



## **ADRIFT**

*©2012 james chandler*

He braced his feet and pushed on the door, feeling the weight as it slowly opened. He wasn't just pushing out but also up against the rising stern as the ship continued to fill with water. Outside he scanned the deck in desperation: an older couple held each other along the railing; two children had climbed atop an empty boat birth, holding onto a flagpole. She was nowhere in sight: not inside, not outside. It was futile. He'd been running through endless labyrinths, stacked one upon another, until he had arrived here, on the upended stern of C deck. Like the slow hand of a clock, the rising angle of the ship continued to tick away his final hours.

Exhausted, Win moved to the railing, looking out beyond the lights into the night sky. Stars were scattered from the horizon upward in a thick spray, as if an ocean swell had burst upon the hull, sending fragments of white into the heavens. Without a moon, the indigo sky offset the stars even more. He took a deep breath of salty air, filling his lungs with the sobering cold.

This silent beauty lay in stark contrast to the pandemonium of the night. Down the deck behind him, Win saw a woman crying as she held her baby aloft. Two men fought over an oar. A crewman blew his whistle and pointed, trying to herd a panicked crowd that was ready to stampede but had no place to go.

It was so astonishing that Win remained motionless, stunned by images of utter chaos. A man came

running around the corner, lost his footing and careened into him. Only Win's hands on the rail prevented him from pitching overboard. Regaining his footing, he surveyed the scene again, trying to find some other interpretation. The steamship was tilting awkwardly into the North Atlantic. What lifeboats there were had been dispatched. The hundreds left behind ran, screamed or wept as they faced – or resisted -- the inevitable. So this was the end of his summer trip abroad.

Great plan, he thought as he recalled the origin of this idea. His father hadn't wanted him to travel. Win had to laugh; that was one argument he should have lost. Stubborn as his father, Win had prevailed with a promise to settle down upon his return. He could still hear Edwin's voice: "Why can't you join the company now? You're out of school. Shipping is a good business. We need you."

"Father, my degree is in General Studies, not International Commerce," Win had protested. "I'm not ready to specialize. Not yet. There's far too much to see, to experience."

"It doesn't matter. A college degree just shows you've got what it takes. You can learn what you need to know. I'll show you." Then, more softly he had said, "I want you by my side in this business, Win. I've wanted it since you were a little boy, when we used to play with boats in the summer. Do you remember the cargo of pine cones we'd move across the lagoon?"

Win released his hold on the railing and let himself slip down to the deck next to a stanchion. He leaned back and lost himself again in the recollection. He didn't want to disappoint his father. Despite their disagreements, he understood the love. He felt it when Edwin talked excitedly about plans for his education and career. Hard as it was to betray those expectations, Win had to take his own path, a separate vector from the family business, even if he didn't know where it would take him.

"It's time for you to focus on something. You can do it, if you try. Focus on your career." Edwin's reference to Win's attention problem was oblique but not without merit. It was hard for Win to sit still; but how could he concentrate on one thing when there was so much to see? As a boy, he couldn't keep his head in a book when he there were creatures crawling underfoot or birds darting just beyond the window.

It wasn't that he lacked discipline or attention. Win felt there was a difference between an exclusive lock on a single subject -- drowning out everything else -- and a determined intention that could still process outside events. Indeed, he had learned some of the most profound things simply by attentively observing his surroundings. The way dew clung to the very tip of each blade of grass led him to the physics of surface tension. The curved arch of a bridge demonstrated the transfer of forces along a solid. Dawn and dusk, the motion of stars and planets taught him the earth's place in the universe. Whyever should he attend to boring details like dates and names from a bygone era? There were just too many other, more compelling things to explore.

Even during this trip, his last freedom before he faced the firing squad of a career decision, he was far more enthralled with the architecture of castles and palaces than the litany of monarchs, plutocrats and tyrants who lived within their walls. However, he did find interest in the lives of inventors, explorers and artists whose work he had recently encountered. DaVinci's talents seemed endless; there was a generalist true to his heart! The painters along the Seine did not have canvases in the galleries; but their work had such an unusual and free expression, like hope and possibility all wrapped up in an image. More understandable and just as impressive

was the pragmatic design of the farmer's irrigation system in Tuscany, sourcing from a hillside stream and coursing through terraces and fields until reunited with its element in the river below.

His attempts to explain this perspective had been entirely unsuccessful, as had his musings about what career could keep his interest. Other classmates had joined banking firms and industrial corporations. Win was not ready to choose; he didn't even have a vague direction in mind. There was so much to learn, and learning just showed him how much he still didn't know.

So he'd decided to get away for a while -- far away from the overbearing house of his youth, and farther still from the impending doom of life in Manhattan shipping offices. He was buying time in hopes of finding his own way.

So this was it then: his separate path, headed straight to the bottom of the Atlantic. At least he'd end it in some aspect of shipping! He shook his head at the stupid joke. This was truly a disaster, and not just for himself: for her, too. Such a woman! Had it really only been hours since they met? Now all he could do was wish her a grand life, filled with joy and children and maybe, once in a while, a memory of this voyage -- of him.

Another flare exploded overhead. How many was that: three? Four? Win had scanned the horizon and seen no lights. Even if he had, no one would reach the ship before she went down. During his hectic run through the decks, a crewman told him the captain had radioed for help, but it would not arrive for untold hours. Survivors in the lifeboats could afford to wait. The silent casualties in the water had already run out of time.

He held back the emotion, closing his eyes to the tears, as he thought again of Julia. What a lively, wonderful woman! It had been a strange way to meet: the flask he dropped from the upper deck almost hit her.

"Excuse me, sir. If you can't hold onto it, don't you think you've had enough?" she called. "For your own good, and mine too, I am hereby confiscating this bottle and its contents."

"Wait," he shouted back. "I'll share it with you. I'll be right down." By the time he'd arrived, the young woman had helped herself.

"I had to be sure it was worth waiting for," she explained. Her dark eyes sparkled.

"I hope it was," he said.

"I'm still deciding," she replied, glancing at him and tipping the flask one more time.

"I said 'share.'" She met his request with a laugh. He studied her face as she returned the bottle. Her hair was dark brown, almost black. A ringlet of hair fell alongside her cheek. The line of her lips had a bold curve as she smiled at him.

"Care to walk a bit? We have a few minutes before dinner."

"I have all night," she said. He tried to search her face for an implied invitation, but she looked out over the railing. "It's strange to see nothing but water all around. I've never been so far from land," she said. "As a matter of fact, I've never been off it!"

"Welcome aboard, then. I hope you're having a delightful time at sea. The first cruise is the one you

remember most.”

They fell into easy conversation, talking for half an hour about lives on their respective sides of the ocean. Something about her ... Win could lose himself in the rhythm of her voice, the smile in her eyes. Once he came near and almost kissed her. A bell rang; the moment vanished.

They agreed to meet after dinner. “Where will I find you?” he asked. “I have more of this in my stateroom,” he said, gesturing to the now empty flask.

She thought for a moment, then put her hand on the railing and said, “Let’s meet right here. We can continue our walk just where we left off.”

A heavyset man jostled him as he hurried past. What was he looking for: the perceived safety of the stern, raised to a higher elevation that offered an illusion of survival? More would follow this instinct to climb up, away from the impending doom of freezing water. His deck would soon be crowded, yet he savored the time to reflect.

After dinner, Win had found her looking outward from the same spot, as promised. This time they talked with less banter and more candid interest. She was from Liverpool, sailing to America to stay with cousins in Boston.

“What will you do there?” he asked, holding her gaze as he listened. He loved looking into her eyes. It was as if they locked a line of light, binding them; neither feeling the need to break it by looking away.

“I don’t know. Maid, waitress ... I’ll find something. I’m just excited to be going somewhere new! I think I’d die if I had to stay at the docks. My whole family works there and my grandparents before them. There has to be something better!”

Something better than the family plan; he could understand that. He wished his father could understand the need he shared with this young woman -- to do something different, something that resonated inside. Yet shipping would forever be in Edwin’s blood -- some genetic heritage that hadn’t been transferred to his son.

“What do you do, in America?” she asked.

“I haven’t decided: either design houses or manage freight -- the two choices at the moment,” he said. Pausing, he added, “Maybe I’ll just run away. Say, do they have bartender jobs in Boston?”

“I’m sure they do. You could come up and visit me once I’m settled. I might be able to get you a job.” Julia stopped and showed him a wry smile.

He took her hands and moved closer. “If I’m lucky.” For a moment, they stood inches apart, their eyes kindling desire. He remembered the soft hesitation of her kiss, his awkwardness in return. Then he held her firmly and pressed his lips, finding an equal response. Any sense of time vanished as touch awakened emotion.

After uncountable minutes, Win placed a light kiss on her lips, then stepped back to see her face. He could never forget it, like a student observing the brush strokes on a master’s painting. She was a classic.

