

Anthony Owen Colby

TITANIC

i

Now quickly, a light appears. It pours through the ornamental skylight and onto the Grand Staircase, spreading in a flash through the First Class staterooms, the Verandah and Palm Court, the galleys and gymnasium and turkish baths, hurrying at breakneck speed to illumine the Second Class promenade and cabins, the Post Office and mailroom, the Third Class galley and, in a twinkling, it bursts into the forward and aft steerage where the tidy bunks and brand new chamber pots cast embarrassed shadows on the white, enamelled bulkheads. There is a flicker, only a blink, then the light blooms full and buttery like the morning sun in Killarney, touching each and every nook the length of the ship from the anchor chain to the flag standard on the poop deck.

A voice speaks from above. "I'm very, very sorry. There has been a terrible mistake. To amend for any inconvenience there will be an ice cream social on the A-deck promenade this afternoon and, this evening, dancing 'till midnight in the Cafe Parisien. All classes invited."

ii

"They're going to sneak up behind the rascal, grab him by the scruff of his neck and fling him and his sour temper over the side." Della speaks with such vigor the chocolate in her cradled fingers pops out of the glassine wrapper onto the clutter of her bureau. "And good riddance!" she adds, fishing the savoury from a nest of discarded hair.

"Overboard, is it? Can't be done, Della," Aggie replies with upturned brows and not the slightest hint of irony in her voice. "We are overboard. Quite, don't you think?"

"There's a meeting tonight, after supper," Della says, sucking chocolate from the crotch of her thumb. "In the Second Class public room. Spirits are running high. I heard Scraps and Mr. Mullavey whisper the word 'mutiny.' True, I did."

"Mutiny on the *Titanic*? Impossible! Where would we mutiny to?"

Della chooses not to hear. Her neck is arched *in extremis* as she bounces a powderpuff on her chest, delighting in the cool tickle of scented powder as it passes between her breasts and onto the waiting porch of her ivory belly. "I hope they do it. That young man—Andersen—gives me the willies. Everytime I see him I get icicles up my spine, like he was the devil himself."

"I agree. The poor man is remarkably unfortunate, he looks like Charles Darwin with the mange."

"Papa would have sent him to Reading gaol at the sight of him, what with his sneer and his growly voice and the nonsense that spews from his mouth."

Aggie blots the letter on her writing desk, folds it then lifts it in confusion looking for a stamp. "Papa would have put half of London in gaol. Mr. Andersen, my dear sister, is a freethinker. That's a greater curse than his hairy face and the funeral duds he wears."

"Atheist, he is," Della says with such animus she crushes the powder box sitting between her thighs.

"Nihilist," Aggie corrects. "He's a nihilist and a mystic. Reads the works of Mr. Nietzsche and Mrs. Blavatsky. Imagines all sorts of ghosts and goblins behind some secret veil. Oh, and he hates Americans. They and all their optimism. Instead of saying a glass is half full of wine, like an American, Mr. Andersen will say its *dangerously nearing* empty, given his sense of the dramatic."

"Empty wine glasses and goblins? That's what we have to put up with for a year?" Della asks.

"His year is coming?" Aggie sits with a start, dropping her pen straight onto her letter.

"Three weeks a day. Then it starts."

iii

Gregor Andersen twists the butt of a readymade cigarette into a pewter bowl heaped with the moldering, accordianed corpses of cigarettes, cigarillos and cheap Russian cigars. He coughs into billows of smoke thick as moorfog then waves his arms to swim across the room where his pilfered robe lies waiting. He is concentrating, bringing to mind the voice and face of P.D. Ouspensky. Gregor recalls the artful gloom of the Fleet Street lecture hall where the beagle-eyed mystic spoke of

the fakirs of Asia and the Caves of Alhora, the day Mr. Ouspensky confided his fascination and intimacy with the devil. There were delicious overtones of conspiracy in the man's voice, pure sorcery in his gaze. Gregor fights for the memory, screwing all the muscles in his face into a blinding spasm. What comes to mind is neither a voice nor a picture but the oily smell of the sweeping compound mounded near spittoons and against the mopboard like drifted sands in Egypt. At wit's end, the passenger in Second Class forward stumbles toward the robe he wears for all his seances. The garment is a coverlet of damask, stolen from First Class. It is the color of overripe plums, embroidered with a circlet of laurel befitting the splendor of the *Titanic*. He has made an opening for his head by slitting the laurel ring dead center, almost as neatly as if he'd done it with an axe.

