophobia rule them: they’ve paid good money to have fun and be pampered and record some foreign experiences, and they’ll be goddammed if they’re going to let some self-indulgent twinge of neurotic projection about how their Americanness appears to malmoured locals detract from the 7NC Luxury Cruise they’ve worked and saved for and decided they deserve.

82 This dawn-and-dusk cloudiness was a pattern. In all, three of the week’s days could be called substantially cloudy, and it rained a bunch of times, including all Friday in port in Key West. Again, I can see no way to blame the Nadir or Celebrity Cruises Inc. for this happenstance.
Here, as in the other ports, Jet Skis buzz the Nadir all morning. There's about half a dozen this time. Jet Skis are the mosquitoes of Caribbean ports, annoying and irrelevant and apparently always there. Their noise is a cross between a gargle and a chain saw. I am tired of Jet Skis already and have never even been on a Jet Ski. I remember reading somewhere that Jet Skis are incredibly dangerous and accident-prone, and I take a certain unkind comfort in this as I watch blond guys with washboard stomachs and sunglasses on fluorescent cords buzz around making hieroglyphs of foam.

Instead of fake pirate ships, in Cozumel there are glass-bottom boats working the waters around the coral shadows. They move sluggishly because they're terribly overloaded with cruisers on an Organized Shore Excursion. What's neat about the sight is that everybody on the boats is looking straight down, a good 100+ people per boat — it looks prayerful somehow, and sets off the boat's driver, a local who stares dully ahead at the same nothing all drivers of all kinds of mass transport stare at.83

A red and orange parasail hangs dead still on the port horizon, a stick-figure dangling.

The 12-Aft Towel Guy, a spectral Czech with eyes so inset they're black from brow-shadow, stands very straight and expressionless by his cart, playing what looks like Rock-Paper-Scissors with himself. I've learned that the 12-Aft Towel Guy is immune to chatty journalistic probing — he gives me a look of what I can only call withering neutrality whenever I go get another towel. I am reapplying ZnO. Captain Video isn't filming now but is looking at the harbor through a square he's made of his hands. He's the type where you can tell even without looking closely that he's talking to himself. This other Megacruise ship is now docking right next to us, a procedure which apparently demands a lot of coded blasts on its world-ending horn. But maybe the single best A.M. visual in the harbor is another big organized 7NC-tourist thing: A group of Nadirites is learning to snorkel in the lagoonish waters just offshore; off the port bow I can see a good 150 solid citizens floating on their stomachs, motionless, the classic Dead Man's Float, looking like the massed and floating victims of some hideous mishap — from this height a macabre and riveting sight. I have given up looking for dorsal fins in port. It turns out that sharks, apparently being short on aesthetic sense, are never seen in pretty Caribbean ports, though a couple Jamaicans had lurid if dubious stories of barracudas that could take off a limb in one surgical drive-by. Nor in Caribbean ports is there ever any evident kelp, glasswort, algalae scuz, or any of the sapropel the regular ocean's supposed to have. Probably sharks like murkier and scuzzier waters; potential victims could see them coming too easily down here.

Speaking of carnivores, Carnival Cruises Inc.'s good ships Ecstasy and Tropicale are both anchored all the way across the harbor. In port, Carnival Megaships tend to stay sort of at a distance from other cruise ships, and my sense is that the other ships think this is just as well. The Carnival ships have masses of 20ish-looking people hanging off the rails and seem at this distance to throb slightly, like a hi-fi's woofer. The rumors about Carnival 7NC's are legion, one such rumor being that their Cruises are kind of like floating meat-market bars and that their ships bob with a conspicuous carnival squeakatasqueakata at night. There's none of this kind of concupiscent behavior aboard the Nadir, I'm happy to say. By now I've become a kind of 7NC snob, and when Carnival or Princess are mentioned in my presence I feel my face assume Trudy and Esther's expression of classy distaste.

But so there they are, the Ecstasy and Tropicale; and now right up alongside the Nadir on the other side of the pier is finally docked and secured the m.v. Dreamward, with the peach-on-white color scheme that I think means it's owned by Norwegian Cruise Line. Its Deck 3 gangway protrudes and almost touches our Deck 3 gangway — sort of obscenely — and the Dreamward's passengers, identical in all important respects to the Nadir's passengers, are now streaming down the gangway and massing and moving down the pier in a kind of canyon of shadow formed by the tall walls of our two ships' hulls. The hulls hem them in and force a near-defile that stretches endlessly. A lot of the Dreamward's passengers turn and crane to marvel at the size of what's just disgorged them. Captain Video, now inclined way over the starboard rail so that only the toes of his sandals are still touching deck, is filming them as they

83 A further self-esteem-lowerer is how bored all the locals look when they're dealing with U.S. tourists. We bore them. Boring somebody seems way worse than offending or disgusting him.
look up at us, and more than a few of the Dreamwardites way below lift
their own camcorders and point them up our way in a kind of almost
defensive or retaliatory gesture, and for just a moment they and C.V.
compose a tableau that looks almost classically postmodern.

Because the Dreamward is lined up right next to us, almost porthole
to porthole, with its Deck 12's port rail right up flush against our Deck
12's starboard rail, the Dreamward's semi-agoraphobic shore-shunners
and I can stand at the rails and sort of check each other out in the
sideways way of two muscle cars lined up at a stoplight. We can sort of
see how we stack up against each other. I can see the Dreamward's rail
leaners looking the Nadir up and down. Their faces are shiny with high-
SPF sunblock. The Dreamward is blindingly white, white to a degree that
seems somehow aggressive and makes the Nadir's own white look more
like buff or cream. The Dreamward's snout is a little more tapered and
aerodynamic-looking than our snout, and its trim is a kind of fluorescent
peach, and the beach umbrellas around its Deck 11 pools are also peach —
our beach umbrellas are light orange, which has always seemed odd given the white-and-navy motif of the Nadir, and now seems to me
ad hoc and shabby. The Dreamward has more pools on Deck 11 than we
do, plus what looks like a whole other additional pool behind glass
on Deck 6; and their pools' blue is that distinctive chlorine-blue — the
Nadir's two small pools are both seawater and kind of icky, even though
the pools in the Celebrity brochure had sneakily had that electric-blue
look of good old chlorine.

On all its decks, all the way down, the Dreamward's cabins have
little white balconies for private open-air sea-gazing. Its Deck 12 has a
full-court basketball setup with color-coordinated nets and backboards
as white as communion wafers. I notice that each of the myriad towel
carts on the Dreamward's Deck 12 is manned by its very own Towel Guy,
and that their Towel Guys are ruddily Nordic and nonspectral and have
nothing resembling withering neutrality or boredom about their mien.

84 (which on scale of these ships means something around 100 m)

85 On all 7NC Megaships, Deck 12 forms a kind of mezzanineish ellipse over Deck 11, which is always about half open-air (11 is) and always has pools surrounded by plastic/Plexiglass walls.

The point is that, standing here next to Captain Video, looking, I
start to feel a covetous and almost pruri ent envy of the Dreamward.
I imagine its interior to be cleaner than ours, larger, more lavishly
appointed. I imagine the Dreamward's food being even more varied
and punctiliously prepared, the ship's Gift Shop less expensive and its
casino less depressing and its stage entertainment less cheesy and its
pillow mints bigger. The little private balconies outside the Dreamward's
cabin, in particular, seem just way superior to a porthole of bank-
teller glass, and suddenly private balconies seem absolutely crucial to the
whole 7NC Megaship experience I'm expected to try to convey.

I spend several minutes fantasizing about what the bathrooms might
be like on the good old Dreamward. I imagine its crew quarters being
open for anybody at all to come down and moo o ut and shoot the
shit, and the Dreamward's crew being open and genuinely friendly, with
M.A.s in English and whole leatherbound and neatly printed diaries
full of nautical lore and wry engaging 7NC observations. I imagine
the Dreamward's Hotel Manager to be an avuncular Norwegian with
a rag sweater and a soothing odor of Borkum Rif about him, a guy
w/o sunglasses or hauteur who throws open the pressurized doors to
the Dreamward's Bridge and galley and Vacuum Sewage System
personally takes me through, offering pithy and quotable answers to
questions before I've even asked them. I experience a sudden rush of
grievance against Harper's magazine for booking me on the m.v. Nadir
instead of the Dreamward. I calculate by eye the breadth of the gap I'd
have to jump or rappel to switch to the Dreamward, and I mentally
sketch out the paragraphs that would detail such a bold and William T.
Vollmannish bit of journalistic derring-do as literally jumping from one
7NC Megaship to another.

This saturnine line of thinking proceeds as the clouds overhead
start to coalesce and the sky takes on its regular cloudy P.M. weight.
I am suffering here from a delusion, and I know it's a delusion, this
envy of another ship, and still it's painful. It's also representative of
a psychological syndrome that I notice has gotten steadily worse as
the Cruise wears on, a mental list of dissatisfactions and grievances
that started picayune but has quickly become nearly despair-grade. I
know that the syndrome's cause is not simply the contempt bred of a
week's familiarity with the poor old Nadir, and that the source of all
the dissatisfactions isn’t the Nadir at all but rather plain old humanly conscious me, or, more precisely, that ur-American part of me that craves and responds to pampering and passive pleasure: the Dissatisfied Infant part of me, the part that always and indiscriminately WANTS. Hence this syndrome by which, for example, just four days ago I experienced such embarrassment over the perceived self-indulgence of ordering even more gratis food from Cabin Service that I littered the bed with fake evidence of hard work and missed meals, whereas by last night I find myself looking at my watch in real annoyance after fifteen minutes and wondering where the fuck is that Cabin Service guy with the tray already. And by now I notice how the tray’s sandwiches are kind of small, and how the wedge of dill pickle always soaks into the starboard crust of the bread, and how the damn Port hallway is too narrow to really let me put the used Cabin Service tray outside 1009’s door at night when I’m done eating, so that the tray sits in the cabin all night and in the A.M. adulterates the olfactory sterility of 1009 with a smell of rancid horseradish, and how this seems, by the Luxury Cruise’s fifth day, deeply dissatisfying.