Arms entwined, they turned to stroll the deck again. “What’s it like up in First Class?” she asked, leaning her head against his shoulder.

“Nice design, good lines; but the people are a little ... stuffy. It’s much more fun down here.”

“Down here? You’ve got a whole ship to explore and you think it’s more fun by the Third Class bar?” She looked unconvinced. “I had to maneuver my way this high to get some fresh air!”

Win had to laugh. “Let’s get you some fresh air then. Come on!”

He steered her along to an outside stairway, pulling her at first. Soon she became giddy, playing up the clandestine nature of their mission with mischievous relish. A few more stairways and Win said, “Welcome to the Boat Deck, Madam. Now we are as high as one can possibly get! Have some rarified air. You’re not going to faint, are you?”

“No!” She pushed his arm and then pulled him back again. “You sure they won’t arrest me for trespassing?”

“Well, I might have to take you under my personal recognizance.” He welcomed the thought. “Of course, if you run off, I’ll be in an awful lot of trouble.”

Julia turned to look at him. “I have a feeling you can get into trouble all by yourself!”

He laughed. “Point made. Perhaps we should both hide out, avoiding the constabulary altogether.” He looked around. “For instance, I see a place to hide right over here, and I can guarantee it will be more fun than anywhere else on the ship.”

After a few steps, he turned and clasped his hands together, holding them low for her. “Here you are; I’ll give you a lift up.”

“Up? In there?” she said, doubtfully.

“Sure. Easy as can be. Just watch where you land.”

In the lifeboat, tarpaulin overhead, they were like children under the kitchen table. “No one’s out there,” she said, giggling as she ducked back under the tarp. “Where can we sit?”

The lifeboat was brand new -- cleaner than any skiff he’d ever seen. But the freshly painted hardwood was uncomfortable. He reached forward and pulled down life jackets, piling them like pillows on the bottom of the boat. She slipped from the seat onto the cushions. “I’m sinking,” she said. “My captain, can you save me?” she asked, reaching her hand to his neck.

“Sorry; I’m sinking too! This captain is going down with the ship.” Win laid alongside her, brushing back her hair in the dim light that filtered through the canvas. He felt the warmth of her body and pressed against her. Rising on his elbow to see her better, he said, “I traveled all over Europe, and the most beautiful thing I’ve found is ... you.” He ran his hand along her cheek, brushed down her neck, let his fingers pass lightly over her breast and reach behind her waist. “Wherever have you been?”

“I’ve been waiting, and now I’m right here.”

He leaned over and kissed her, first softly on her lips, then more passionately. He pushed her blouse off her shoulder and buried his face in the concave softness of her skin. Reaching under her, he twisted, reversing their positions as he shifted into a spot that let him untangle his legs in the skiff. Now it was her turn to reach

down and caress. Her tongue ran along the outside of his ear. Then, she bit him.

“Ow!” he howled reflexively before muffling his voice.

She laughed and said, “Sorry. Must be all that whiskey you gave me; it makes me ... impulsive.”

He pulled her closer, whispering, “It must be all that whiskey you voluntarily, and fortuitously, acquired.”

“And now I’m going to acquire something else.” She reached to his shirt and began to free the buttons. He reached to her face, brushed her cheek with his, and began a long and determined kiss – one that never seemed to end.

On the bottom of the lifeboat, cushions scattered from their frantic activity, Win felt a wonderful calm settling over them. He hugged her; she responded with a kiss on his neck. He felt for her face, his eyes still closed. He was about to kiss her again when the lifeboat jumped, then rocked for several seconds.

“What was that?” she asked.

“I don’t know. It feels as though a boiler blew.” Win sat up. “I should go see.” He lifted the tarp, letting the ship’s deck lights illuminate their hidden retreat. He grabbed his shirt and slipped his arm into a sleeve, finding it had turned itself inside out.

“No! Don’t go. Stay with me, here. You were right: it’s the most marvelous place on the ship.” He reflected upon her tender request; leaning over, he kissed her once, twice. It was the most marvelous place.

The thunder of footsteps running past awakened them from their trance. “What was that?” she asked again.

“Something’s going on. I’d better find out.” He searched for his shoes. “Wait here; I’ll be back.”

“Make it soon,” she said, more with her voice than her words.

“Soon,” he promised.

It all rushed over him, joy followed by sorrow in repeating waves of recollection. How ironic: the voyage that brought Julia to him had cast them aside so quickly, so callously. He closed his eyes, willing a return to that safe haven, bound together on a makeshift bed. Maybe now they would be floating safely in the darkness, if he had but stayed.

What he found when he left the lifeboat was a growing mayhem as the crew, then passengers, realized the severity of their predicament. He never did make it back – not before the lifeboats were cleared of their canvas and shifted out over the side. He hoped she had stayed right where he left her, safe in a boat, surrounded by life jackets. Yet he guessed she would have slipped out when the commotion started, stealing away from their hidden nest before anyone could invade the memory.

Never should have left; but how could he have known their time together would be measured in minutes of fleeting emotion, not decades of a shared life? He felt the anger rise within. The hubris of man, chronicled in history and mythology, attempting to conquer nature and failing -- yet again! The “unsinkable” ship had succumbed so quickly to the opponents of ice and ocean. The arrogance that considered lifeboats to be a

frivolous reassurance had condemned him to death, stolen his first real taste of love. Anger yielded to regret as he fought back the tears.

Wiping his eyes, he considered his predicament again as he leaned against the cold metal. Had he come on this trip to explore the world, or to run from a decision that impatiently awaited him? In any case, his fate was now decided. Was that why he was so calm while others ran screaming? Strangely, he felt no more of the angst that had badgered him throughout Europe, clouding his view of people and culture. With no future to preoccupy, he could truly see the night's bouquet in the heavens. It was nothing less than spectacular.

Standing, Win gripped the rail. What could he do now, other than keep his wits about him? Looking around the deck, he saw a mob fighting near an overturned lifeboat on a lower deck; paradoxically, none of the combatants would cooperate for their own salvation.

Julia. He had searched the ship, longing to hold her in his arms once more. Would she have returned to a lifeboat? Would they have let her? The First Class passengers got off; there weren't enough boats to accommodate her in Third. If they had only stayed with the lifeboats when they were first being deployed, before the seriousness of their plight had been known . . . . Damn!

Now they had nothing – nothing but a romantic image of dying together in the icy Atlantic. It was not his kind of romance. Perhaps it was best he did not find her, did not shout her name, touch her face, one last time. The tragedy of what might have been simply overwhelmed him. He whispered her name into the night: “Julia.”

Below him, he heard a shot, then another; a body hit the water. The waves from the impact rocked the silent, life-jacketed heads nearby. Soon he would become one of them, bobbing lifelessly in the North Atlantic. Was there no other way?

“What other way?” he asked himself. The ship was sinking in the middle of the ocean! There was no other in sight, within range of any probable rescue. All the lifeboats were full and away. Passengers like himself -- like Julia -- would be swept into the ocean, into the numbing cold, a watery door to oblivion.

Damn them! It was his life, his turn for action. He would do something before his time was up; but what? He had to think this through. Focusing on a simple, linear problem had always been hard for him, boy of free spirit and mind. Yet complex problems intrigued him. This was so complex there seemed to be no solution, only chaos and an untimely end. He refused to accept that. So often in his life he had seen things differently, come up with an answer that no one else had anticipated. He just had to look.

Something to keep him from entering the freezing water, just for a few hours. He could make a raft! Anything that would float could take Julia and him away from this disaster, just long enough to last. But what? He could bust up tables or the piano. There was precious little time. Nails? A rope? What could he use? Recognizing the signs of panic, he forced himself to breathe.

He needed to come at this fresh, to pull together the tools or systems that would give him a multi-disciplinary view of events. The best example in his studies had been his work in Professor Harris' Architecture class his final semester. Design, art, engineering, materials science – they were all incorporated into his project. He remembered the lectures. “In Architecture, you must first review the site and assess the client's needs. Then

you must create a design that marries the two.” Win considered his new assignment: the “client’s needs” were to stay out of the water ... for maybe ten hours. Warm and dry. There were blankets and clothing if they could keep above it.

Site review: middle of North Atlantic. Water temperature about 30 degrees. No land in sight. About 20 lifeboats away. Main boat sinking in ... what, three or four hours? Some materials on board. Several hundred people to accommodate.

Something to float on, he reasoned. Could the lifeboats be lashed together to make a larger platform -- one that would hold more people? Wait: he could space them out like piers and tie them together with crossbeams to make an even larger surface. He looked around for materials to use. The wooden decks were made of stout teak and well built – too well built. A team of workers would take days to pull enough decking and beams for such a project – not the minutes or hours before him.

Any solution would have to take into account the human element. He looked at the fracas around him: men were becoming mobs. Panic was turning to anger. There would be no organized labor pool to draw upon. It wouldn’t work. The solution had to be simpler, faster.