Gregor is desperate. He is trapped on a luxury liner for eternity and wants off. On April 10, 1912, he'd put failure behind him and stepped aboard the new ship to begin a journey of passion and discovery, travelling to Japan in search of the Kagayaite Iru Kurai Kao, the Shining Darkened Face, the Glowing Enlightenment, the Astral Spark. The monk, if he could be found, had the power to bring light to Gregor's clouded mind, to a soul languishing in an age of foppery and nihilism. It was not to be a simple undertaking, finding an old man who lives amidst the crags and caves of the northern Japanese islands.

"Spirit, spirit!" His voice is raspy, mutilated from the abuse of tobacco. Gregor shouts, waits a brief moment then shouts again. Sweat pours down the sides of his chest. "Spirit! I beg of thee. It is your supplicant from below, Gregor. Listen, please. *Spirit!*"

"Mr. Andersen? Mr. Andersen! Open up, open your door!" Scraps and Mr. Mullavey, Aggie and Dell, Mrs. Huffinton and her Weimaraner, Mick the deck steward, Bishop Gruyere, Bart the mailman, Archibald and Leonora Buttersworth and Millicent Whorely, actress, all are gathered about Gregor Andersen's door. The retired tug boat captain Mullavey shouts again and the door opens with a belch of smoke, Mr. Andersen standing like Octavian Augustus before the Senate.

"Would you mind comin' with us?" Mullavey asks. "Topsides, where we can get a little air. We got a few things on our minds."

Gregor scans the group with angry, mistrusting eyes. His decision is made simple when the deck steward and bishop take him by the arms

and lead him out the door and up the stairs until they arrive in the midday glow of the A-deck open promenade with its haunting echoes of seabirds and slapping waves.

Mrs. Huffinton, of the Boston Huffintons, speaks. "I have been asked to speak for the group." She is a large woman with a commanding tenor voice. The mask of youth and beauty still clings to her face. "We are concerned about your attitude, Mr. Andersen. It isn't very positive and that's a worry. Especially because of what's coming—"

"My attitude! What about yours! Capitulators, all of you. My friend Mr. Nietzsche has said, 'You have made your way from worm to human and much of you is still worm.'"

"Worm, is it? And what about you, you look like a half-starved butterfly," Della blurts with a blush.

"This is a robe of serenity. It was a gift from the captain."

"This boat ain't got no cap'n, Sir," Mick the deckhand interjects.

"I choose to think otherwise, Sir." Gregor spits his words at the bandy-legged Mick.

Bart the mailman twirls a finger over his ear, whistles like a cuckoo.

"Mr. Andersen!" Mrs. Huffinton speaks in a voice far more imperious than the bloom of her cheeks allows. "Please. We wish to be your friends. It's essential—for the survival of the passengers. We're all in this together."

"Amen," seconds the bishop.

"All this—this mirage, this dreamplay, this self-willed indulgence in fantasy—all of it is a mistake—compounded and twisted into a farce! I am an illusion, I am dust, I am the wind, I am myth, a fabrication of your minds."

"You look pretty real to me," Mr. Mullavey says.

"Make your own gods and your own heaven, but leave me out of it."

"We would, Mr. Andersen, but truth is, we can't. That's why we're here. Because what you think affects us all. Or will." Frustrated, Annalea Huffinton chokes on her words, tears form in her eyes. "We were going to throw you off the boat but we can't. In three weeks it's your year, Mr. Andersen."

Gregor Andersen slips out of his ceremonial robe and folds it rather neatly into a large square. He has the physique of an abandoned cat. The unhappy man stares at his accusers then sniffs crudely, as if some-

one had passed foul air. "You've wasted your time. I won't be here in three weeks. I'm leaving."

The entire group laughs, then thinks better of it as Mr. Mullavey speaks.

"Leaving the ship, Sir? No one does that, you know. No one leaves the *Titanic*."

iv

My Dear Aunt Cleo . . . Aggie Vickers pauses as she begins her letter, flicks a twist of lint from the page with her little finger and continues. It's been weeks since I've penned a line to you or anybody. Forbearance, dear aunt! Things have been topsy-turvy here, if you can believe, not the smooth sailing we've grown to expect.