Death and Conroy notwithstanding, we’re maybe now in a position to appreciate the lies at the dark heart of Celebrity’s brochure. For this — the promise to sate the part of me that always and only WANTS — is the central fantasy the brochure is selling. The thing to notice is that the real fantasy here isn’t that this promise will be kept, but that such a promise is keepable at all. This is a big one, this lie.87 And of course I want to believe it — fuck the Buddha — I want to believe that maybe this Ultimate Fantasy Vacation will be enough pampering, that this time the luxury and pleasure will be so completely and faultlessly administered that my Infantile part will be sated.88

86 (I hate dill pickles, and C.S. churlishly refuses to substitute gherkins or butter chips)
87 It may well be the Big One, come to think of it.
88 The fantasy they’re selling is the whole reason why all the subjects in all the brochures’ photos have facial expressions that are at once orgasmic and oddly slack: these expressions are the facial equivalent of going “Aaaahhhhh,” and the sound is not just that of somebody’s Infantile part exulting in finally getting the total pampering it’s always wanted but also that of the relief all the other parts of that person feel when the Infantile part finally shuts up.

But the Infantile part of me is insatiable — in fact its whole essence or dasein or whatever lies in its a priori insatiability. In response to any environment of extraordinary gratification and pampering, the Insatiable Infant part of me will simply adjust its desires upward until it once again levels out at its homeostasis of terrible dissatisfaction. And sure enough, on the Nadir itself, after a few days of delight and then adjustment, the Pamper-swaddled part of me that WANTS is now back, and with a vengeance. By Ives Wednesday I’m acutely conscious of the fact that the AC vent in my cabin hisses (loudly), and that though I can turn off the reggae Muzak coming out of the speaker in the cabin I cannot turn off the even louder ceiling-speaker out in the 10-Port hall. By now I notice that when Table 64’s towering busboy uses his crumb-scoop to clear crumbs off the tablecloth between courses he never seems to get quite all the crumbs. By now the nighttime rattle of my Wondercloset’s one-off-plumb drawer sounds like a jackhammer. Movoureen of the high seas or no, when Petra makes my bed not all the hospital corners are at exactly the same angle. My desk/vanity has a small but uncannily labial-looking hairline crack in the bevel of its top’s right side, which crack I’ve come to hate because I can’t help looking right at it when I open my eyes in bed in the morning. Most of the nightly Celebrity Showtime live entertainment in the Celebrity Show Lounge is so bad it’s embarrassing, and there’s a repellant hotel-art-type seascape on the aft wall of 1009 that’s bolted to the wall and can’t be removed or turned around, and Caswell-Massey Conditioning Shampoo turns out to be harder to rinse all the way out than most other shampoos, and the ice sculptures at the Midnight Buffet sometimes look hurriedly carved, and the vegetable that comes with my entrée is continually overcooked, and it’s impossible to get really numbingly cold water out of 1009’s bathroom tap.

I’m standing here on Deck 12 looking at a Dreamward that I bet has cold water that’d turn your knuckles blue, and, like Frank Conroy, part of me realizes that I haven’t washed a dish or tapped my foot in line behind somebody with multiple coupons at a supermarket checkout in a week; and yet instead of feeling refreshed and renewed I’m anticipating just how totally stressful and demanding and unpleasant regular landlocked adult life is going to be now that even just the premature removal of a towel by a sepulchral crewman seems like an
assault on my basic rights, and plus now the sluggishness of the Aft elevator is an outrage, and the absence of 22.5-lb dumbbells in the Olympic Health Club's dumbbell rack is a personal affront. And now as I'm getting ready to go down to lunch I'm mentally drafting a really mordant footnote on my single biggest peeve about the Nadir: soda-pop is not free, not even at dinner: you have to order a Mr. Pibb from the 5☆C.R.'s maddeningly E.S.L.-hampered cocktail waitress just like it was a fucking Slippery Nipple, and then you have to sign for it right there at the table, and they charge you — and they don't even have Mr. Pibb; they foist Dr Pepper on you with a maddeningly unapologetic shrug when any fool knows Dr Pepper is no substitute for Mr. Pibb, and it's an absolute goddamned travesty, or at any rate extremely dissatisfying indeed. 89

89 This right here is not the mordant footnote projected supra, but the soda-pop issue bears directly on what was for me one of the true mysteries of this cruise, viz. how Celebrity makes a profit on Luxury 7NCs. If you accept Fielding's Worldwide Cruises 1995's per diem on the Nadir of about $275.00 a head, then you consider that the m.v. Nadir itself cost Celebrity Cruises $250 million to build in 1992, and that it's got 600 employees of whom at least the upper echelons have got to be making serious money (the whole Greek contingent had the unmistakable set of mouth that goes with salaries in six figures), plus simply hallucious fuel costs — plus port taxes and insurance and safety equipment and space-age navigational and communications gear and a computerized tiller and state-of-the-art maritime sewage — and then start factoring in the luxury stuff, the top-shelf decor and brass ceiling-tile, chandeliers, a good three dozen people aboard as nothing more than twice-a-week stage entertainers, plus then the professional Head Chef and the lobster and Etruscan truffles and the cornucopic fresh fruit and the imported pillow mints ... then, even playing it very conservative, you cannot get the math to add up. There doesn't look to be any way Celebrity can be coming out ahead financially. And yet the sheer number of different Megalines offering 7NCs constitutes reliable evidence that Luxury Cruises must be very profitable indeed. Again, Celebrity's PR lady Ms. Wiessen was — notwithstanding a phone-voice that was a total pleasure to listen to — not particularly helpful with this mystery:

The answer to their affordability, how they offer such a great product, is really based on their management. They really are in touch with all the details of what's important to the public, and they pay a lot of attention to those details.

Libation revenues provide part of the real answer, it turns out. It's a little bit like the microeconomics of movie theaters. When you hear how much of the gate they have to kick back to films' distributors, you can't figure out how theaters stay in business.

Every night, the 10-Port cabin steward, Petra, when she turns down your bed, leaves on your pillow — along with the day's last mint and Celebrity's printed card wishing you sweet dreams in six languages — the next day's Nadir Daily, a phatic little four-page ersatz newspaper printed on white vellum in a navy-blue font. The ND has historical nuggets on upcoming ports, pitches for Organized Shore
Excursions and specials in the Gift Shop, and stern stuff in boxes with malaprop-headlines like QUARANTINES ON TRANSIT OF FOOD and MISUSE OF DRUG ACTS 1972.

Right now it's Thursday 16 March, 0710h., and I'm alone at the 5☆C.R.'s Early Seating Breakfast, Table 64's waiter and towering busboy hovering nearby. We've rounded the final turn and are on our return trajectory toward Key West, and today is one of the week's two "At-Sea" days when shipboard activities are at their densest and most organized; and this is the day I've picked to use the Nadir Daily as a Baedeker as I leave Cabin 1009 for a period well in excess of half an hour and plunge headfirst into the recreational fray and keep a precise and detailed log of some really representative experiences as together now we go In Quest of Managed Fun. So everything that follows from here on out is from this day's p.&d. experiential log:

0645h.: A triple ding from the speakers in cabin and halls and then a cool female voice says Good Morning, the date, the weather, etc. She says it in a gentle accented English, repeats it in an Alsatian-sounding French, then again in German. She can make even German sound lush and postcoital. Hers is not the same PA voice as at Pier 21, but it's got the exact same quality of sounding the way expensive perfume smells.

0650-0705h.: Shower, play with Alisco Sirocco hairdryer & exhaust fan & hair in bathroom mirror, read from Daily Meditations for the Semiphobically Challenged, go over Nadir Daily with yellow HiLiter pen.

0708-0730h.: E.S. Breakfast at Table 64 in 5☆C.R. Last night everybody announced intentions to sleep through breakfast and grab some scones or something at the Windsurf Cafe later. So I'm alone at Table 64, which is large and round and right up next to a starboard window.

Table 64's waiter's name is, as mentioned before, Tibor. Mentally I refer to him as "The Tibster," but never out loud. Tibor has dismantled my artichokes and my lobsters and taught me that extra-well-done is not the only way meat can be palatable. We have sort of bonded, I feel. He is 35 and about 5'4" and plump, and his movements have the birdlike economy characteristic of small plump graceful men. Meanwhile, Tibor advises and recommends, but without the hauteur that's always made me hate the gastropedantic waiters in classy restaurants. Tibor is omnipresent without being unctuous or oppressive; he is kind and warm and fun. I sort of love him. His hometown is Budapest and he has a postgraduate degree in Restaurant Management from an unpronounceable Hungarian college. His wife back home is expecting their first child. He is the Head Waiter for Tables 64–67 at all three meals. He can carry three trays w/o precarity and never looks harried or on-the-edge the way most multitalented waiters look. He seems like he cares. His face is at once round and pointy, and rosy. His tus never wrinkles. His hands are soft and pink, and his thumb-joint's skin is un wrinkled, like the thumb-joint of a small child.
Tibor’s cuteness has been compared by the women at Table 64 to that of a button. But I have learned not to let his cuteness fool me. Tibor is a pro. His commitment to personally instantiating the Nadir’s fanatical commitment to excellence is the one thing about which he shows no sense of humor. If you fuck with him in this area he will feel pain and will make no effort to conceal it. See for example the second night, Sunday, at supper: Tibor was circling the table and asking each of us how our entrée was, and we all regarded this as just one of those perfunctory waiter-questions and all perfunctorily smiled and cleared our mouths and said Fine, Fine — and Tibor finally stopped and looked down at us all with a pained expression and changed his timbre slightly so it was clear he was addressing the whole table: “Please. I ask each: is excellent? Please. If excellent, you say, and I am happy. If not excellent, please: do not say excellent. Let me fix. Please.” There was no hauteur or pedantry as he addressed us. He just meant what he said. His expression was babe-naked, and we heard him, and nothing was perfunctory again.