He looked out over the water again, clearing his head of any plan, just looking. What could he see? What could he observe? A ship half in the water, tilted at about twenty degrees. Lifeboats, and life-jacketed casualties, drifting. The icebergs that got them into this disaster. Nothing else, just a vast and desolate ocean. Win sighed in defeat, then laughed at the irony: maybe he should have studied something specific like shipping after all. He could hear his father agree: “Shipping is a more pragmatic career, Win.”

As if to offer a rebuttal, Professor Harris’ voice came back to him. “Often an obstacle can be incorporated successfully into your design. A tree in the middle of the site can suggest an interior courtyard. A large boulder can become part of the landscape, or even act as a support structure for a decorative arch. Look for ways to incorporate, rather than overcome, the difficulties of the site.”

Incorporate ... support structures ... something that floats. Then he saw it: several “ships” right there in front of him! “Yes!” he shouted, the word bursting out of him. “That which dooms you can also save you.” He looked again at the several ice floes that surrounded the ship. Specifications of material: were they strong enough to hold the weight? Archimedes said the weight they could support was proportional to the weight of water displaced. Most of the floes were submerged. Yes it would be strong enough -- but brittle. Would they crack and shear off? The image of people falling into the sea flashed before him like a haunting dream. The bobbing heads below him seconded the danger. His excitement began to cool in the night air.

Would the central part of the tops be accessible from sea level? He looked around at the crowd, screaming and crying. Could he really get this fighting lot to cooperate in their own salvation? His breath and his hope faded. No one would listen to him – one man with no experience at sea. Still, he had to try.

Win quickly hailed a crewman, shouting “You there! Sir! We can transport all these people to the icebergs. Call the boats back!”

“Hold there,” the man responded with a growl. “There are no more boats, and none are coming back.”

Win began to explain again. “No, you don’t understand. We can ... .” He was physically dragged from



behind as men rushed over him toward the crewman. Win watched the melee from floor level as the crewman knocked down three men before the rest got the jump on him. What could that possibly achieve? What could he hope to achieve?

Would this rabid crowd listen to anyone? Win turned this last question over in his mind. If not him, who could pull this off? As the answer surfaced in his mind, Win stood and ran back along the deck. Ascending a stairway, he met a heavy-set crew member on his way down. "There's nothing up here for you." His tone implied no room for discussion. "Go find a lifeboat."

Win didn't even reply; he just turned and walked to the deck below. No sense wasting time to a losing argument. Win leaned over the rail, making a show of breathing heavily. The sailor prodded, "Come on now, you can catch your breath on the lifeboat."

So much for that ploy, Win chided himself. He ran well ahead, finally turning into a corridor, out of sight. He crossed through a maze of hallways, finally emerging on the port side. He ran back up the deck and ascended the stairs on the less active side of the ship. He was losing precious minutes. He broke into a run until he reached the wheelhouse.

"Captain!" he shouted and pounded on the door. "I need to speak with Captain Smith!"

"Captain's busy," came a gruff answer from a window nearby.

"It's important! I need to speak to him now!" persisted Win. He pounded harder. There was no response. Win stepped back and kicked the door once, twice.

The door opened and a white-jacketed young man stepped out. Win recognized the signs of fatigue and strain in his face. "The captain is busy and is taking no visitors. Now get out of here. Bigger off!" He slammed the door shut.

Was he to be isolated in these final moments, taking his idea, his one prospect to the depths with him? Damn it! It might work! But not if he couldn't be heard.

Win ran around to the front of the wheelhouse. "Captain!" He pounded on the glass. Men inside waved him off. "Captain!" Dark forms turned back to a table covered with charts; others stared into the glow of instruments around the room. Win stepped back to think; what could he do to get attention?

On the starboard passageway, Win saw a teak deck chair that had caught a venting pipe on its way down the sloped deck. Walking swiftly to it, he pulled it free and dragged it to the side of the wheelhouse. In one burst of exertion, Win heaved it into the side window, shattering the glass. Stepping forward, he yelled to a crowd of startled and angry faces. "Captain! I can save your passengers and crew, with your help." They swore at him. Win shouted back. "You've condemned hundreds to die. Don't you want a chance to redeem yourself?"

The door burst open, depositing three men on top of him. One drove a fist into the side of Win's face, sending him to the deck. Before he could rise, they were on him again. Win saw a fist pull back; he crossed his arms in front of his face.

"Wait!" Hands released him as he dropped back to the deck. Touching his face, he flinched as he felt

the cut. "Pick him up." Two of the sailors raised him to a standing position, holding him tightly, one arm twisted behind his back. Focusing on the figure in front of him, Win barely recognized the man who had been so congenial in the First Class lounge the night before. The confidence with which he had told stories from a lifetime of sailing had been replaced by anxiety, casting darkness over his whole countenance. Overwhelmed by his defeat, this diminished Captain Smith challenged Win with softly spoken words: "What can you do?"

"Captain, last night you and I talked about ship design, about ballast and the Principle of Flotation." He stepped back and gestured toward the sea. The crew members tightened their grip on him. "Come to the railing. Look out. Tell me what's floating."

From the railing, the captain saw lifeboats. He raised his eyes to the horizon, searching intently for a few seconds. Seeing nothing, he lowered his gaze to the drifting shapes beside the ship. He sighed, looked at Win with disappointment, and turned back toward the bridge.

"Captain, wait! There is our ship." Win pointed toward a mass of white. "Those icebergs are displacing huge volumes below the water. They will hold all the weight we can put on them. We can house our people on top until help arrives. It will keep them dry and alive."

The captain's face looked puzzled. One by one the crewmen released their grasp. Win stood up straight, rubbing his shoulder. "I can't make this happen, but you can. You have the authority." The captain looked at the tall chunks of ice.

"How would we get all the passengers up there? The sides are too steep."

"Order the crew to bring some of the boats back. Take whatever tools you have to cut steps into the ice. I saw axes in the fire hose boxes; you must have others. Then ferry everyone over. You have enough boats to move the passengers aboard. Forget about the ones in the water."

Where was she, he wondered? Still on board; in a lifeboat; in the water? Would he see her once more, atop a snowy berg on a moonless night, waiting for him to still the shivers of cold, of fear?

"Steps on ice? Passengers are sure to slip off. They'll fall in to the sea!" The captain looked unconvinced.

"They'll be there soon enough if we don't," Win replied. "String some safety lines along the path if you like. Station crew along the steps to help, to keep everyone moving." Win's frustration grew; these were small details that could be worked out later. They needed organization now. Last night, anyone within earshot would have followed the captain without question. Tonight, he wondered whether this man was capable of leadership that could turn the tide. "Captain, there is little time," Win implored. "Do it now."

Win saw a glint of understanding as the captain lifted his head, his eyes focusing intently. "You can do this, Captain. There is no other choice -- none you want to consider."

Win followed the captain's gaze, out beyond the light cast by the "unsinkable" vessel already half way to its demise. Towering in the darkness were the bergs, each a ghostly ogre, a frozen possibility. He turned again to the captain. "What do you say?"

The captain looked once more at Win, as if searching to measure truth or lie. He stared, then tensed.

Win could see a sharpening in his face. “Recall the boats! Assemble twenty of the crew. Westly, go below with five men and find supplies: ropes, axes, bars.” He walked briskly back into the wheelhouse without looking back.

Win leaned against the railing and let his breath out in a long, slow stream. Maybe this would work. At least they were going to try. Looking out again, he assessed what they would need next. The closest berg had some sheer sides to it, but it sloped toward the back. It would be an easier ascent from that end. Boats were being hailed now and a few started to row back. They would need equipment; the captain was summoning that. What about survival gear for the people? Blankets for warmth, even towels for those who slipped into the frigid water. Food? Warm drink? No, forget that. Passengers could stand to shiver if they had the privilege of living.

Win started down toward the lower decks to be at hand when the boats arrived. He should be out at the bergs to help with the mounting. Walking up ice steps would be a challenge. Could he use some poles along the way, driven into the ice at intervals so people could grab on? That would be a lot of poles into hard ice; not so achievable. Maybe one driven in at the top, with a rope tied to it. People could pull and walk their way up, staying out of the water; but it would be slow. The crew would have to establish multiple ascents to move all the passengers quickly, perhaps on multiple bergs.

A sudden commotion sounded over the water. People floating in life jackets were grasping at the incoming boats, tugging at the gunnels, tipping one precariously. Passengers in the boat herded to the high side. When the boarders could no longer hold and released their grip, the weight imbalance nearly capsized the boat in the other direction. Several were tossed out into the water, leaving others to scream fear into an already impossible night. The word “dreamlike” came to him; it was really more like a nightmare.

Crewmen were poking at survivors in the water, menacing them with scowls to keep them at bay. Win heard the captain shouting orders from above, and the boats began to retreat. Pushing back at his despair, he ran up the flights of stairs until he was near the captain, who barked his last orders and turned back toward the wheelhouse. This time the crewman let him pass.