We have a tradition that begins on the first of January. It is a rare and charming form of celebration, certainly unique to this ship. It has proven to be one of the very, very endearing joys of living on board. Each new year one of the passengers is chosen to be honored. It's very much like a birthday party except that it lasts three hundred and sixty five days. We name the year after that person. We are now in 'Haverkamp's Year,' in honor of a fetching young lad from steerage named Mitch Haverkamp. He's a fiddler and a crackerjack pinochle player, so it's been a sweet time you can bet, what with the nice music and card games on all the decks. You see, the person whose year it is brings his personality, his spirit to the ship. I don't want to brag, but only at a place like this could something so special happen. We get to know everything about the person, good or bad and, being where we're at, we forgive the bad and celebrate the good!

*We've had some dandy years! A big eye opener was Millicent Whorely, the actress. One of those well-rounded creatures with pink parasols and ruffles to match, we all thought of her as a bit brazen, a female boulevardier like the sort that seemed to show up in Squire Burton's parlors on Boxing Day. A bit worried, we were, when her day was coming. The woman is a dream! A comedian! Oh, she can do the serious stuff, scowls a mean Regan and pulls off a pretty good Desdemona but she's a comic at heart. Imagine, laughing for a year. Right off, the first day, in the cold of January, she pops out of her stateroom, she still travels First Class, talkin' nonsense like a banty rooster. She's playing Magdalen in *The Romantic Ladies*! The airs she put on. Pretty soon everybody on the whole ship is talking silly and putting on. Even Mr. Serious, Mullavey.*

That's the magic of it all, you get infected with the spirit of whosever year it is. We were daubing our faces with makeup and spouting Chekov with the best of 'em. Now the woman is like a jewel amongst us, makes us so proud to be in such talented company.

Timmy's year wore us out. He's the nine year old I told you about. Freckles, devil in his eyes, a bit too curious for a boy his age, especially when it comes to women. He's a toucher. Dreams of Indians and soldiers. We went from makeup to warpaint. I don't know where all those sharp arrows came from but we learned quickly to guard our backsides or we'd be goosed like Napoleon's horse. Every day as we strolled about we'd hear the shout 'ambush' and a shriek. Then the laughter. I mean, by midsummer the ladies were hiding out ambushing the men and boys. Little Timmy's spirit touched us in deceiving ways! I've often wondered what he'll be like when he grows up but then we'll never know, because he'll always be a little boy.

There was the year of champagne and white linen! Mrs. Garrison Wiedolph II, Middy as we got to know her. She's ghost-white like that old lady in Dickens that lived with the cobwebs, frail skin and delicate features. But a soft voice and pleading eyes, like she's saying 'thank you' every time you speak to her. Everywhere, white linen and silver settings. Even on the poop deck where we often gather for sundown (rather like a moon-down in the fog, but pleasant nonetheless.) Everyone gets proper with their speech, thanking people for the smallest little thing, passing out tea-biscuits with the bubbly, saying, 'to your health' and 'cheerio, old tot!' Della was in a swoon all year long, says it reminded her of weekends at Culver House up in Kensington where all the maids wore fresh-starched dickeys and wove sprigs of marsh asphodel into their locks.

And who would have guessed Smyth's year? A little mousy wisp of a man, all melancholy in the face and dour. Little black dots for eyes. A ticket-taker at Victoria Station. Scrimped so he could meet up with his brother in Kansas. Kept his talents a secret, he did. Della and I came to breakfast on that New Year's day, the steward lifted the top of the warming dish and instead of toast a timid dove flew up to the ceiling! Smyth is a magician! Amateur, of course, but accomplished for one so shy. Birds popping out of dishes, flowers in the spittoons, balloons floating from the bells of cornets and tubas when the band played. Was undressing for bed and the Queen of Hearts fell from my sleeve. And rabbits! Running around the place like Welsh footballers on bank holiday.

There were songs aplenty with Gwendolyn Hamer the singer from Llandidloes,

gambling and roulette with Matty O'Hearn the sheriff from Clarksville, Indiana, a wee bit of God and Jesus with the bishop, fresh air and long, soulful hikes with Amanda Till the poet from Lake Country. More than seventy years, Cleo, and now we tremble! A Dane by the name of Andersen is next. Comes from a good family, his father a trader in porcelain, figurines and painted plates. The son is a genius gone sour. Angry at the world, at us, at himself. Says he's on his way to Japan to meet the Kooky Booky, some flimflam or another that lives like a Highland goat. Andersen is the only person on the whole ship who isn't delighted to be here. He's the one bad apple and it's his turn to spoil us all! I hate to sound in a panic, but we're at wit's end. None of us sleep at night, he's already cast a spell of fear on us. And for good reason. The man is a disbeliever, he's got no faith in the world. Tomorrow we have Anglican services for Christmas Eve. Know that I'll be on my knees like never before, dear Aunt, for it's but a few days and the devil himself is coming to visit.