Good old Wojtek, the towering bespectacled Pole, age 22 and at least 6’8”, Table 64’s busboy — in charge of water, bread supply, crumb-removal, and using a big tower of a mill to put pepper on pretty much anything you don’t lean forward and cover with your upper body — good old Wojtek works exclusively with Tibor, and they have an involved minuet of service that’s choreographed down to the last pivot, and they speak quietly to each other in a Slavicized German pidgin you can tell they’ve evolved through countless quiet professional exchanges; and you can tell Wojtek reveres Tibor as much as the rest of us do.

This morning The Tibster wears a red bow tie and smells faintly of sandalwood. Early Seating Breakfast is the best time to be around him, because he’s not very busy and can be initiated into chitchat without looking pained at neglecting his duties. He doesn’t know I’m on the Nadir as a pseudojournalist. I’m not sure why I haven’t told him — somehow I think it might make things hard for him. During E.S.B. chitchat I never ask him anything about Celebrity Cruises or the Nadir,²² not out of deference to Mr. Dermatitis’s pissy injunctions but because I feel like I’d just about die if Tibor got into trouble on my account.

²² (except for precise descriptions of whatever dorsal fins he’s seen)

Tibor’s ambition is someday to return to Budapest³³ for good and with his Nadir-savings open a sort of newspaper-and-beret-type sidewalk café that specializes in something called Cherry Soup. With this in mind, two days from now in Ft. Lauderdale I’m going to tip The Tibster way, way more than the suggested $3.00 U.S./diem,⁴⁴ balancing out total expenses by radically undertipping both the liplessly sinister maître d’ and our sommelier, an unctuously creepy Ceylonese guy the whole table has christened The Velvet Vulture.

0815h.: Catholic Mass is celebrated with Father DeSandre, Location: Rainbow Room, Deck 8.⁹⁵

There’s no chapel per se on the Nadir. The Father sets up a kind of folding credence table in the Rainbow Room, the most aftward of the Fantasy Deck lounges, done in salmon and sere yellow with dados of polished bronze. Genuflecting at sea turns out to be a tricky business. There are about a dozen people here. The Father’s backlit by a big port window, and his homily is mercifully free of nautical puns or references to life being a voyage. The communal beverage is a choice of either wine or Welch’s-brand unsweetened grape juice. Even the Nadir’s daily mass’s communion wafers are unusually yummy, biscuitier than your normal host and with a sweet tinge to the pulp it becomes in your teeth.⁹⁶ Cynical observations about how appropriate it is that a 7NC Luxury Cruise’s daily worship is held in an overdecorated bar seem too easy to take up space on. Just how a diocesan priest gets a 7NC Megacruiser as a parish — whether Celebrity maybe has clerics on retainer, sort of like the army, and they get assigned to different ships in rotation, and whether the R.C. Church gets paid just like the other vendors who provide

³³ (he pronounces the "-pest" part of this "-persht")

⁴⁴ The last night's ND breaks the news about tipping and gives tactful "suggestions" on going rates.

⁹⁵ All boldface stuff is verbatim and sic from today's Nadir Daily.

⁹⁶ If Pepperidge Farm made communion wafers, these would be them.
service and entertainment personnel, etc. — will I am afraid be forever unclear: Father DeSandre explains he has no time after the recessional for professional queries, because of

0900h.: **Wedding Vow Renewal with Father DeSandre.** Same venue, same porta-altar setup. No married couples show up to renew their wedding vows, though. There’s me and Captain Video and maybe a dozen other *Nadirite* sitting around in salmon chairs, and a beverage waitress makes a couple circuits with her visor and pad, and Father DeS. stands patiently in his cassock and white cope till 0920, but no older-type couples appear or step forward to renew. A few of the people in the R.R. sit in proximities and attitudes that show they’re couples, but they sort of apologetically tell the Father they’re not even married; the surprisingly cool and laid back Father DeS.’s invitation to make use of the setup and twin candles and priest w/ sacramentary *Book of Rites* opened to just the right page produces some shy laughter from the couples, but no takers. I don’t know what to make of the W.V.R.’s no-shows in terms of death/despair/pampering/insatiability issues.

0930h.: **The Library is open for check-out of games, cards, and books, Location: Library, Deck 7.**

The *Nadir*’s Library is a little glassed-in salon set obliquely off Deck 7’s Rendez-Vous Lounge. The Library’s all good wood and leather and three-way lamping, an extremely pleasant place, but it’s open only at weird and inconvenient times. Only one wall is even shelved, and most of the books are the sorts of books you see on the coffeetables of older people who live in condominiums near unchallenging golf courses: folio-sized, color-plated, with titles like *Great Villas of Italy* and *Famous Tea Sets of the Modern World,* etc. But it’s a great place to just hang around and moss out, the Library. Plus this is where the chess sets are. This week also features an unbelievably large and involved jigsaw puzzle that sits about half-done on an oak table in the corner, which all sorts of different old people come in and work on in shifts. There’s also a seemingly endless game of contract bridge always going on in the Card Room right next door, and the bridge players’ motionless silhouettes are always there through the frosted glass between Library and C.R. when I’m mossing out and playing with the chess sets.

The *Nadir*’s Library’s got cheapo Parker Brothers chess sets with hollow plastic pieces, which any good chess player has got to like.98 I’m not nearly as good at chess as I am at Ping-Pong, but I’m pretty good. Most of the time on the *Nadir* I play chess with myself (not as dull as it may sound), for I have determined that — no offense — the sorts of people who go on 7NC Megacruises tend not to be very good chess players.

Today, however, is the day I am mated in 23 moves by a nine-year-old girl. Let’s not spend a lot of time on this. The girl’s name is Deirdre. She’s one of very few little kids on board not tucked out of sight in Deck 4’s Daycare Grotto.99 Deirdre’s mom never leaves her in the Grotto but also never leaves her side, and has the lipless and flinty-eyed look of a parent whose kid is preternaturally good at something.

I probably should have seen this and certain other signs of impending humiliation as the kid first comes over as I’m sitting there trying a scenario where both sides of the board deploy a Queen’s Indian and tugs on my sleeve and asks if I’d maybe like to play. She really does tug on my sleeve, and calls me Mister, and her eyes are roughly the size of sandwich plates. In retrospect it occurs to me that this girl was a little *tall* for nine, and worn-looking, slump-shouldered, the way usually only much older girls get — a kind of poor psychic posture. However good she may be at chess, this is not a happy little girl. I don’t suppose that’s germane.

98 Heavy expensive art-carved sets are for dorks.

99 This is something else Mr. Dermatitis declined to let me see, but by all reports the daycare on these Megaships is phenomenal, w/squads of nurturing and hyperkinetic young daycare ladies keeping the kids manically stimulated for up to ten-hour stretches via an endless number of incredibly well-structured activities, so tuckering the kids out that they collapse mutely into bed at 2000h. and leave their parents free to plunge into the ship’s nightlife and Do It All.
Deirdre pulls up a chair and says she usually likes to be black and informs me that in lots of cultures black isn't thanatotic or morb id but is the spiritual equivalent of what white is in the U.S. and that in these other cultures it's white that's morbid. I tell her I already know all that. We start. I push some pawns and Deirdre develops a knight. Deirdre's mom watches the whole game from a standing position behind the kid's seat, motionless except for her eyes. I know within seconds that I despise this mom. She's like some kind of stage-mother of chess. Deirdre seems like an OK type, though — I've played precocious kids before, and at least Deirdre doesn't hoot or smirk. If anything, she seems a little sad that I don't turn out to be more of a stretch for her.

My first inkling of trouble is on the fourth move, when I fianchetto and Deirdre knows what I'm doing is fianchettoing and uses the term correctly, again calling me Mister. The second ominous clue is the way her little hand keeps flailing out to the side of the board after she moves, a sign that she's used to a speed clock. She swoops in with her developed QK and forks my queen on the twelfth move and after that it's only a matter of time. It doesn't really matter. I didn't even start playing chess until my late twenties. On move 17 three desperately old and related-looking people at the jigsaw puzzle table kind of totter over and watch as I hang my rook and the serious carnage starts. It doesn't really matter. Neither Deirdre nor the hideous mom smiles when it's over; I smile enough for everybody. None of us says anything about maybe playing again tomorrow.

0945–1000h.: Back briefly for psychic recharging in good old 1009.E.P., I eat four pieces of some type of fruit that's like a tiny oversweetened tangerine and watch, for the fifth time this week, the Velociraptors-stalk-precocious-children-in-gleaming-institutional-kitchen part of Jurassic Park, noting an unprecedented sympathy for the Velociraptors this time around.

1000–1100h.: Three simultaneous venues of Managed Fun, all aft on Deck 9: Darts Tournament, take aim and hit the bull's-eye; Shuffleboard Shuffle, join your fellow guests for a morning game; Ping Pong Tournament, meet the Cruise Staff at the tables, Prizes to the Winners!

Organized shuffleboard has always filled me with dread. Everything about it suggests infirm senescence and death: it's like it's a game played on the skin of a void and the rasp of the sliding puck is the sound of that skin getting abraded away bit by bit. I also have a morbid but wholly justified fear of darts, stemming from a childhood trauma too involved and hair-raising to discuss here, and as an adult I avoid darts like cholera.