“Captain, don’t give up. We can still do this! Have them regroup, transfer their passengers, come in fast with a few boats. Then we can ... .”

Captain Smith held up his hand to silence Win. “I’ve already told them. We’re not giving up. Not yet. Not on my watch.” Win saw the renewed confidence in his face and felt his own body relax a bit, as if welcoming an old friend.

“I’d like to join the crew in the first boats out to the berg. I can help.” Win stood firmly, waiting.

“Thank you, but this is a job for experienced crew.”

“Captain, your experienced crew got us into this mess. They are not the ones who saw an escape. You need a different pair of eyes out there, a view that sees more than water.” Win insisted, “Let me help.”

The captain considered for a moment, then nodded to a crewman. “Chief, take him with you. See what he can do.”

“Cap’n, we don’t need passengers in the way.”

“Enough! I said take him along. But remember, you’re in charge.”

For the first time since this chaos began, Win let himself smile. He caught the captain’s eye and said, “Thank you.”

Win followed the chief, admiring the speed with which he slipped down the stair railings from deck to deck, as if he were trying to leave Win behind. He caught up when the sailor met the mob of passengers. The crew was pushing them back to clear the way for the returning boats. They met with a fierce resistance Win found understandable. These people were fighting for their lives, and fighting against themselves at the same time.

“Fire a shot in the air,” Win told his new acquaintance.

“What? Why?”

“To get their attention. Just do it.”

Win knew he would have about four startling seconds before the din would return, with a vengeance. After the shot, he bellowed, “Listen! Quiet! Here’s what we’re going to do. We will transfer all passengers from the ship to the icebergs. There we will wait for a rescue ship that is on its way. To do this, the crew must prepare the icebergs. Let them through to do this work.” Win watched the crowd. They remained quiet, with some mumbling and whispering. “In the meantime, you can search the ship for useful things: warm clothes, blankets, any food or water. Make sure everyone has shoes.”

It didn’t really matter whether they found these things. Win’s thought was to keep them busy and out of the way while the plan unfolded. The crew needed cooperation and a clear deck to get this done, to have a chance of getting this done. It seemed to be working. Then a man cried out, “How do we know you’ll come back for us?” The crowd began to grumble.

“If we were going to ditch you, we’d already be gone.” This held them for a moment. Win continued, “Go into the kitchen and staterooms, any rooms. Bring what you can. When the icebergs are ready, the crew will transport us – all of us. Now go!”

People departed with urgency in multiple directions, some slipping from the slope of the deck. They were responding. He could forestall pandemonium for a while, but not long. The angle had increased, the clock advancing relentlessly.

“You coming?” asked the crew chief.

“Wouldn’t miss it.” Win looked back one last time, glancing over the line of passengers, searching. He gave it up, sliding over the side, down a rope ladder and into a boat. They were off. This was more familiar, more like the small sailboats he and his father took from the lagoon out to the coast. To be sure, these were sluggish beasts compared to the sleek boats of his youth, twin triangles stretched taught as they sailed close-hauled, pinching against the wind. But these were far more nimble than the floating hotel he had just left. It felt good to be on the water, and yet strange. An hour ago, he had no expectation of leaving that sinking tombstone. Now, as he watched the ship recede and heard paired oars stroking in time, he wondered if he could really go back. Maybe, if he knew she would be there.

They soon came upon the flotilla of lifeboats. The chief barked orders. "One man only remains in each boat. Consolidate the passengers until two boats are freed. The rest of you men get in those two boats and meet me at the closest iceberg, there!" The crewman adrift were hesitant, as if trying to comprehend. "Now! Get moving! Bring those boats together. There, that one that's only half full. Start depositing passengers and picking up crew. Let's go!"

The pitch of the sounds brought back the days he'd spent in the Scottish lowlands, full of sheep and the herding dogs that pushed them in one general direction. This appeared to work at sea too; but on land, the soothing voice of the herder accompanied the dogs. Win called out, "As soon as the icebergs are ready, you can bring the boats over to transfer everyone. It will be solid and safe."

There was a scuffle on one of the boats. He heard a woman's voice shouting "I'm staying right here! I'm going with the crew."

He recognized her voice and stood excitedly, ready to shout her name. The chief looked over at him. Win hesitated, then said, "Let her come along. We need to know how steep we can make the steps, to test them with a woman before we bring them all over. She'll be useful." He could see the chief wanted none of this, but he pushed the point. "Bring her along. She can help the first batch of passengers on the berg. We don't have time to get her off anyway. Let's get going."

The chief shouted to the crew, telling them to leave her and keep depositing passengers to the other boats. "When you have a boat full of crew, meet us at the first iceberg!"

Soon they approached the berg, white with snow on top, but darker and foreboding as they came nearer. It loomed above them, appearing higher than the ship they had just left: massive, like an island. Maybe they should choose a smaller iceberg, Win thought: something more ... addressable.

"Keep going to the next one," said the chief. Win watched as they approached this second, much smaller iceberg. The top here was white too, but the side they came upon was blue, smoother, as if it had melted in the sun.

The chief called to his men in an even voice, "Row to starboard." As the boat turned and skimmed alongside the ice, Win marveled at the blue color, dark and polished like stained glass. He was expecting crusty layers of snow. They couldn't bring passengers up slick sides of pure ice. This had all seemed more feasible from the deck of the ship. He exchanged glances with the chief.

Win gazed at the ice sliding past. If this were caused by the sun, why wouldn't the top be blue too? It got more radiation than the sides. Same with rain. What would cause only one side to ... Suddenly he had a new respect for icebergs. Displacement, yes; floatation, certainly; stability, not likely. These bergs must topple and roll. Shit! Maybe the melting -- from the air above or the current below -- changed the balance as they moved south. The side he was looking at must have been underwater. The whole thing would have flipped up, rolling out of the water 90 degrees. Would it roll back, or roll forward again?

A gloom descended upon him. What if he turned out to be a Pied Piper, leading desperate people to a different but certain death? Hell, what did he know about icebergs, or about seafaring for that matter? He had sailed the northeastern coast, always within sight of land, in daylight. Here he was, in mid-ocean, at night, in a

situation bordering upon the macabre, conjuring up theories of survival. He was just fooling himself, and these others as well. This whole thing could come crashing down on him, on them all. He sat down and shivered in the darkness.

It came back to him, a time he was equally frightened and unsure of himself. He and Edwin were on the coast in the small cutter, returning through a storm that had come up from nowhere. Edwin had put off getting a new mast, even though it had been damaged by falling branches during winter storage. Now, under the pressure of so much wind, it had broken, leaving them powerless before the rocks.

Win was twelve, old enough to recognize the fear in his father's eyes. Yet Edwin started working the main halyard, loosening and soon casting off the sail. Now they were really done for, thought Win. His father saw him sitting low in the cockpit. "There's always a way, Win; you just have to find it." Then he smiled, and Win didn't feel so lost. "Come here and help me; grab this line."

Edwin pulled the base of the upper section of mast into the cockpit, anchoring it between the ribs. He loosened the cam cleats for the spinnaker and clipped that line to the side stay; then he cranked it in hard to take the slack out of the stay. The mast righted somewhat, though not all the way. Win understood what he was doing and grabbed the jib sheet, trimming it in. The boat tipped, swung back, and started turning into the wind.

"That's it," said Edwin as he moved back to grab the tiller. "Leave a little luff in the sail – just enough so we don't stress the windward stay." Under the single, smaller sail, the boat worked its way out and along the shore, on a single tack all the way back to harbor. They had found a way. Now, with rocks made of ice and snow, Win had to find his.

"Let's go back to the larger iceberg. This one is too small. It's not stable," Win said to the Chief.

"The other one's too steep, take too long to work our way up it. This one will be quicker. Steady on. Pull up alongside that crevice."

Win started to object. "Shut up or get off!"

He knew he couldn't push this now. Still, he could ameliorate. "Okay, okay. But you might consider going up the snowy side ... easier to dig steps." Win saw anger and stress in the man's eyes and thought it best to sit down quickly and quietly. No sense starting a fight when every minute counted. Besides, he wasn't an engineer or physicist; maybe this berg was stable in its new position.

The axe swung into the side of the ice, glancing off and hitting the boat gunnel. The man next to it jumped back, swearing. Another crewman took the axe from the first and began making smaller cuts into the ice. This would take too long if each step had to be so carefully cut. Win looked for a better purchase somewhere, but the whole side was glazed. Not only that, the ice tapered inward at the waterline. Erosion from the waves? It would make the climb up even worse than vertical.

"There, up that fissure the slope is more gradual. We could at least get people off. They could work their own steps up higher while we transport. They could gather in that clear space."

The crew had cut two steps, but there was no place for a handhold. "Chief," said one sailor, "we're going to slide right off this. Craziest idea I ever heard, boarding icebergs!"