Aggie signs her name with a thoughtful script then makes her way on an outer stairway all the way down to the mailroom. "In the nick of time," Bart informs her. "Closing up for the day." Taking the letter from her he drops it into an *outbound* sack. "Go out first thing in the morning," he says. "Like always."

v

New Year's Day, Anno Domini MCMLXXXV. Loneliness shrouds the *Titanic* in an encompassing fog. It burrows like cold fire through the skin and into the blood and marrow, touching the very souls of the ship's company. No one escapes, there is no place to hide. The offending mood drifts unchastened from the embalming sea-vistas of the A-deck promenade to the gloom and shadows of the coal bins and long-silent boilers. Aggie feels it as heaviness in her heart, a melancholy that sits in her throat making it impossible to complete a logical sentence to her sister. Tears come to her eyes. When, at long last, she is able to look directly at Della, Aggie mutters, "What has happened to us? Why are we here? I miss father so much." Della fumbles with her powder boxes and rouge, so befuddled and distraught she paints giant bullseyes on her cheeks like a street clown in Montmartre. Up a deck and shrouded in silk, Millicent Whorely the comic actress fights a nagging voice that tells her she should be somewhere else, somewhere in her past, but the voice fails to bring images and she is left with haunted memories of

barren moors and frozen castles. The Bishop, for the first time on the voyage, doubts the wisdom of the Almighty as he whispers over and over the name of his long-dead wife. Timmy the eternal child wanders alone, dragging his hands on railings as he dreams of rucksacks and pack mules and a star-jammed firmament backlighting the high-country campfire he'll never see or smell. The fiddler Haverkamp plays reels and giguees so wistful and sad they could make the devil weep. Mrs. Garrison Wiedolph II walks with downcast eyes on her daily constitutional, avoiding the usual visit to her friends in steerage for fear they'll see the pain that lies heavy and inexplicable in her heart.

At noontide and dinner, in the evening when sweet conversation once ruled the outer decks and gathering rooms, at night when each and every sojourner lies bepillowed and quiet, the spectre of eternal loneliness speaks to them as an ambassador from beyond. It is the fear of nothingness, of abandonment by God and the universe, or worse, that God does not exist, that fate is a prankster and humans are flotsam blown by careless winds, that life is but a fleeting breath between dust and ash. So much must happen between the insuck and out of that short breath, so much love and joy and work, so much caring and passion, so much fire of the spirit because once extinguished there is nothing, nothing at all. In the mornings they wake from their troubled sleep to begin the great worries again, their minds filled with so much doubt they forget that this is Andersen's gift, that it is his year.

vi

SIX AM, the feast day of Saint Valentine. A mutt dog by the name of Hemlock skillfully prises open a forward stateroom door. The dog is the only mutt on the *Titanic*, the curious beast belonging to Lorramaie, a nanny who has all the look of a floured piecrust. Pale, squint-eyed, pleated 'round the edges, she is a young woman invested with peculiar thoughts and eccentric manners. The dog is clumsy, born with a defect in its gait, the animal shuffling sideways down the dimlit hallway like a warmup act in a Picadilly music hall. It descends the breathtaking First Class stairway, stopping at a potted palm in the Reception Room where it lifts a leg, pondering its phantasmic reflection from the ebony of the parlor Steinway. The distance from there to Gregor Andersen's room is several hundred yards, more if Hemlock's labyrinthine route is consid-

ered. He sniffs figure-of-eights across the seablue carpet in the First Class dining saloon, licks bacon grease from kitchen prep tables, regards the poison-spiked aromas of the Hospital, meanders like a thief-in-the-night in the Second Class dining saloon and Third Class general room before he sits with all propriety before Gregor Andersen's door and scratches, again and again until Gregor responds to the noise.

"Hoah." A multilingual word of greeting catches, then arrests, in Gregor's throat.