What I'm here for is the Ping-Pong. I am an exceptionally good Ping-Pong player. The ND's use of "Tournament" is euphemistic, though, because there are never any draw sheets or trophies in sight, and no other Nadirs are ever playing. The constant high winds on 9-Aft may account for Ping-Pong's light turnout. Today three tables are set up (well off to the side of the Darts Tournament, which given the level of dart-play over there seems judicious), and the m/v Nadir's very own Ping-Pong Pro (or "3P," as he calls himself) stands cockily by the center table, amusing himself by bouncing a ball off the paddle between his legs and behind his back. He turns when I crack my knuckles. I've come to Ping-Pong three different times already this week, and nobody's ever here except the good old 3P, whose real first name is Winston. He and I are now at the point where we greet each other with the curt nods of old and mutually respected foes.

Below the center table is an enormous box of fresh Ping-Pong balls, and apparently several more of these boxes are in the storage locker behind the Golf-Drive Net, which again seems judicious given the number of balls in each game that get smashed or blown out to sea. They also have a big peg-studded board on the bulkhead's wall with over a dozen different paddles, both the plain-wooden-grip-and-head-
with-thin-skin-of-cheap-pebbly-rubber kind and the fancy-wrapped-grip-and-head-with-thick-mushy-skin-of-unpebbled-rubber kind, all in Celebrity's snazzy white/ navy motif.102

I am, as I believe I may already have stated, an extraordinarily fine Ping-Pong player,103 and it turns out that I am an even finer Ping-Pong player outdoors in tricky tropical winds; and, although Winston is certainly a good enough player to qualify as a 3P on a ship where interest in Ping-Pong is shall we say less than keen, my record against him thus far is eight wins and only one loss, with that one loss being not only a very close loss but also consequent to a number of freakish gusts and a net that Winston himself admitted later may not have been regulation I.T.T.E. height and tension. Winston is under the curious (and false) impression that we’ve got some kind of tacit wager going on whereby if the 3P ever beats me three games out of five he gets my full-color Spiderman hat, which hat he covets and which hat I wouldn’t dream ever of playing serious Ping-Pong without.

Winston only moonlights as a 3P. His primary duty on the Nadir is serving as Official Cruise Deejay in Deck 8’s Scorpio Disco, where every night he stands behind an incredible array of equipment wearing hornrim sunglasses and working both the CD player and the strobes frantically till well after 0200h, which may account for a sluggish and slightly dazed quality to his A.M. Ping-Pong. He is 26 years old and, like much of the Nadir’s Cruise and Guest Relations stuff, is good-looking in the vaguely unreal way soap opera actors and models in Sears catalogues are good-looking. He has big brown Help-Me eyes and a black fade that’s styled into the exact shape of a nineteenth-century blacksmith’s anvil, and he plays Ping-Pong with his thick-skinned paddle’s head down in the chopsticky way of people who’ve received professional instruction.

102 Only the fear of an impromptu Fort Lauderdale Customs search and discovery keeps me from stealing one of these paddles. I confess that I did end up stealing the chamois eyeglass-cleaners from 1009’s bathroom, though maybe you’re meant to take those home anyway — I couldn’t tell whether they fell into the Kleenex category or the towel category.

103 I’ve sure never lost to any prepubescent females in fucking Ping-Pong. I can tell you.

Outside and aft, the Nadir’s engines’ throb is loud and always sounds weirdly lopsided. 3P Winston and I have both reached that level of almost Zen-like Ping-Pong mastery where the game kind of plays us — the lunges and pirouettes and smashies and recoveries are automatic outer instantiations of a kind of intuitive harmony between hand and eye and primal Urge To Kill — in a way that leaves our forebrains unoccupied and capable of idle chitchat as we play:


“Can’t have it.”

“Wicked motherfucking hat. Spiderman be dope.”104

“Sentimental value. Long story behind this hat.”

Insipidness notwithstanding, I’ve probably exchanged more total words with 3P Winston on this 7NC Luxury Cruise than I have with anybody else.105 As with good old Tibor, I don’t probe Winston in any serious journalistic way, although in this case it’s not so much because I fear getting the 3P in trouble as because (nothing against good old Winston personally) he’s not exactly the brightest bulb in the ship’s intellectual chandelier, if you get my drift. E.g. Winston’s favorite witticism when deejaying in the Scorpio Disco is to muff or spoonerize some simple expression and then laugh and slap himself in the head and go “Easy for me to say!” According to Mona and Alice, he’s also unpopular with the younger crowd at the Scorpio Disco because he always wants to play Top-40ish homogenized rap instead of real vintage disco.106

It’s also not necessary to ask Winston much of anything at all, because

104 Winston also sometimes seemed to suffer from the verbal delusion that he was an urban black male; I have no idea what the story is on this or what conclusions to draw from it.

105 This is not counting my interfaces with Petra, which though lengthy and verbose tended of course to be one-sided except for “You are a funny thing, you.”

106 The single most confounding thing about the young and hip cruisers on the Nadir is that they seem truly to love the exact same cheesy disco music that we who were young and hip in the late ’70s loathed and made fun of, boycotting Prom when Donna Summer’s “MacArthur Park” was chosen Official Prom Theme, etc.
he's an incredible chatterbox when he's losing. He's been a student at the U. of South Florida for a rather mysterious seven years, and has taken this year off to “get fucking paid for a change for a while” on the *Nadir*. He claims to have seen all manner of sharks in these waters, but his descriptions don't inspire much real confidence or dread. We're in the middle of our second game and on our fifth ball. Winston says he's had the chance to do some serious ocean-gazing and soul-searching during his off hours these last few months and has decided to return to U.S.F. in Fall '95 and start college more or less all over, this time majoring not in Business Administration but in something he claims is called “Multimediated Production.”

“They have a department in that?”

“It's this interdisciplinarian thing. It's going to be fucking *phat*, Homes. You know. CD-ROM and shit. Smart chips. Digital film and shit.”

I'm up 18–12. “Sport of the future.”

Winston agrees. “It's where it's all going to be at. The Highway. Interactive TV and shit. Virtual Reality. *Interactive Virtual Reality.*”

“I can see it now,” I say. The game's almost over. “The Cruise of the Future. The *Home Cruise*. The Caribbean Luxury Cruise you don't have to leave home for. Strap on the old goggles and electrodes and off you go.”

“Word up.”

“No passports. No seasickness. No wind or sunburn or insipid Cruise staff.” Total Virtual Motionless Stay-At-Home Simulated Pampering.”

“Word.”

107 Interfacing with Winston could be kind of depressing in that the urge to make cruel sport of him was always irresistible, and he never acted offended or even indicated he knew he was being made sport of, and you went away afterward feeling like you'd just stolen coins from a blind man's cup or something.

108 Choosing from among 24 options, they can run on all four, or one Papa and one Son, or two Sons, etc. My sense is that running on Sons instead of Papas is kind of like switching from warp drive to impulse power.

109 The *Nadir* has a Captain, a Staff Captain, and four Chief Officers. Captain Nico is actually one of these Chief Officers; I do not know why he's called Captain Nico.

110 Something else I've learned on this Luxury Cruise is that no man can ever look any better than he looks in the white full-dress uniform of a naval officer. Women of all ages and estrogen-levels swooned, sighed, wobbled, lash-batted, growled, and hubba'd when one of these navelly resplendent Greek officers went by, a phenomenon that I don't imagine helped the Greeks' humility bit.

111 The Fleet Bar was also the site of *Elegant Tea Time* later that same day, where elderly female passengers wore long white stripper-gloves and pinkies protruded from cups, and where among my breaches of *Elegant Tea Time* etiquette apparently were: (a) imagining people would be amused by the tuxedo-design T-shirt I wore because I hadn't taken seriously the Celebrity brochure's instruction to bring a real tux on the Cruise; (b) imagining the elderly ladies at my table would be charmed by the off-color
in stainless steel, and so abundantly fenestrated that the sunlight makes
Captain Nico's illustrative slides look ghostly and vague. Captain Nico
wears Ray-Bans but w/o a fluorescent cord. Thursday 16 March is also the
day my paranoia about Mr. Dermatitus's contriving somehow to jettison
me from the Nadir via Cabin 1009's vacuum toilet is at its emotional
zenith, and I've decided in advance to keep a real low journalistic profile
at this event. I ask a total of just one little innocuous question, right at
the start, and Captain Nico responds with a witticism —

"How do we start engines? Not with the key of ignition, I can tell
you!"

— that gets a large and rather unkind laugh from the crowd.

It turns out that the long-mysterious "m.v." in "m.v. Nadir" stands
for "motorized vessel." The m.v. Nadir cost $250,310,000 U.S. to build.
It was christened in Papenburg FRG in 10/92 with a bottle of ouzo
instead of champagne. The Nadir's three onboard generators produce
9.9 megawatts of power. The ship's Bridge turns out to be what lies
behind the very intriguing triple-locked bulkhead near the aft towel
cart on Deck 11. The Bridge is "where the equipments are — radars,
indication of weathers and all these things."

Rorschach jokes I made about the rather obscure shapes the linen napkins at each place
were origami-folded into; (c) imagining these same ladies might be interested to learn
what sorts of things have to be done to a goose over its lifetime in order to produce
pâté-grade liver; (d) putting a 3-ounce mass of what looked like glossy black bucket shot
on a big white cracker and then putting the whole cracker in my mouth; (e) assuming
one second thereafter a facial expression I'm told was, under even the most charitable
interpretation, inelegant; (f) trying to respond with a full mouth when an elderly lady
across the table with a pince-nez and buff-colored glasses and lipstick on her right inci-
isor told me this was Beluga caviar, resulting in (f1) the expulsion of several crumbs
and what appeared to be a large black bubble and (f2) the distorted production of a
word that I was told sounded to the entire table like a genital expletive; (g) trying to spit
the whole indescribable nauseous glob into a flimsy paper napkin instead of one of
the plentiful and sturdier linen napkins, with results I'd prefer not to describe in any
more detail than as unfortunate; and (h) concurring, when the little kid (in a bow tie
and [no kidding] nylon shorts) seated next to me pronounced Beluga caviar "blucky,
with a spontaneous and unconsidered expression that was, indeed and unmistakably,
a genital expletive.