“Shut up!” returned the chief. “Row up this next crevice. Make a few steps up there, where the ice reaches down to the water. Flatten out the top of that part that looks like a root so we can walk on it. Let’s go!”

As the first two sailors jumped out, they slipped right into water, yet stood as if they were holy apostles. The ice was solid a foot below the surface. Once they’d gotten over the surprise, they scrambled up to dry ice. Others began to cut the path indicated by the chief and soon a half dozen were standing in the clearing. “Start cutting up the side there so we can send people to the top section. You there, start a second stairway.” They followed orders, swinging more forcefully with the balance of solid footing.

Win was curious to see what would greet them up above, but the ascent would take a while. “Chief, why don’t we leave them to finish this approach and find another; you know, two doors to safety?”

The chief ignored him and walked over to review the progress. In a minute, he spoke with his men. “Thompson, Ingalls, you finish the left staircase. Roberts, Soundheim, you’ve got the right. The rest of you men, back into the boat.”

They rowed around more solid ice until Win noticed a vertical line, ice to the left and snow pack to the right. That must have been the old waterline. Now they had snow to deal with instead of the blue metal they’d been working. The height of the berg began to increase. Win looked at the chief, who must have sensed his gaze without acknowledging it.

“Turn in here. May as well not go further. It’s too high up ahead.” They came alongside the hard packed snow and began swinging. Win wished they had shovels now instead of axes; but the snow was easier to carve. He watched as steps appeared, again with no handholds. They weren’t going to be able to make a vertical ascent, especially not with women and children. They needed a gradual slope. There was none.

Soon the steps reached higher than the men could cut. “Sanders, climb up to the top and swing downward to finish the stairs,” shouted the chief. A man slipped an axe through his belt and began to climb the steps. At the fourth one, he slipped and fell backward into the boat, swearing as he lifted himself off the axe. Blood flowed from a gash in his back.

Win thought of stairs -- jagged, rising lines like the sides of a triangle. He remembered degrees of slope in his geometry classes. This was 90-degrees straight up. He recalled his time with the carpenter, James, who rebuilt the stair to the cottage one summer. Eating his lunch on the grass, Win would watch him work, watch and listen. “The tread is what takes you forward; the rise is what takes you up. Every step has a tread and a riser.” Win could still hear the melodious voice. “You have to have enough tread to place your foot squarely, and a rise that’s comfortable – not like a ladder!”

What they had now was a ladder, and a slippery one at that. If they carved their way in rather than straight up, they could make a staircase with sides of snow. That would be safer. The stairs would eventually emerge on top, probably about twenty feet back into the berg. “Chief, we’ve got to dig further into the snow pack, make a trench or a channel in, with stairs. It’ll take longer, but it’s the only way we’re going to mount this beast.”

The chief’s frustration at his fruitless task burst out. He spun toward Win and shouted, “You keep your mouth shut or I’ll toss you overboard. Not one more word!” The chief turned to his men. “Dig the steps down

at an angle so we won't slip off. Then let's try it from the top again.

A second boat rounded the iceberg. Win counted approximately fifteen men aboard. He saw no women. They glided up and hailed. "There's no more room to work here," said the chief. He looked further along the berg, seeing the sides rising even higher.

"Chief, how about I go with the other boat and we'll find a spot to board that first iceberg. It's big, but there are places it slopes to the sea." The chief looked at Win with distaste, as if he'd had enough of him. Win decided to invoke authority he lacked. "The captain said I should help. You work this crew; let me take the other." The chief thought for a moment. Win added, "I'll be out of your way."

"Haliday! Take this man aboard and explore that other iceberg." As the boat approached, he added, "He's just a helper; you are in charge of your boat. Clear?"

"Yes sir." The boats bumped sides and Win scrambled over. Haliday directed the rowers back the way they had come.

"Mr. Haliday, the other berg is closer if we keep rowing this way around. The big one will appear just beyond the curve." Win spoke softly so his voice wouldn't carry. The sailor looked in the direction Win indicated, then back, then at the chief's boat. "It'll be quicker, and we don't have minutes to spare," added Win.

"Port side, stop. Starboard, ahead." The boat started turning. "Port side, backwash." The boat seemed to spin in one place, turning the bow 180 degrees. "Port side, all ahead." With so many men rowing, the boat moved swiftly through the water. Soon they came upon their appointed station.

Win wondered again if there might be a more hospitable mountain to climb. Was this the iceberg that had torn open the hull? It certainly would make a formidable adversary to anything built by man. There was something eerie, even frightening about the massive hulk in the dark, as if something was about to jump at them. No matter; they had no time to pick and choose. This one would be stable and hold them all, if they could find a route up.

A route or an ascent? The sides looked treacherous, an improbable climb for a man with ropes, impossible for a line of women and children. "It slopes off to the right, coming closer to the water," Win recalled aloud.

As they glided further, Win looked ahead to the decreasing height of the berg. It was still high, but looking more manageable. On this moonless night, the iceberg appeared lighter, more reflective than the other, showing only the white crust Win was looking for. A small peak reached away from the main body of the berg, leaving a valley in between. Shifting his gaze to the sailor in charge, he asked, "See that low spot ahead? What do you say we have a look?"

Haliday turned to his rowers and said, "Bring her in, port of that fissure there." The crew obeyed and one man went to the bow to cushion the contact. With a quiet crushing sound, the boat met their nemesis.

"I don't suppose we have any shovels," Win inquired.

"I don't suppose," said Haliday. "Johnson, McCabe; get axes and poles. Start on making a flat landing area. Test the strength of the ice with the poles. Make it about five feet wide. Go back in ten feet. Make it



level.”

Two men scrambled out and up on the snow, slipping with their shoes but keeping hold by digging their knees into the cold mass. Soon they had carved out a rectangle big enough for ten men. “Okay, Lewis, Smith, Frenchy, jump up. Start looking around.” The chief hesitated a minute, then added, “Be careful. We’re not going to be fetching you out if you fall.”

“Mind if I join them?”

“Wait a moment. Let them move inward first to test the snow.”

Win watched them work their way as they probed with metal poles for any pockets or gaps. When they had all moved toward the end of the chasm, Haliday told Win to go. With his first step, he slipped and landed back in the boat. Haliday laughed and said, “Are you sure you don’t want to stay here?”

“What,” said Win; “and miss all the fun?” He kicked several blows with his foot to make a better purchase on the step, then hoisted himself with a jump and a grasp at the steps above. He crawled onto the level space and stood, having new respect for the agility of sailors. Walking briskly into the iceberg, he met up with men who were tearing at the sides of a crevasse.

Win looked at their approach. It was another vertical side, and this one was too high to be carving tunnels into. Win studied the scene. Most of the passengers would not be able to climb icy steps up a steep incline. They needed stairs, but there was no way to carve stairs. The more they went into the snow pack, the further under the top they would find themselves. The triangle would be buried.

The geometry played in his mind. He imagined a movable right triangle, pushed into the snow. If he pulled it out from the snow pack, it would almost fit, reaching a little short of the top when the 90-degree side was tight against it. They could make a triangle of snow – building up in front of the bank instead of carving straight into it. Or maybe a bit of both.

“Men, over here!” he called. A few sailors stopped, more out of exhaustion than attention. “Look, if we build steps from out here,” Win pointed to a spot about eight feet from the side, “we can build up a gradual approach. Then we can dig into the upper section and have an egress about the same distance into the side. That will get us to the top.” The men stared up, testing the idea for feasibility.”

“Not enough snow to do that,” said one. “It won’t stick: too cold and grainy,” said another.

Win looked around. The night was cold. The snow that had been chipped from the steps was loose and brittle. Still, he saw huge chunks that had fallen nearby. “We can use the axes to cut blocks from those snow boulders, just like stone. Pile them up on one another like building blocks.” It was child’s play on a grand scale.

No one said anything, which to Win meant no one objected. “C’mon, let’s go. We can get up this side!” By the time Haliday joined them, the men were chopping blocks and shoving them in place, lifting others on top. Soon they had a primitive stairway.

While they were building out the blocks for a wider access, Win climbed past to the level above. Two men were already scouting the area. It sloped like a gradual hillside, no more of the shear cliffs. “Can’t know

how solid it is, mate. Might give way at any minute.”

Win came into their conversation with a question. “How do we know? How far out is it safe?” The men looked at each other and shrugged. “Let’s get some of those poles and probe. We could walk a perimeter to indicate the safe areas. This ice has been packed for decades, maybe centuries. It won’t collapse. We just have to be careful it doesn’t calve off.”

“How are you gonna do that?” a sailor asked dubiously.

“You’re right; we can’t know exactly where. But this is a big flow. Keep the people in the middle and they should be safe.” It occurred to Win that sailors should be stationed at the perimeter to keep people from wandering. That, or a few falling into the sea should enforce caution. But all this was too much detail. People who came on to the berg could figure that out. Right now, the issue was getting them off the ship to some place warm and dry. With the freezing night temperatures on this snowy world, “warm” would have to wait. In any case, dry on an iceberg at 15 degrees Fahrenheit was better than wet at 30.

