

PROLOGUE

THE SINKING OF THE PISCES

Our ship, the PISCES, was beating an uncomfortable course through raging seas. The night was bitterly cold and laced with icy squalls of rain. Beset by storm after storm since our voyage began, our condition was causing apprehension among the passengers. There was longing for a port. Any port would suffice. The PISCES was an old ship and she'd seen hard use, which was even more apparent in the midst of the storm.

It was interesting to note however, that we had all booked passage and boarded in full knowledge that violent storm warnings had been issued prior to our departure. Many of the passengers were intent upon blaming the ship's Captain or the shipping line for our predicament. Many of us had also chosen the PISCES because a reduced fare had been offered, due to her less than luxurious condition.

All things considered, each of us was right where we deserved to be by our own choice, but no one wanted to admit it. As far as I was concerned, the whole escapade seemed tragically humorous. I couldn't even recall why my wife Veronica and I had decided upon taking this particular cruise in the first place.

We were about to get up from our seats in the lounge and retire to the bar for an encouraging drink, when a very lovely girl with a guitar came in. I hadn't seen her among the passengers before. She had a calm grace that seemed to permeate the room as she entered.

She was slender and plainly dressed, but her beauty was clearly evident - mystical more than physical. My desire for a drink was quenched in her presence so I held my seat. Some of the others noticed her also, but remained immersed in their nervous banter.

She seated herself in an unimposing part of the lounge, not too close yet not too far from the nucleus of prevailing misery that had gathered there.

Very quietly and composedly, without taking particular notice of anyone, she began strumming a relaxed tune. The tense buzzing eased a bit, though some glared angrily at her unruffled calm. When the voices finally trailed off into silence, she began humming an ethereal ballad that filled the gyrating ship's lounge with a mystical cushion for the nerves. Somewhere in the sweetly ensuing melody, her humming became words, words that did not seem to require understanding, for as they entered my ears, they became a part of my being.

I suddenly had the strange feeling that this was why we had embarked upon this voyage. The violent storm was another factor, something that would inevitably run its course to the finish. But this being, this lovely personage, was my sole reason for having boarded this ship.

The fragrant tones of her voice suddenly succumbed to a waft of doubt as I recalled an old sailor's tale of sirens met at sea. Remembering that I had not yet had that drink, I decided I shouldn't let my imagination intoxicate me. Once again I allowed the pleasant magic of her voice to engulf me.

It was quite encouraging to let myself relax amidst the turmoil of nature and men's minds. I cannot say whether she sang one lengthy song or several short ones, for it all seemed to flow together. After a long while, she rose and moved across the floor in my direction. As she approached, I could feel an unusually pleasant sensation growing within me. Just a few steps away her eyes caught mine and something akin to an inner explosion took place. It was silent, yet it seemed to resonate throughout the universe. I could sense no damage, but the structure of all existence had suddenly altered profoundly. It took me a few moments to relate even to the fact that she smiled as she passed. The being that I called myself seemed drawn, cell by cell, into the wake of her passing presence, and yet I was powerless to follow. All I was left with was the absolute knowledge that we had shared that explosion, and that was all that mattered.

Suddenly I felt a serpent writhing inside of me and I looked at Veronica. Though nothing was said, a silent rage burned in her eyes and I felt ashamed.

The tension crept stealthily back into the lounge so we retired to our quarters for the night. Sleep came with difficulty as the old ship strained her way through the massive seas.

Sometime around the hour of 2 AM, I had managed to lodge myself semi-comfortably between waking and sleeping. Suddenly there was a rather nondescript lurch in the huge vessel that only momentarily interrupted the monotonous surge we had been experiencing.

I might have drifted off again had it not been accompanied by a vague but sickening groan that shuddered throughout the entire ship. Sensing the worst, I leapt out of our berth and whispered urgently to Veronica to get dressed quickly. Instead of doing this, she gasped and pulled the covers around her as though dressing would be an admission of danger. Impatiently, I pulled the bed covers away and demanded that she dress.

Soon we were making our way through the passage to the decks above - Veronica in near hysteria behind me. Some of the other passengers were poking bewildered, sleepy-eyed faces out of their quarters. A few were also moving out into the passage. It appeared quite obvious that the ship was in difficulty, but no alarm sounded. Everybody seemed to be waiting for the alarm to make it official. Veronica was clawing at my back by this time, frantically demanding to know what the matter was.

"The ship is sinking!" I shouted at her and she stopped dead in her tracks, horrified.

"You're mad!" she screamed. "It's not! It's not!"