Let us draw the curtain of charity over the rest of that particular bit of Managed
Fun. This will, at any rate, explain the 1600h.–1700h. lacuna in today's p.&d. log.

Two years of sedulous postgraduate study is required of officer-
wannabes just to get a handle on the navigational math involved; "also
there is much learning for the computers."

Of the 40 or so Nadirites at this lecture, the total number of
women is: 0. Captain Video is here, of course, Celebrating the Moment
from a camcorder crouch on the Fleet Bar's steel bartop; he's wearing
a nylon warm-up suit of fluorescent maroon and purple that makes
him look like a huge macaw, and his knees crackle whenever he shifts
position and rehunches. By this time Captain Video's really getting on
my nerves.

A deeply sunburned man next to me is taking notes with a Mont
Blanc pen in a leatherbound notebook with ENGLER embossed on it.

Just one moment of foresight on the way from Ping-Pong to
Fleet Bar would have prevented my sitting here trying to take notes on
paper napkins with a big felt-tip HiLiter. The Nadir's officers have their
quarters, mess, and a private bar on Deck 3, it turns out. "In the Bridge
also we have different compass to see where we are going. The ship's
four patro-filial turbines cannot ever be turned off except in drydock.
What they do to deactivate an engine is simply disengage its propeller. It
turns out that parallel parking a semi on LSD doesn't even come close
to what Captain G. Panagiotakis experiences when he docks the m.v.
Nadir. The Engler man next to me is drinking a $5.50 Slippery Nipple,
which comes with not one but two umbrellas in it. The rest of the Nadir's
crew's quarters are on Deck 2, which also houses the ship's laundry and
"the areas of processing of garbage and wastes." Like all MegaCruisers,
the Nadir needs no tugboat in port; this is because it's got "the sternal
thrusters and bow thrusters."113

The lecture's audience consists of bald solid-wristed men over
50 who all look like the kind of guy who rises to CEO a company

112 All week the Englerites have been a fascinating subcultural study in their own
right — moving only in herds and having their own special Organized Shore Excursions and
constantly reserving big party-rooms with velvet ropes and burly guys
standing by them with their arms crossed checking credentials — but there hasn't been
room in this essay to go into any serious Englerology.

113 (not — mercifully — "bow thrusters")
of that company’s engineering dept., instead of some fancy MBA program. A number of them are clearly Navy veterans or yachtsmen or something. They all compose a very knowledgeable audience and ask involved questions about the bore and stroke of the engines, the management of multiradial torque, the precise distinctions between a C-Class Captain and a B-Class Captain. My attempts at technical notes are bleeding out into the paper napkins until the yellow letters are all ballooned and goofy like subway graffiti. The male 7NC cruisers all want to know stuff about the hydrodynamics of midship stabilizers. They’re all the kind of men who look like they’re smoking cigars even when they’re not smoking cigars. Everybody’s complexion is hectic from sun and salt spray and a surfeit of Slippery Nipples. 21.4 knots is a 7NC Megaship’s maximum possible cruising speed. There’s no way I’m going to raise my hand in this kind of crowd and ask what a knot is.

Several un reproduceable questions concern the ship’s system of satellite navigation. Captain Nico explains that the Nadir subscribes to something called GPS: “This Global Positioning System is using the satellites above to know the position at all times, which gives this data to the computer.” It emerges that when we’re not negotiating ports and piers, a kind of computerized Autocaptain pilots the ship. There’s no actual “tiller” or “con” anymore, the sense I get; there’s certainly no protrusive-spoked wooden captain’s wheel like these that line the walls of the jaunty Fleet Bar, each captain’s wheel centered with thole pins that hold up a small and verdant fern.

1150h.: There’s never a chance to feel actual physical hunger on a Luxury Cruise, but when you’ve gotten accustomed to feeding seven or eight times a day, a certain foamy emptiness in the gut always lets you know when it’s time to feed again.

Among the Nadirites, only the radically old and formalphilialacal hit Luncheon at the 5☆C.R., where you can’t wear swim trunks or a floppy hat. The really happening place for lunch is the buffet at the Windsurf Cafe off the pools and plasticene grotto on Deck 11. Just inside both sets of the Windsurf’s automatic doors, in two big bins whose sides are decorated to look like coconut skin, are cornucopiae of fresh fruit presided over by ice sculptures of a madonna and a whale. The crowds’ flow is skillfully directed along several different vectors so that delays are minimal, and the experience of waiting to feed in the Windsurf Cafe is not as bovine as lots of other 7NC experiences.

Eating in the Windsurf Cafe, where things are out in the open and not brought in from behind a mysterious swinging door, makes it even clearer that everything ingestible on the Nadir is designed to be absolutely top-of-the-line: the tea isn’t Lipton but Sir Thomas Lipton in a classy individual vacuum packet of buff-colored foil; the lunch meat is the really good fat- and gristle-free kind that gentiles usually have to crash kosher delis to get; the mustard is something even fancier-tasting than Grey Poupon that I keep forgetting to write down the brand of. And the Windsurf Cafe’s coffee — which bubbles merrily from spigots in big brushed-steel dispensers — the coffee is, quite simply, the kind of coffee you marry somebody for being able to make. I normally have a firm and neurologically imperative one-cup limit on coffee, but the Windsurf’s coffee is so good, and the job of deciphering the big

116 As God is my witness no more fruit ever again in my whole life.

117 And it’s just coffee qua coffee — it’s not Blue Mountain Hazlenut Half-Caf or Sudanese Vanilla With Special Chicory Enzymes or any of that bushwa. The Nadir’s is a level-headed approach to coffee that I hereby salute.
yellow Rorschachian blobs of my Navigation Lecture notes so taxing, 
that on this day I exceed my limit, by rather a lot, which may help 
explain why the next few hours of this log get kind of kaleidoscopic and 
unfocused.

1240h.: I seem to be out on 9-Aft hitting golf balls off an Astroturf square 
into a dense-mesh nylon net that balloons impressively out toward the 
sea when a golf ball hits it. Thanatotic shuffleboard continues over to 
starboard; no sign of 3P or any Ping-Pong players or any paddles left 
behind; ominous little holes in deck, bulkhead, railing, and even the 
Astroturf square testify to my wisdom in having steered way clear of the 
A.M. Darts Tourney.

1314h.: I am now seated back in Deck 8’s Rainbow Room watching 
“Ernst,” the Nadir’s mysterious and ubiquitous Art Auctioneer, mediate spirited bidding for a signed Leroy Neiman print. Let me iterate 
this. Bidding is spirited and fast approaching four figures for a signed 
Leroy Neiman print — not a signed Leroy Neiman, a signed Leroy Neiman print.

1330h.: Poolside Shenanigans! Join Cruise Director Scott Peterson and Staff for some crazy antics and the Men’s Best Legs Contest judged by all the ladies at poolside! 
Starting to feel the first unpleasant symptoms of caffeine toxicity, 
hair tucked at staff suggestion into a complimentary Celebrity Cruises swimcap, I take full and active part in the prenominate Shenanigans, 
which consist mostly of a tourney-style contest where gals in the Gal division and then guys in the Guy division have to slide out on a plastic telephone pole slathered with Vaseline and face off against 
another gal/guy and try to knock each other off the pole and into 
the pool’s nauseous brine by hitting each other with pillowcases filled 
with balloons. I make it through two rounds and then am knocked off 
by a hulking and hairy-shouldered Milwaukee newlywed who actually hits me with his fist — which as people start to lose their balance and compensate by leaning far forward can happen — knocking my swimcap almost clear off my head and toppling me over hard to 
starboard into a pool that’s not only got a really high Na-content but is also now covered with a shiny and full-spectrum scum of Vaseline, and I emerge so icky and befouled and cross-eyed from the guy’s right hook that I blow what should have been a very legitimate shot at the title in the Men’s Best Legs Contest, in which I end up placing third but am told later I would have won the whole thing except for the scowl, swollen and strabismic left eye, and askew swimcap that formed a contextual backdrop too downright goofy to let the full force of my gams’ shapeliness come through to the judges.

1410h.: I seem now to be at the daily Arts & Crafts seminar in some sort of back room of the Windsurf Cafe, and aside from noting that 
I seem to be the only male here under 70 and that the project under construction on the table before me involves Popsicle sticks and crepe 
and a type of glue too runny and instant-adhesive to get my trembling overcaffeinated hands anywhere near, I have absolutely no fucking idea what’s going on. 1415h.: In the public loo off the elevators on Deck 11-
Fore, which has four urinals and three commodes, all Vacuum-Suction, 
which if activated one after the other in rapid succession produce a cumulative sound that is exactly like the climactic D♭–G♮ melisma

118 One of very few human beings I’ve ever seen who is both blond and murine-looking, Ernst today is wearing white loafers, green slacks, and a flared sportcoat whose pink I swear can be described only as menstrual.