Win descended the stairway, now much easier to navigate. Haliday was still at the bottom. He was directing his crew to construct some lateral supports for the staircase. Admirable, Win thought, but immaterial given the time they had left and the likelihood of any shift in the stair. “Mr. Haliday, how about getting some of the boats over here to unload? We still have a ship full of people who would like to join us.”

Haliday reviewed the work in progress and then said, “Jones, go up and get the other two and finish these buttresses. Then return to the landing and make the ascent off the water more gradual. The rest of you, come with me.” He turned toward the boat. Win followed.

When they returned to the flotilla, Win saw that the chief had already drawn in several boats to the smaller berg. Haliday hailed four of the passenger boats, unloaded crew in each to row, and escorted them back to the larger. Passengers were hesitant to leave, but the success of those in front and the barking of the crew from behind moved them along. When the first boat had cleared, Win asked if he could take it back to the ship. “You can take one crewman and any two men you can find in those remaining boats.”

“What’s your name?” Win asked his assigned partner.

“Higgins, sir.”

“Okay, Mr. Higgins, let’s round up a crew.” They approached the first boat and fetched a young lad in his mid teens. The second boat had only women, young children and one crewman. The third had four gentlemen in hats and long coats. “Gents, we need rowers. One now, and the next boat will fetch the rest.”

“We are not rowers,” one said.

“Let me put it this way, sir: you are rowers or swimmers. Which will it be?”

With his newly acquired crew rowing toward the ship, Win saw a boat working another side of the smaller berg. They were progressing up a ridgeline opposite the chief’s site. It was a lot of emphasis on a small iceberg, but dual access routes would indeed increase the flow of passengers.

As they approached the ship, orange lifejackets bobbed in the sea like buoys. Win lifted his gaze so he didn’t have to look at the white faces. The hull was much further underwater than when he had last seen her.

Passengers were waving and yelling, as if he might pass them by unseen without the commotion. Win told his rowers to hold.

“Ahoy! Are you ready for an orderly transfer? I will not bring the boat alongside until the crew says you are orderly.” He heard some scuffling on deck. Shouts came from the crowd. Win waited. The ruckus died down.

“Safe to approach,” said a crewman.

He brought the boat to a point where the ship’s deck nearly met the water, now at a thirty degree angle. The crew had expected him to board further toward the stern. As they reoriented the line, Win called to them. “This will make for speedier transfer. We don’t have time to run lines. Start them over, and include at least six strong men for rowers!”

Passengers poured over the side. The crew held back the rest. Now that there was some hope of departure, desperation had come down a notch. “That’s it; away!” Win turned to his charges. “You there, switch seats with that child. Grab an oar. You men on the port side; an oar!”

With so many rowers, Win was having a hard time steering. He remembered his trip out and was soon calling orders by port and starboard, adjusting his course by throttling one side or slowing the other. Soon they were back at his berg. “His iceberg,” he laughed to himself. The thought of making it home was ... unappealing, at best.

The crewmen helped people access the iceberg. They had strung a rope from a pole lodged in the snow, holding the other end from the boat. Another line was strung alongside the staircase as a safety support, or at least reassurance. The stream of passengers moved quickly and Win pulled away with his six conscripts at the oars. “Good luck, Mr. Higgins!” Win called to his partner, now in another boat and headed back to the ship.

After the second voyage to deposit passengers on the berg, Win heard an unexpected commotion: first a loud groan, then screams, then a thundering splashing. He looked toward the smaller iceberg but couldn’t focus on it in the darkness. It was moving, rolling. People were tumbling down the slopes, some hanging on, others tossed into the icy water. Boats were pushed away by the slapping wave. One capsized in the tumult.

After a moment of shock and disbelief, Win shouted, “Row! Full ahead!” He steered the boat alongside the new edge of the iceberg. People in the water were grasping at the sides. “Keep it balanced! Pull them from both sides.” When soaked passengers were dumped into the boat, Win kept them at the bottom for stability. “Back to the oars!” he called when the boat was full. It looked like a fishing boat with its catch piled loosely in the middle. So many from the water were claspings at the boat, Win decided he couldn’t go straight in. “No, row out, away from the iceberg. Port side, faster. Starboard, hold!” He made a circular sweep and came back to the berg thirty feet downshore.

“Aren’t we taking them to the other iceberg?” asked one of his rowers. “It could tip again.”

“No, it’s got to be here. The ones in the water will be dead by the time we row over and back. We just have to get them out.” The boat touched the iceberg, now more readily mountable on its side. “Out, one at a time; out!” Passengers shivered, trembling with both fear and cold. Win decided it was time to be Captain Bligh.

“Get out now, on one side or we’ll throw you out the other. We have to get the other passengers out of the water; so decide: on the iceberg or back in the water!” Still they hesitated, frozen by the cold and the whole, freakish experience. He could not count on logic or cooperation. “Rowers, move these people out!” Win repeated this whole sequence, managing to amass a larger catch. If only he had been able to convince the chief; but then, he himself wasn’t sure how much of that perceived danger was real, until now.

On the third run, he was pulling more passive people from the water, alive but hypothermic. That one, something about her was familiar, the shape of her face. “Julia!”

He hugged her, stopped, tore away her wet coat and wrapped himself and his coat around her. She said nothing, but he could feel her shivering. She was alive. He held her while he called out orders. “Straight in now. There aren’t enough left in the water to get in the way of the oars.” Another boat had carried in many passengers, but a third had left for the larger berg. Win wondered what had happened on the other side, wondered whether the chief was still there. No time for that. Anyone still in the water was going to stay there. When the boat was cleared, Win called, “Crew, let’s get back to the ship.”

“Is she coming off then, sir?”

“No, she’s coming with us,” he told the rower. “She’s not leaving me,” he whispered.

On the way to the ship, he took off his coat and wrapped her, keeping his body close and pressing the heat in. She murmured but did not speak. He held her face, looked into her eyes, and saw the faint light of recognition. He held her hand, pressing it against his chest, feeling a squeeze in return.

There was a small line of about ten boats approaching the ship, scarcely half the number that had been drifting beyond the railing hours ago. Some may have floundered; some held back in the safety of the icebergs; he could not know. More passengers flowed over the side and pressed into the boat. They were scarcely leaving room for the rowers to move. At this point, he didn’t care; he just held her close.

“Captain wants you aboard, wants to know what’s going on out there!” The crewman pointed to Win, tucked in the bow with Julia.

“An iceberg rolled. We fished out all we could,” answered Win.

“Don’t tell me; tell him!” said the sailor. “Now, or we’ll drag you out!” He called for other crewmen. Win signed in despair.

“Charles,” he called to one of his rowers. “Get her out when you get back to the berg. Only take passengers to the large berg. It won’t turn. And find those other boats. Tell all able-bodied men to get aboard them and row the hell back over here. We only have time for one more run, maybe two. Hear me?” Win’s voice sounded more like a plea than an order.

“Aye, Cap’n,” he said with a smile. “Good luck to you.”

Win hugged her, kissed her on her forehead, and settled her into the bow. He climbed through the throng of survivors to meet his own fate.

There were still hundreds of passengers on deck, starting to become more frantic as the ship lowered slowly, ominously into the sea. Many would not make it off, he realized. Where were those other boats, damn

it?

He found the captain still standing by the wheelhouse. Win reported the events on the smaller iceberg. “Most of the passengers on this side of the berg made it back onto the ice. I can’t say what happened on the other. The whole thing was just too unstable; and with different groups of people who weren’t coordinated, the weight must have shifted everything.”

The captain sighed and shook his head. “I shouldn’t have . . . .”

“You did the right thing, Captain. If not, you’d see a lot more bobbing lifejackets.” Win looked out as he said it, resisting an inclination to estimate a count. His eye caught a familiar hat – bright red, made of the wool from his farm in Scotland. The night before, Calum had won the poker game with three kings in the final hand; he joked about his Christmas luck finally arriving. How quickly it had run out.

Win turned his attention back to the captain. “The smaller berg should stay steady for now. Taking people off in the morning may cause a shift. We’ll have to do that logically, with an engineering mind.” Thinking of the exhausted souls he’d fished out of the water, Win added, “Blankets or dry bedding would help them get through the night.”

The captain listened quietly, nodding as Win finished his review. The ship shuddered; both men instinctively grabbed the railing. “Second boiler,” said the captain. A moment later, he continued. “We’ve moved a lot of people off the ship. I don’t know whether they are alive or just deposited in a watery grave I cannot see. Only morning will reveal the results of our labours.” He sighed again. “Thank you for your . . . initiative. I do think more people had a chance. Sadly, not all.”