I suggested that we get up on deck to make sure. I was convinced I was right, but could not understand why no alarm was sounding. We passed an open elevator and darted into a stairwell instead. No sense getting caught in a mobile coffin. Once on deck Veronica's babbling seemed to blend in with the howling wind and the babbling of others who were already topside.

There was a sudden increase in the groaning and the ship seemed to stop its forward motion for an instant. Everybody on deck was forced to take a

few steps because of the inertia. As we recovered, and a few frightened screams subsided, the deck didn't seem quite the same. It was a bit too easy going one direction and not easy enough going the other.

"My God!" shrieked Veronica, "This is impossible!" and then she collapsed in a heap on the deck. I scooped her up and forced her along the deck not knowing for sure where I was going. Suddenly I felt an overpowering pang of anguish inside of me and I began to search the gathering crowd for someone I desperately wanted to be safe. Why was no one taking any responsibility? No alarm, no crew, no responsibility. It was unreal. Ships don't sink this way. People were sitting and waving their arms and crying hysterically. Then I saw her, braced against the rail by a lifeboat stall, looking straight at me.

Veronica was more than I could manage by this time, so I sat her down beside an old man who was smiling as he prayed. I made my way to the railing. The decks were getting steeper by the moment. I reached her side. She was stern but still fairly calm. She said, "Look!" and her eyes directed mine out to the broiling seas, where I caught a glimpse of a beautiful white ocean liner passing in the night.

I looked back at her in disbelief and she managed a smile that filled me with new strength. She said, "I was watching the ship and I saw them putting out lifeboats".

"A ship!" I shouted at the others, but no one seemed to hear me. I struggled back to where Veronica was clinging and told her I'd seen a ship and that we would be saved. All she could do was flail her fists at me and scream. "We're not sinking, you fool, have you gone mad! I saw you talking to that witch! She'll destroy us all! We're not sinking! The ship is not sinking! It's impossible!"

People were still trying to gain control over some helplessly dangling lifeboats they had tried to lower. Still... no alarm, and no crew to be seen.

I tried to drag Veronica, in panic, to the rail, but it was nearly impossible on the slippery deck. Somehow, I managed to move her nearer the empty lifeboat stall. The wind was wailing and the rain and spray were tortuous.

The girl was pointing out over the side and I could see lifeboats quite near. I shouted at Veronica to look at the lifeboats, but she refused.

The girl was clinging to the end of the railing at the empty lifeboat stall. She was reaching for me. My wife was screaming at me, "You can have your witch, you madman, let me go! We're not sinking!"

With my last ounce of strength, my hand grasped the girl's as the ship made an agonizingly violent lurch. Over the side we plunged, hand in hand, into space. But it didn't matter, for suddenly I knew, in my hand I held the promise of immortality. We became two smiles traversing the limitless, smiling void of the universe. A deafening cymbal crashed somewhere in that void and a flash of light contained in an unknowable darkness... a darkness that is cold in its comfort. So this is death? Amazing! Not even a hint of fear. I felt warmth in my hand. What was it? It's my love! She must live!

I struggled toward the light and finally burst out into spray filled air... air my love needed to live. The light seemed intense and voices and hands reaching out to us surrounded it. I saw a white vessel bobbing violently in the frigid mist. A familiar word drifted off its white surface into my consciousness. Warm hands were on us, lifting us into the lifeboat.

We were drifting in a raging sea now, but in a warm and secure embrace with our rescuers from a passing ship, a ship that could no longer be seen. We were lost, and I felt horribly responsible when I remembered how I had embarked on this ridiculous voyage in the first place. We had been rowing for a long time, but still no sign of the beautiful white liner.

After a time, the shape of a tiny white bird appeared in the black sky. It drew nearer while being tossed and buffeted cruelly in the torrential wind and rain, but it struggled on through the violent storm. We were shamed by the little bird's valiant courage as it refused to be beaten. We began to row again with renewed energy. On and on through the storm swept night, the little bird fed us on his undying strength, never out of sight, spurring us on to some goal.

Suddenly we saw lights, and finally a white monolithic shape appeared out of the storming mist. As we drew nearer, we heard a joyous cheer rise up from the passengers aboard her. We could see other lifeboats unloading their survivors.

I gazed up at the ship's awesome shape and again that familiar word was reflected into my mind... AQUARIUS!

The little bird seemed to glow with light as he made a final courageous dip, as if to salute, as he was swept away by the wind to be seen no more.

I looked into the young girl's beautiful eyes brimming with love, and an ineffable joy pervaded my being and a smile of some omniscient wisdom became etched permanently upon my lips. I somehow managed a short prayer.

"God bless you, Jonathan Livingston Seagull!"

SO IT ENDS... AND SO IT ALSO BEGINS!