120 This is what I did, leaned too far forward and into the guy’s fist that was clutching the hem of his pillowcase, which is why I didn’t cry Foul, even though the vision in my right eye still drifts in and out of focus even back here on land a week later.
at the end of the 1983 Vienna Boys Choir's seminal recording of the mediavely lugubrious *Tenebrae Factae Sunt*. 1420h: And now I'm in Deck 12's Olympic Health Club, in the back area, the part that's owned by Steiner of London, 121 where the same creamy-faced French women who'd worked 3/11's crowd at Pier 21 now all hang out, and I'm asking to be allowed to watch one of the "Phytomer/IONithermie Combination Treatment De-Toxifying Inch Loss Treatments" 122 that some of the heftier ladies on board have been raving about, and I am being told that it's not really a spectator-type thing, that there's nakedness involved, and that if I want to see a P.L.C.T.D-T.I.T. it's going to have to be as the subject of one; and between the quoted price of the treatment and the sensuous recall of the smell of my own singed nostril hair in Chem. 205 in 1983, I opt to forfeit this bit of managed pampering. If you back off from something really big, the creamy ladies then try to sell you on a facial, which they say "a great large number" of male *Nadirrites* have pampered themselves with this week, but I also decline the facial, figuring that at this point in the week the procedure for me would consist mostly in exfoliating half-peeled skin. 1425h.: Now I'm in the small public loo of the Olympic Health Club, a one-holer notable only because O. Newton-John's "Let's Get Physical" plays on an apparently unending loop out of the overhead speaker. I'll go ahead and admit that I have, this week, come in a couple times between UV bombardments and pumped a little iron here in the *Nadir* Olympic Health Club. Except in the O.H.C. it's more like pumping ultrarefinied titanium alloy: all the weights are polished stainless steel, and the place is one of these clubs with mirrors on all four walls that force you into displays of public self-scrutiny that are as excruciating as they are irresistible, and there are huge and insectile-looking pieces of machinery that mimic the aerobic demands of staircases and rowboats and racing bikes and improperly waxed cross-country skies, etc., complete with heart-monitor electrodes and radio headphones; and on these machines there are people in spandex whom you really want to take aside and advise in the most tactful and loving way not to wear spandex.

1430h.: We're back down in the good old Rainbow Room for *Behind the Scenes — Meet your Cruise Director Scott Peterson and find out what it's really like to work on a Cruise Ship!*

Scott Peterson is a deeply tan 39-year-old male with tall rigid hair, a constant high-watt smile, an escargot mustache, and a gleaming Rolex — basically the sort of guy who looks entirely at home in sockless white loafers and a mint-green knit shirt from Lacoste. He is also one of my least favorite Celebrity Cruises employees, though with Scott Peterson it's a case of mildly enjoyable annoyance rather than the terrified loathing I feel for Mr. Dermatitis.

The very best way to describe Scott Peterson's demeanor is that it looks like he's constantly posing for a photograph nobody is taking. 123 He mounts the Rainbow Room's low brass dais and reverses his chair and sits like a cabaret singer and begins to hold forth. There are maybe 50 people attending, and I have to admit that some of them seem

121 (also in the ND known as Steiner Salons and Spas at Sea)

122 So you can see why nobody with a nervous system would want to miss watching one of these, some hard data from the Steiner brochure:

**IONITHERMIE — HOW DOES IT WORK?** Firstly you will be measured in selected areas. The skin is marked and the readings are recorded on your program. Different creams, gels and ampoules are applied. These contain extracts effective in breaking down and emulsifying fat. Electrodes using faradism and galvanism are placed in position and a warm blue clay covers the full area. We are now ready to start your treatment. The galvanism accelerates the products into your skin, and the faradism exercises your muscles. 122a The cellullite or 'lumpy fat,' which is so common amongst women, is emulsified by the treatment, making it easier to drain the toxins from the body and disperse them, giving your skin a smoother appearance.

122a And, as somebody who once brushed up against a college chemistry lab's live induction coil and had subsequently to be pried off the thing with a wooden mop handle, I can personally vouch for the convulsive-exercise benefit of faradic current.

123 He's also a bit like those small-town politicians and police chiefs who go to shameless lengths to get mentioned in the local newspaper. Scott Peterson's name appears in each day's *Nadir Daily* over a dozen times: "Backgammon Tournament with your Cruise Director Scott Peterson"; "The World Goes Round" with Jane McDonald,
to like Scott Peterson a lot, and really do enjoy his talk, a talk that, not surprisingly, turns out to be more about what it's like to be Scott Peterson than what it's like to work on the good old *Nadir*. Topics covered include where and under what circumstances Scott Peterson grew up, how Scott Peterson got interested in cruise ships, how Scott Peterson and his college roommate got their first jobs together on a cruise ship, some hilarious booboo's in Scott Peterson’s first months on the job, and every celebrity Scott Peterson has personally met and shaken the hand of, how much Scott Peterson loves the people he gets to meet working on a cruise ship, how much Scott Peterson loves just working on a cruise ship in general, how Scott Peterson met the future Mrs. Scott Peterson working on a cruise ship, and how Mrs. Scott Peterson now works on a different cruise ship and how challenging it is to maintain an intimate relationship as warm and in all respects wonderful as that of Mr. and Mrs. Scott Peterson when you (i.e., Mr. and Mrs. Scott Peterson) work on different cruise ships and lay eyes on each other only about every sixth week, except how but now Scott Peterson’s tickled to be able to announce that Mrs. Scott Peterson happens to be on a well-earned vacation and is a rare treat here this week cruising on the m.v. *Nadir* with him, Scott Peterson, and is as a matter of fact right here with us in the audience today, and wouldn’t Mrs. S.P. like to stand up and take a bow.

I swear I am not exaggerating: this occasion is a real two-handed head-clutcher, awesome in its ickiness. But now, just as I need to leave in order not to be late for 1500h.'s much-anticipated sketshooting, Scott Peterson starts to relate an anecdote that engages my various on-board dreads and fascinations enough for me to stay and try to write down. Scott Peterson tells us how his wife, Mrs. Scott Peterson, was in the shower in the Mr. and Mrs. Scott Peterson Suite on Deck 3 of the *Nadir* the other night when — one hand goes up in the gesture of someone searching for just the right delicate term — when nature

called. So Mrs. Scott Peterson apparently gets out of the shower still wet and sits down on Scott Peterson's stateroom's bathroom's commode. Scott Peterson, in a narrative aside, says how perhaps we've all noticed that the commodes on the m.v. *Nadir* are linked to a state-of-the-art Vacuum Sewage System that happens to generate not a weak or incidental flush-suction. Other *Nadirites* besides just me must fear their toilet, because this gets a big jagged tension-related laugh. Mrs. Scott Peterson is still lower and lower in her salmon-colored chair. Scott Peterson says but so Mrs. Scott Peterson sits down on the commode, still naked and wet from the shower, and attends to nature's summons, and when she's done she reaches over and hits the commode's Flush mechanism, and Scott Peterson says that, in Mrs. Scott Peterson's wet slick condition, the incredible suction of the *Nadir's* state-of-the-art V.S.S. starts actually *pulling her down through the seat's central hole*, and apparently Mrs. Scott Peterson is just a bit too broad abeam to get sucked down all the way and hurled into some abstract excremental void but rather sticks, wedged, halfway down in the seat's hole, and can't get out, and is of course stark naked, and starts screeching for help (by now the live Mrs. Scott Peterson seems very interested in something going on down underneath her table, and mostly only her left shoulder — leather-brown and stippled with freckles — is visible from where I'm sitting); and Scott Peterson tells us that he, Scott Peterson, hears her and comes rushing into the bathroom from the stateroom where he'd been practicing his Professional Smile

---

124 Mrs. S.P. is an ectomorphic and sort of leather-looked British lady in a big-brimmed sombrero, which sombrero I observe her now taking off and stowing under her brass table as she loses altitude in the chair.

125 At this point in the anecdote I'm absolutely rigid with interest and empathic terror, which will help explain why it's such a huge letdown when this whole anecdote turns out to be nothing but a cheap Catskills-type joke, one that Scott Peterson has clearly been telling once a week for eons (although maybe not with poor Mrs. Scott Peterson actually sitting right there in the audience, and I find myself hopefully imagining all sorts of nuptial vengeance being wreaked on Scott Peterson for embarrassing Mrs. Scott Peterson like that), the dweeb.
in the bedside table’s enormous vanity mirror, comes rushing in and sees what’s happened to Mrs. Scott Peterson and tries to pull her out — her feet kicking pathetically and buttocks and popliteals purpling from the seat’s adhesive pressure — but he can’t pull her out, she’s been wedged in too tight by the horrific V.S.S. suction, and so thanks to some quick thinking Scott Peterson gets on the phone and calls one of the Nadir’s Staff Plumbers, and the Staff Plumber says Yes Sir Mr. Scott Peterson Sir I’m on my way, and Scott Peterson runs back into the bathroom and reports to Mrs. Scott Peterson that professional help is on the way, at which point it only then occurs to Mrs. Scott Peterson that she’s starkers, and that not only are her ectomorphic breasts exposed to full Eurofluorescent view but a portion of her own personal pudendum is clearly visible above the rim of the occlusive seat that holds her fast, and she scruches Britishly at Scott Peterson to for the bloody love of Christ do something to cover her legally betrothed nethers against the swart blue-collar gaze of the impending Staff Plumber, and so Scott Peterson goes and gets Mrs. Scott Peterson’s favorite sun hat, a huge sombrero, in fact the very same huge sombrero Scott Peterson’s beloved wife is wearing right . . . umm, just a couple seconds ago was wearing right here in this very Rainbow Room; and but so via the quick and resourceful thinking of Scott Peterson the sombrero is brought from the state room into the bathroom and placed over Mrs. Scott Peterson’s inebriate concave naked thorax, to cover her private parts. And the Nadir’s Staff Plumber knocks and comes in all overlarge and machine-oil-redolent, w/ tool-belt ajingle, and badly out of breath, and sure enough swart, and he comes into the bathroom and appraises the situation and takes certain complex measurements and performs some calculations and finally tells Mr. Scott Peterson that he thinks he (the Staff Plumber) can get indeed get Mrs. Scott Peterson out of the toilet seat, but that extracting that there Mexican fellow in there with Mrs. S.P. is going to be a whole nother story.