With those words, it dawned on Win that he was not going to make it off either. All those trips, the time on both bergs and he’d ended up back here, soon to go down with the ship. It was ludicrous! The glorious ending of his big summer abroad, of his indeterminate career that never started, of his plan for rescuing all passengers, was a slow and numbing. And Julia, lost from his grasp, again! He wanted to cry, to scream! He did neither. He was exhausted, out of energy, out of possibilities. It was over.

“Got any whiskey?” he asked.

“What? Whiskey?” The captain glanced at him incredulously. Then he laughed -- first softly, then louder, as if to concede: each to his own. “Surely. There’s some in the captain’s lounge, just aft of the wheelhouse. Have all you want.”

Win soon gripped the railing with one hand and the bottle with the other. He knew the whiskey offered false warmth, but right now he’d take any consolation he could muster. From the back of the captain’s door, he had picked up a coat, mostly ineffective against the biting cold. Only the whiskey helped.

Screwed. He hadn’t been on a voyage: he’d been taken for a ride. Betrayed by overconfident engineers and promising salesmen, he was now the victim of their audacity – a soon-to-be-dead victim. Maybe somebody would remember him: that guy with the stupid idea about icebergs, like the one that rolled over. The guy who rowed us off the ship and went back, like a glutton to his punishment. How dumb was he?

Boats. Icebergs. That was about it for things that floated. Except the life jackets, hauntingly scattered

around the ship, like an audience waiting to see the living go down, cheering their demise with the vengeance of the frozen dead, beckoning Win to join them in their descent to hell.

He'd always imagined hell as a place under ground, in a closed cave with fire and flames. Now he knew better: hell was a frozen suspension on the floor of a cold, pressurized ocean. He countered the image with another shot. What the hell: he could get a life jacket, jump off and cheer with the corpses. Join the other side. Well, soon enough. What's the rush? Have another drink.

He looked down the deck, seeing scores of desperately hopeful passengers, all waiting, ready, life vests tied around them, looking for boats that were too few and too far between. The poor bastards wouldn't accept the truth that awaited them. An observant scientist could see the relationship between putting on a life vest and being dead in the water. A becomes B. Yet there was something admirable in the naïve, desperate hope of lost souls. Win thought it rather ... quaint. Chumps. They were all chumps, gullible travelers believing that a ship was unsinkable, that man could trump nature. Gullible and stupid, fools every one.

He thought again about joining the life jackets. He should go down to the waiting crowd and convince the whole lot to jump ship, swim out to the bobbies, and maybe even climb on top. That would teach the hollering onlookers in the water. At least the living would be on top of the dead for a few more minutes!

That was an interesting suggestion: the dead supporting the living. Win took another sip as he contemplated. Take the theoretical instance of floating bobbies underneath live passengers in the water. If you gathered enough of the floaters together, maybe tied them with rope, you might actually keep torsos out of the water – enough so to last for hours instead of minutes. But then, one only needed hours.

Win's mind was getting into problem-solving mode again. Forget the bobbies. Who would want them on your team anyway? All you really needed were the life jackets. Why wear them, with your body hanging underneath? Faulty design. Why not climb on top of them, like a raft. 'Cause you'd fall through. Unless you grouped them, used them as floatation. Stuff all the life jackets under a plank you could lay on, a plank that would distribute the weight. Like the planks he was going to tear off the decks; yea, right.

Time for another drink. Win felt the warmth in his throat. He held some in his mouth while he breathed the cold air, filling his lungs with a fine mist. He should find a chair to sit in, to watch the finale. It would be quite a spectacle.

He tugged at a deck chair that had caught on the railing. He pulled it free, only to see it slide down the deck. How much higher would the hull rise before the whole thing just torpedoed to the bottom? He grabbed another chair from the high side of a venting pipe; but before he could sit, it too ran away to join the first at the water end of the deck. All he seemed to be doing was piling up chairs. Pretty soon that's all that would be left as the ship slid under water: a bunch of furniture drifting atop the waves. Flotsam and jetsam, and life jackets.

Piling up chairs. And life jackets. His mind was assembling all these thoughts into something almost coherent. Furniture tied with a rope. Torsos above water. A few hours.

He tossed the bottle overboard and ran, half slipping down the deck as the stern pointed still higher on the imaginary clock. The crowd's panic was yielding to despair as the last of the boats rowed into the shadows beyond the ship's light. Some men had jumped overboard, swimming out in pursuit -- a plan that did not go

well for them. A few others fought, as if a victory over another would earn them a place in a departed boat. Yet it was toned down with the realization that there were no real competitors; there was no winning, just an exercise in frustration, a wailing sadness. Women had been pushed to the back of the throng, huddling against the inner walls, some shielding small children. Win approached them. "Come with me. Bring your children. We're leaving the ship together."

It didn't matter that they couldn't comprehend. He was the only one addressing them, offering some dim hope. "Come now!" he shouted. Slowly, most gathered their children and followed him into the cabin area just up deck. A few stayed, paralyzed by shock or fear. Win moved on. "Hurry up. Grab all the life jackets you can find. Safety rings too. Cushions. Anything that looks like it will float."

One woman looked exhausted, carrying belongings in one arm and a child in the other. "What ... is there a lifeboat? Where are we going?"

Win took the bag from her hand and tossed it aside. He gave her a life jacket from the floor and shouted so all could hear. "Each person must find at least three. Do you hear? At least three things that float. Move across the hall to the other side of the ship." He walked that way, opening doors in search of floatable things. He tore life vests out of the closets and tossed them into the halls. Seat cushions, suitcases that closed tightly -- all went into the hallway.

As he approached the far side, Win surveyed his ragtag crew. They looked like refugees on a march, carrying their odd belongings, whimpering as they walked. Well and good; these were more compliant accomplices than some of the men he had worked with during the night, and far more than the throng on the starboard side.

Exiting to the exterior walkway, he looked for chairs. Many were floating in the water where a slide down the deck had deposited them. Some were caught. Win took a rope from the wall and strung it across the walkway. The dining area inside was just beginning to flood. He dashed in and pulled out two dozen high-backed dinner chairs, letting them catch on the rope.

"Listen up! We don't have much time, so you must do this quickly. Take all the life jackets; use their straps to tie them underneath the dinning chairs. Put smaller things in the suitcases and duffels. Stick them and the cushions up under the chairs too. Do it now!"

He must not give them too many tasks at once, more than they could handle. Seeing an older woman, slow but attentive, Win took her by the shoulders and enlisted her. "Keep them focused, working. You just call to them, help them along. Don't tie anything yourself, just direct. Can you do that?" The woman nodded but said nothing. He wondered if she could speak, if she were in shock; but she turned and talked softly to a nearby cluster of girls.

While they began, he had to get the deck chairs. He gathered a few from odd places -- vista nooks that stood out along the railing, an open door that had snagged one. He needed more. The water looked uninviting, but he invited himself anyway. He removed his new coat, hoping it would stay dry 'til later. Along the walkway, he lifted a coiled rope from its hangar. Tying one end to the railing, Win took the other in hand and walked.

The water surprised but did not stun him – a factor of the antifreeze he'd been drinking, or of the adrenalin pumping through his system. Swimming to the cluster of chairs, he pulled the rope through the openings in the slats until he had a cluster. Tying off the last chair, he swam back to the ship in a frenzy, the cold driving him on.

The women were in a disarrayed state. Some were crying, others looked dazed; several had a strong intent and purpose in their expressions. Yet they all kept working, attaching the life vests to the last of the dinning room chairs. Just tying them together wouldn't work; they'd all drift apart and tip over in the water. He needed some structure, some design to keep the chairs together, to keep all of them above the cold.

“Good,” Win extolled. “Now set them up with two backs together, facing opposite directions. Make a row of double chairs. Come on; you can do this!” Win untied his rope and pulled. It took several minutes to bring the chairs bumping against the deck. He dragged one up the deck and opened it flat into a fully reclining position. Examining the open space at its fold, he was unsure whether it would be enough. No time to measure; only enough time to do. He lifted the flat deck chair and placed the center opening over the joined backs of two dinner chairs. He pressed hard, jamming it over the vertically protruding backs. Satisfied, he repeated this twelve times.

Looking over his work, he almost laughed at the recollection: Vertebrate Biology, second semester, junior year. What he had here was a backbone with no intervertebral discs to hold it all together.

“Get the children to string these ropes through the chair feet, under the other chairs. Loop them around the legs too, wherever you can. Look, I'll show you. Pay attention!”

Win crawled down on the deck and began to run the rope. “I can do it!” shouted a boy, about ten years old.

“Good. You start. You kids, watch what he's doing and run your lines down the other side.” Before the ropes got away, Win tied one end of each to the last chair. The raft was starting to have a mass, a structural design, but it was long rather than wide. Would it roll, tip like the iceberg? He could try to tie some spare chairs to the sides, like outriggers, for stability --if he had time. The water was flowing up around them now. Soon the ship would slip into the sea, and he guessed it would not do so peacefully. They were out of time.