1305h.: I’ve darted just for a second into Deck 7’s Celebrity Show Lounge to catch some of the rehearsals for tomorrow night’s climactic Passenger Talent Show. Two crew-cut and badly burned U. Texas guys are doing a minimally choreographed dance number to a recording of “Shake Your Groove Thing,” Asst. Cruise Director “Dave the Bingo Boy” is coordinating activities from a canvas director’s chair at stage left. A septuagenarian from Halifax VA tells four ethnic jokes and sings “One Day at a Time (Sweet Jesus).” A retired Century 21 Realtor from Idaho does a long drum solo to “Caravan.” The climactic Passenger Talent Show is apparently a 7NC tradition, as was Tuesday night’s Special Costume Party. Some of the Nadirites are deep into this stuff and have brought their own costumes, music, props. A lithic Canadian couple does a tango complete w/ pointy black shoes and an interdental rose. Then the finale of the P.T.S. is apparently going to be four consecutive stand-up comedy routines delivered by very old men. These men totter on one after the other. One has one of those three-footed canes, another a necktie that looks uncannily like a Denver omelette, another an excruciating stutter. What follow are four successive interchangeable routines where the manner and humor are like exhumed time capsules of the 1950s: jokes about how impossible it is to understand women, about how very many men want to play golf and how their wives try to keep them from playing golf, etc. The routines have the same kind of flamboyant unhipness that makes my own grandparents objects of my pity, awe, and embarrassment all at once. One of the senescent quartet refers to his appearance tomorrow night as a “gig.” The one with the tridental cane stops suddenly in the middle of a long joke about skipping
his wife's funeral to play golf and, pointing the cane's tips at Dave the Bingo Boy, demands an immediate and accurate estimate of what the attendance will be for tomorrow night's Passenger Talent Show. Dave the Bingo Boy sort of shrugs and looks at his emery board and says that it's hard to say, that it like varies week to week, whereupon the old guy kind of brandishes his cane and says well it better be substantial because he goddamn well hates playing to an empty house.

1320h.: The ND neglects to mention that the skeet shooting is a competitive Organized Activity. The charge is $1.00 a shot, but you have to purchase your shots in sets of 10, and there's a large and vaguely gun-shaped plaque for the best X/10 score. I arrive at 8-Aft late; a male Nadirite is already shooting skeet, and several other men have formed a line and are waiting to shoot skeet. The Nadir's wake is a big fizzy V way below the aft rail. Two sullen Greek NCOs run the show, and between their English and their earmuffs and the background noise of shotguns — plus the fact that I've never touched any kind of gun before and have only the vaguest idea of which end even to point — negotiations over my late entry and the forwarding of the skeet shooting bill to Harper's are lengthy and involved.

I am seventh and last in line. The other contestants in line refer to the skeet as "traps" or "pigeons," but what they really look like is tiny discusses painted the Day-Glo orange of high-cost huntingwear. The orange, I posit, is for ease of visual tracking, and the color must really help, because the trim bearded guy in aviator glasses currently shooting is perpetrating absolute skeetocide in the air over the ship.

I assume you already know the basic skeet shooting conventions from movies and TV: the lackey at the weird little catapultish device, the bracing and pointing and order to Pull, the combination thuud and kertwang of the catapult, the brisk crack of the weapon, and the midair disintegration of the luckless skeet. Everybody in line with me is male, though there are a number of females in the crowd that's watching the competition from the 9-Aft balcony above and behind us.

From the line, watching, three things are striking: (a) what on TV is a brisk crack is here a whooming roar that apparently is what a shotgun really sounds like; (b) skeet shooting looks comparatively easy, because now the stocky older guy who's replaced the trim bearded guy at the rail is also blowing these fluorescent skeet away one after the other, so that a steady rain of lumpy orange crud is falling into the Nadir's wake; (c) a flying skeet, when shot, undergoes a frighteningly familiar-looking midnight peripeteia — erupting material, changing vector, and plummeting seaward in a distinctive corkscrew way that all eerily recalls footage of the 1986 Challenger disaster.

Striking thing (b) turns out to be an illusion, one not unlike the illusion I'd had about the comparative easiness of golf from watching golf on TV before I'd actually ever tried to play golf. The shooters who precede me do all seem to fire with a kind of casual scorn, and they all get 8/10 or above. But it turns out that, of these six guys, three have military-combat backgrounds, another two are insufferable East-Coast retro-Yuppie brothers who spend weeks every year hunting various fast-flying species with their "Papa" in southern Canada, and the last has not only his own earmuffs, plus his own shotgun in a special crushed-velvet-lined case, but also his own skeet shooting range in his backyard in North Carolina. When it's finally my turn, the earmuffs they give me have somebody else's ear-oil on them and don't fit my head. The gun itself is shockingly heavy and stinks of what I'm told is cordite, small pubic spirals of which are still exiting the barrel from the Korea-vet who preceded me and is tied for first with 10/10. The two Yuppie brothers are the only entrants even near my age; both got scores of 9/10 and are now appraising me coolly from identical prep-school-sloouch positions against the starboard rail. The Greek non-ems seem extremely bored. I am handed the heavy gun and told to "be bracing a hip" against the aft rail and then to place the stock of the weapon against no nor the shoulder of my hold-the-gun arm but the shoulder of my pull-the-trigger arm — my initial error in this latter regard results in a severely distorted aim that makes the Greek by the catapult do a rather neat drop-and-roll.

129 (these skeet made, I posit, from some kind of extra-brittle clay for maximum frag)
130
OK, let's not spend a lot of time drawing this whole incident out. Let me simply say that, yes, my own skeet shooting score was noticeably lower than the other entrants' scores, then simply make a few disinterested observations for the benefit of any novice contemplating shooting skeet from the rolling stern of a 7NC Megaship, and then we'll move on: (1) A certain level of displayed ineptitude with a firearm will cause everyone in the vicinity who knows anything about firearms to converge on you all at the same time with cautions and advice and handy tips passed down from Papa. (2) A lot of the advice in (1) boils down to exhortations to "lead" the launched skeet, but nobody explains whether this means that the gun's barrel should move across the sky with the skeet or should instead lie in a sort of static ambush along some point in the skeet's projected path. (3) TV skeet shooting is not totally unrealistic in that you really are supposed to say "Pull" and the weird little catapultish thing really does produce a kertwanging thud. (4) Whatever a "hair trigger" is, a shotgun does not have one. (5) If you've never fired a gun before, the urge to close your eyes at the precise moment of concussion is, for all practical purposes, irresistible. (6) The well-known "kick" of a fired shotgun is no misnomer: it does indeed feel like being kicked, and hurts, and sends you back several steps with your arms pinwheeling wildly for balance, which, when you're holding a gun, results in mass screaming and ducking and then on the next shot a conspicuous thinning of the crowd in the 9-Aft gallery above.

Finally, (7), know that an unshot skeet's movement against the vast lazuli dome of the open ocean's sky is sun-like — i.e. orange and parabolic and right-to-left — and that its disappearance into the sea is edge-first and splashless and sad.

1600h.–1700h.: Lacuna.

1700h.–1815h.: Shower, personal grooming, third viewing of the heart-tweaking last act of Andre, attempted shower-steam-rehabilitation of wool slacks and funereal sportcoat for tonight's 5☆C.R. supper, which in the ND is designated sartorially "Formal."\textsuperscript{131}

1815h.: The cast and general atmospherics of the 5☆C.R.'s T64 have already been covered. Tonight's supper is exceptional only in its tension. The hideous Mona has, recall, opted to represent today as her birthday to Tibor and the maître d', resulting tonight in bunting and a tall cake and a chair-balloon, plus in Wojtek leading a squad of Slavic busboys in a ceremonial happy-birthday mazurka around Table 64, and in an overall smug glow of satisfaction from Mona (who when The Tibster sets her cake down before her claps her hands once before her face like a small depraved child) and in an expression of blank tolerance from Mona's grandparents that's impossible to read or figure.

Additionally, Trudy's daughter Alice — whose birthday, recall, really is today — has in silent protest against Mona's fraud said nothing all

\textsuperscript{131} Look, I'm not going to spend a lot of your time or my emotional energy on this, but if you are male and you ever do decide to undertake a 7NC Luxury Cruise, be smart and take a piece of advice I did not take: bring Formalwear. And I do not mean just a coat and tie. A coat and tie are appropriate for the two 7NC suppers designated "Informal" (which term apparently comprises some purgatorial category between "Casual" and "Formal"), but for Formal supper you're supposed to wear either a tuxedo or something called a "dinner jacket" that as far as I can see is basically the same as a tuxedo. I, dickhead that I am, decided in advance that the idea of Formalwear on a tropical vacation was absurd, and I steadfastly refused to buy or rent a tux and go through the hassle of trying to figure out how even to pack it. I was both right and wrong: yes, the Formalwear thing is absurd, but since every Nadirite except me went ahead and dressed up in absurd Formalwear on Formal nights, I — having, of course, ironically enough spurned a tux precisely because of absurdity — was the one who ends up looking absurd at Formal 5☆C.R. suppers — painfully absurd in the tuxedo-motif T-shirt I wore on the first Formal night, and then even more painfully absurd on Thursday in the funereal sportcoat and slacks I'd gotten all sweatsy and rumpled on the plane and at Pier 21. No one at Table 64 said anything about the absurd informality of my Formal-supper dress, but it was the sort of deeply tense absence of comment which attends only the grossest and most absurd breaches of social convention, and which after the Elegant Tea Time debacle pushed me right to the very edge of ship-jumping.

Please, let my dickheadedness and humiliation have served some purpose: take my advice and bring Formalwear, no matter how absurd it seems, if you go.
week to Tibor about it — i.e. her own birthday — and sits tonight across from Mona wearing just the sort of face you would expect from one privileged child watching another privileged child receive natal treats and attentions that are by all rights her own.

The result of all this is that stony-faced Alice and I \(^{132}\) have tonight established a deep and high-voltage bond across the table, united in our total disapproval and hatred of Mona, and are engaging in a veritable ballet of coded little stab-, stranglev., and slap-Mona pantomimes for each other's amusement, Alice and I are, which I've got to say is for me a fun and therapeutic anger-outlet after the day's tribulations.

But the supper's tensest development is that Alice's mother and my own new friend Trudy — whose purslane-and-endive salad, rice pilaf, and Tender Medallions of Braised Veal are simply too perfect tonight to engage any of her critical attention, and who I should mention has, all week, made little secret of the fact that she's not exactly crazy about Alice's Serious Boyfriend Patrick, or about his and Alice's Serious Relationship \(^{133}\) — that Trudy notices and misconstrues my and Alice's coded gestures and stifled giggles as signs of some kind of burgeoning romantic connection between us, and Trudy begins yet once again extracting and spreading out her purse's 4x5s of Alice, and relating little tales of Alice's childhood designed to make Alice appear adorable, and talking Patrick down, and in general I have to say acting like a procurress . . . and this would be bad enough, tension-wise (especially when Esther gets into the act), but now poor Alice — who, even though deeply preoccupied with birthday-deprivation and Mona-hatred, is by no means dim or unperceptive — quickly sees what Trudy's doing, and, apparently terrified that I might possibly share her mother's mispercep-

\(^{132}\) (an I who, recall, am reeling from the triple whammy of first ballistic humiliation and then Elegant Tea Time disgrace and now being the only person anywhere in sight in a sweat-crusted wool sportcoat instead of a glossy tux, and am having to order and chug three Dr Peppers in a row to void my mouth of the intransigent aftertaste of Beluga caviar)

\(^{133}\) (which S.R. apparently includes living together on Alice's $$ and "co-owning" Alice's 1992 Saab)

A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again

2045h.

**CELEBRITY SHOWTIME**

**Celebrity Cruises Proudly Presents**

**HYPNOTIST**

**NIGEL ELLERY**

Hosted by your Cruise Director Scott Peterson

PLEASE NOTE: Video and audio taping of all shows is strictly prohibited.
Children, please remain seated with your parents during shows.
No children in the front row.

**CELEBRITY SHOW LOUNGE**

Other Celebrity Showtime headline entertainments this week have included a Vietnamese comedian who juggles chain saws, a husband-and-wife team that specializes in Broadway love medleys, and, most notably, a singing impressionist named Paul Tanner, who made simply an enormous impression on Table 64's Trudy and Esther, and whose impressions of Engelbert Humperdinck, Tom Jones, and particularly Perry Como were apparently so stirring that a second Popular Demand
Encore Performance by Paul Tanner has been hastily scheduled to follow tomorrow night's climactic Passenger Talent Show.\textsuperscript{134}

Stage-hypnotist Nigel Ellery is British\textsuperscript{135} and looks uncannily like 1950s B-movie villain Kevin McCarthy. Introducing him, Cruise Director Scott Peterson informs us that Nigel Ellery "has had the honor of hypnotizing both Queen Elizabeth II and the Dalai Lama."\textsuperscript{136} Nigel Ellery's act combines hypnotic highjinks with a lot of rather standard Borscht Belt patter and audience abuse. And it ends up being such a ridiculously apposite symbolic microcosm of the week's whole 7NC Luxury Cruise experience that it's almost like a setup, some weird form of journalistic pampering.

First off, we learn that not everyone is susceptible to serious hypnosis — Nigel Ellery puts the C.S.L.'s whole 300+ crowd through some simple in-your-seat tests\textsuperscript{137} to determine who in the C.S.L.'s crowd is "suggestibly gifted" enough to participate in the "fun" to come.

\textsuperscript{134} At least guaranteeing the old Nadirite comedian w/ cane a full house, I guess.

\textsuperscript{135} His accent indicates origins in London's East End.

\textsuperscript{136} (Not, one would presume, at the same time.)

\textsuperscript{137} One is: Lace your fingers together and put them in front of your face and then unlace just your index fingers and have them sort of face each other and imagine an irresistible magnetic force drawing them together and see whether the two fingers do indeed as if by magic move slowly and inexorably together until they're pressed together whorl to whorl. From a really scary and unpleasant experience in seventh grade,\textsuperscript{137a} I already know I'm excessively suggestible, and I skip all the little tests, since no force on earth could ever get me up on a hypnotist's stage in front of over 300 entertainment-hungry strangers.

\textsuperscript{137a} (viz. when at a school assembly a local psychologist put us all under a supposedly light state of hypnosis for some "Creative Visualization," and ten minutes later everybody in the auditorium came out of the hypnosis except unfortunately yours truly, and I ended up spending four irreversibly entranced and pupil-dilated hours in the school nurse's office, with the increasingly panicked shrink trying more and more drastic devices for bringing me out of it, and my parents very nearly litigated over the whole episode, and I calmly and matter-of-factly decided to steer well clear of all hypnosis thereafter)

Second, when the six most suitable subjects — all still locked in complex contortions from the in-your-seat tests — are assembled onstage, Nigel Ellery spends a long time reassuring them and us that absolutely nothing will happen that they do not wish to have happen and voluntarily submit to. He then persuades a young lady from Akron that a loud male Hispanic voice is issuing from the left cup of her brassiere. Another lady is induced to smell a horrific odor coming off the man in the chair next to her, a man who himself believes that the seat of his chair periodically heats to 100°C. The other three subjects respectively flamenco, believe they are not just nude but woefully ill-endowed, and are made to shout "Mommy, I want a wee-wee!" whenever Nigel Ellery utters a certain word. The audience laughs very hard at all the right times. And there is something genuinely funny (not to mention symbolically microcosmic) about watching these well-dressed adult cruisers behave strangely for no reason they understand. It is as if the hypnosis enables them to construct fantasies so vivid that the subjects do not even know they are fantasies. As if their heads were no longer their own. Which is of course funny.

Maybe the single most strikingly comprehensive 7NC symbol, though, is Nigel Ellery himself. The hypnotist's boredom and hostility are not only undisguised, they are incorporated kind of ingeniously into the entertainment itself: Ellery's boredom gives him the same air of weary expertise that makes us trust doctors and policemen, and his hostility — via the same kind of phenomenon that makes Don Rickles a big star in Las Vegas, I guess — is what gets the biggest roars of laughter from the lounge's crowd. The guy's stage persona is extremely hostile and mean. He does unkind imitations of people's U.S. accents. He ridicules questions from both the subjects and the audience. He makes his eyes burn Raspushinsky and tells people they're going to wet the bed at exactly 3:00 A.M. or drop trou at the office in exactly two weeks. The spectators — mostly middle-aged, it looks like — rock back and forth with mirth and slap their knee and dab at their eyes with hankies. Each moment of naked ill will from Ellery is followed by an enormous circumoral constriction and a palms-out assurance that he's just kidding and that he loves us and that we are a simply marvelous bunch of human beings who are clearly having a very good time indeed.
For me, at the end of a full day of Managed Fun, Nigel Ellery’s act is not particularly astounding or side-splitting or entertaining — but neither is it depressing or offensive or despair-fraught. What it is is weird. It’s the same sort of weird feeling that having an elusive word on the tip of your tongue evokes. There’s something crucially key about Luxury Cruises in evidence here: being entertained by someone who clearly dislikes you, and feeling that you deserve the dislike at the same time that you resent it. All six subjects are now lined up doing syncopated Rockette kicks, and the show is approaching its climax, Nigel Ellery at the microphone getting us ready for something that will apparently involve furiously flapping arms and the astounding mesmeric illusion of flight. Because my own dangerous susceptibility makes it important that I not follow Ellery’s hypnotic suggestions too closely or get too deeply involved, I find myself, in my comfortable navy-blue seat, going farther and farther away inside my head, sort of Creatively Visualizing a kind of epiphanic Frank Conroy—type moment of my own, pulling mentally back, seeing the hypnotist and subjects and audience and Celebrity Show Lounge and deck and then whole motorized vessel itself with the eyes of someone not aboard, visualizing the m.v. Nadir at night, right at this moment, steaming north at 21.4 knots, with a strong warm west wind pulling the moon backwards through a skein of clouds, hearing muffled laughter and music and Papas’ throb and the hiss of receding wake and seeing, from the perspective of this nighttime sea, the good old Nadir complexly aglow, angelically white, lit up from within, festive, imperial, palatial... yes, this: like a palace; it would look like a kind of floating palace, majestic and terrible, to any poor soul out here on the ocean at night, alone in a dinghy, or not even in a dinghy but simply and terribly floating, a man overboard, treading water, out of sight of all land. This deep and creative visual trance — N. Ellery’s true and accidental gift to me — lasted all through the next day and night, which period I spent entirely in Cabin 1009, in bed, mostly looking out the spotless porthole, with trays and various rinds all around me, feeling maybe a little bit glassy-eyed but mostly good — good to be on the Nadir and good soon to be off, good that I had survived (in a way) being pampered to death (in a way) — and so I stayed in bed. And even though the tranced stasis caused me to miss the final night’s climactic P.T.S. and the Farewell Midnight Buffet and then Saturday’s docking and a chance to have my After photo taken with Captain G. Panagiotakis, subsequent reentry into the adult demands of landlocked real-world life wasn’t nearly as bad as a week of Absolutely Nothing had led me to fear.