Quickly, he took more deck chairs and placed them, flat and open, along each side the ridge of protruding chair backs. They might float away, but maybe they'd stay, keeping his castaways above the water, just those few, crucial inches. No more time to study or research; the test was on.

He grabbed his jacket. “Okay, get any blankets you have. No life jackets. This is our raft. This is what needs to float. If you have any life jackets, tie them underneath, now. We're going for a ride.”

The water was calf deep. Soon it would lift them off the boat; or not. “Climb onto the chairs. Hold in close; hold onto the chair backs that stick up, but stay low. Lie down if you can.” He would need to get this contraption away from the boat, away from the swirling death of the vortex to come. There were no oars about. What could he use?

He ran into the foyer ahead of the dinning area, itself already under water, and scanned. Heavy furniture, tables, wall décor. He needed something light and flat. Off the wall he yanked a section of decorative



screen – an oriental design with inlaid flowers. Dashing back to the raft, he added one more deck chair on the end, hanging off the back. He slid the screen through the open slot at the fold. His crew was positioned in two long rows, some children piled atop their mothers. They said nothing; some cried. Win hopped on to the end of the raft and waited.

As the water swelled around him, he shivered in his wet clothing. The coat did little to stem the cold. Why had he tossed the whiskey? Damn! The raft lifted, then appeared to sink, then lift again. His pants got a good soaking. Muffled shrieks came from behind him, but no one moved. He could hear loud noises from the other side of the ship. They must be fighting again, everyone meeting his fate in a different way. He was glad he had chosen the port side, away from all that. In the hysteria, his little crew would have been swamped by the mob. There was no chance to save everyone. It was time to look after himself, and a few others. They cast off, drifting as the ship lowered itself under them.

The raft was working. Wet butt, yet dry torso. Good thing it was such a calm night, he considered gratefully. He turned to look ahead. Most of his crew was drier than he. The second tier of chairs kept them off the water, if only by an inch or two. Since he was at the end, his position dipped into the water. Oh well; torso, right?

Win lifted, dipping the back half of the screen into the water, forcing it under. Then he pressed down, leveraging it up. He repeated this up-down motion, like a whale's tail, getting a push with each cycle. "Notice how the tail of some mammals, like the dolphin or the whale, is horizontal, not vertical," the young marine biologist had explained. Where had that been? Belfast? Liverpool? It was an interesting discussion. Now he was enacting his own experimental demonstration of the concept. Slowly, they edged away from the groaning metal.

Win and his ragtag crew were about fifty yards away from the ship when it arced up, seemed to scream and then crashed back down as half of its former self. Amazingly, it had split apart! This was just too bizarre. Win gave up trying to anticipate, even to react. How could anyone respond to such a series of events, all within the span of a few hours? No more, he told himself. He was spent.

The waves that erupted were not as high as Win feared; still, the swells washed over, soaking all as they clenched the wooden slats. Women cried and screamed, but everyone clutched to their makeshift home. Again the ship slowly arced upward, almost reaching a midnight position. With a sound quite unlike the clock towers of the continent, the stern section let out a long whooshing sound and slowly cratered into the North Atlantic.

Eventually, the sobbing stopped. Cries from the night grew dim. The bobbies that floated where the ship once lay were silent, as if they had become bored with the show and went to sleep. Win shivered. The screen had vanished in the wash, but the loose chair was still under him. He turned around, braced himself to a seated position, and looked forward at his charges, a mound in the darkness. He thought of nothing more but collapse and surrender.

"Turn it off," he said in his dream. "I'm trying to sleep." But the light didn't turn off. His eyes probed open. He realized it was daylight, just. The sun was a few degrees up over the horizon. His chair back had held half his body out of the water. His right leg, rocking in the water, was completely numb. The mound of humanity ahead of him occasionally stirred but did not change its shape. Clouds above him caught the sunlight,

reflecting an eerie pink luminescence. He should make a painting, like the ones he saw in Spain. He wanted to lift his leg up onto the wood, but he could summon no strength. He closed his eyes.

He was in Barcelona, listening to the street hawkers as he walked the docks. That girl in the restaurant in Patras looked back at him again, as if she wanted to leave her Greek lover for an exotic encounter in his dreamland. What was she saying? A British voice blocked out her words; her moving lips disappearing out a misty doorway. The intrusive voice grew louder. Opening his eyes, Win saw his fellow rafters being lifted into boats. He was still on the water. As the rescue crew worked their way toward his end, he was the last to leave the craft. Immobilized by the cold, he could not rise. It felt strange to be lifted, as if he were out of his body, watching the action unfold. He was beginning to understand some of the eastern mysticism he had studied. Was it Philosophy or Anthropology? He closed his eyes again.

Aboard a new ship, people were lying across the decks wherever they could find space. All had donned the standard uniform of gray blankets, like the monks he had seen in European abbeys. It seemed appropriate, all of them novitiates in some order of survivalist religion. He clutched his own robe and pulled it in tightly. After an hour or so, he was warm enough to stand. His legs and arms were stiff, as if they needed lubricant, a good shot of oil – but no more whiskey. His head still ached.

Walking the deck, he saw a few people he recognized and one he knew. “Higgins! You made it! Where did you end up?”

“I stayed in the transport boats. We filled ours with as many people as we could on the last run: twice the capacity of the boat. I thought we were going to tip over, but we got most of them to lie down in the bottom, cold as it was. Better there than the water, I told them. How about you?”

“Drifting,” said Win. “Just drifting.”

“Have you seen the captain? Is he aboard?”

“No, I haven’t seen him. I think we shall not.” Win was sure the captain stayed with the last passengers, going down with the ship. Each to his own.

The chill still penetrated to his bones. What he really wanted were dry clothes, but he was grateful for a second blanket he’d fetched from the deck. He wrapped it around the first, covering his head this time. Now he really was outfitted for a religious career. Wouldn’t father love that. Win walked to the railing – a different railing, a level one this time. The ship had been under way for hours. He forced himself to scan the waters. With some relief, he saw no orange dots on the surface. One look at a bobbing life vest would surely bring back memories of a gruesome audience to a night best forgotten. Before him were simply the waves and swells of an open ocean as far as he could see. They must be on a more southerly course, as there were no more mountains of ice and snow, the mixed nemesis and savior of the night before.

It was remarkable that he was still alive. The previous night, he had abandoned himself to death aboard that ship. Twice! Yet each time he had come back, had used that vision others called odd to see what they themselves could not see. People had such limited views of events, of opportunities. Was his view an oddity, or a gift?

There were so many elements one had to take into account in an ocean crossing: the vehicle, the water,

the bergs, the light of day, the moon or lack of one – and the people. The interaction of so many different types of people all in one large, temporarily assembled community. Maybe an odd person, one who saw all these things, could add something to the equation. Father had asked him to join the commercial side of his shipping business. Win thought he might look into the operations aspect, just to see what he could contribute. Answers could lie in many places. Instead of reinforcing a ship's design for iceberg safety, a smaller escort ship could pilot ahead. Even a simple redefinition could solve it – a rule that specified slow speed at night or in fog, full during daylight. In any case, he would like working with Edwin. Maybe there was a future for him in shipping after all.

He walked the decks, searching. He wasn't sure he'd recognize people he'd met on board. The men in suits looked different now, broken and frail. Reluctantly, he had visited the lower deck where they gathered the dead. He did not wish to see who might be among them: crew he had befriended, travelers he had met, a girl he had loved. It was a strange reversal: he had been searching so frantically, so longingly for Julia; as he walked past the motionless shapes, he desired with all his heart not to find her. Then he could believe that somewhere, she was still alive and laughing.

At noon, he followed a line into the dining room where they served soup. He thanked the waiter and walked out on deck, cherishing the warmth of the bowl in hand. Leaving the spoon in his pocket, he lifted the bowl to his lips. The warmth filled him with life, a strength altogether unlike the concocted warmth of last night's libation. He was glad to be here, cold, but breathing air, feeling sunshine and breeze.

Win decided to sit, finding a spot against a masthead. People were lying about the deck in random patterns. Wouldn't they have stories to tell? Like many good stories, theirs would be better in retrospect.

As he ate, he noticed a sleeping girl's hair spilling from under a blanket at his side. It was dark brown, almost black. He put down his bowl, told himself not to expect anything, and prayed nonetheless. Lifting the blanket, he beheld the girl on C deck, the girl who shared his hidden lifeboat, who pressed next to him in the bow of another. He reached to run his fingers along her face. She murmured at his touch, reached for his hand, turned.

He leaned over, kissed her cheek and whispered, "Wherever have you been?"

She opened her eyes, recognized him with a tired smile, and said, "You left me. Twice!"

"Sorry about that." He slid down to lie next to her, putting his arm around her and drawing her in. He could feel the warmth returning to his body; it felt right.

"Maybe we should find ourselves a lifeboat?" he said. She muffled a laugh as he curled around her more tightly. He'd lost her twice; he would not make that mistake again.

THE END