Hemlock isn't a pretty dog. His coat is mottled and stained like an old jute-backed carpet. The mutt's lack of physical charm draws attention to his compelling eyes. The dog is seriousness and play, slapstick and tragedy, Puck and Prometheus, a doormat with obsidian eyes that plead with the earnest gaze of a loyal Pharaoh. Gregor's breath eases, hostility is siphoned from him like bad blood let in a plague.

"And where do you belong?" Gregor asks.

"To me," a voice replies. "Looks as though he's taken a fancy to you." Lorramaie stands with a leash in hand, barefoot and cozy in a hastily tied dressing gown. Gregor can see the crown of her knee, a triangle of skin above her collar bone. Her eyes have cast a net as soft as the morning light, she pulls it home with a smile that is at once impish, immodest and disarmingly innocent. Gregor tries to avoid her but the ineluctability of the moment cements the two in a mutual gaze. She is like a neighbor girl come to play, prompting a remembrance of Gregor's brief dance with childhood before he began asking questions no one could answer. Veiled impulses touch his body like ancient winds, images of that child whirl in his brain, hunting reindeer in the attic, dune-soldiers on the beaches of the Kattegat, sugarplums and Christmas at the manse in Århus, Sigrid the soft-fleshed maid, her liberties at bath—. Gregor trembles as the memory seizes him. Lorramaie's eyes reflect none of it and all of it, the harbor whale who sang to gulls, Mr. Gavnø's golden rings, Tillie Jensen's back-stoop kisses, her child's tongue snaking in his ear like dragon's breath, like hissing, wet fire.

Shaken, suddenly aware that he, too, is barefoot and dressed in a loose gown, Gregor attempts to compose himself when Hemlock scratches him with a paw. "Oh, yes," Gregor says, "my friend." He pats the dog then lifts its chin, thanking the animal for coming saying, "*Tak for besøg,*" in a sing-song brogue. "And, please," he whispers, "come again."

“Don’t be too harsh on Mr. Andersen. He’s a First Timer,” Lorramaie explains to Aggie and Mr. Mullavey. “This is his first time on earth. The rest of us are Old Souls. We’ve been here in previous lives. First Timers have so many problems, they’re shy and clumsy and make a lot of mistakes. He’s so taken by Hemlock because that innocent looking pup is a real Old Soul, been here on and off since the beginning of time.”

“Old Souls, past lives, secrets of the Egyptians? How do you know these kind of things?” Aggie asks.

“Now that’s a question! My old boyfriend Bobby went to a lecture by a man named Leadbeater who’s in thick with the famous Madame Blavatsky, you know, the lady who has an in with the spirit world.”

“Can you figure this stuff out? Like me—and old sourpuss Mullavey here? Where have we been that we don’t know about? I can’t remember being anywhere but the Lake District and that was years ago. Never made it to Scotland.”

Lorramaie glances furtively over her shoulder. “I need to place my hands on your head in order to investigate your past lives. I can tell you straight off, Miss Aggie, you had a bad one in the Middle Ages. Took up with the wrong people, priests no less. Bad times.” Her voice lowers and she whispers to Aggie, “You were burned at the stake by Thomas Torquemada, Inquisitor General of the Spanish Inquisition. Them priests didn’t want you around any longer. True, that’s why you came to England, to make up for having such a rough time of it.”

“Are we floating in grace or under water?” Annalea Huffinton asks, her impatience echoed by the rat-a-tat-tat of her fingers on the table.

“In grace,” says Sparks.

“Under water. We’re certainly under water,” says Della.

The Bishop says nothing.

Annalea reaches for another cigarette, ducking under the cloud of smoke that engulfs them. They are sitting at pushed-together tables in the back corner of Second Class dining. Annalea, Mullavey, Sparks, Della, the Bishop, a dreamy-eyed journalist from steerage named Willie. Della and the Bishop are thoughtfully puffing on phallic cigars. The ship is lighted as if in a summer’s day though it is well past midnight.

Few people are sleeping. Groups are huddled in all the meeting places, loners stroll the outer decks with worrisome eyes fixed downward, searching their toetops for meaning. It is the ides of March and the eternal cruise is foundering in the brackish tides of disbelief. "The question is not if we are floating but whether we care if we're floating," Mullavey suggests. He has been reading the works of Schopenhauer. Della has discovered her talents as a medium, her cabin filled with petitioners as she, slithering in layers of silk, becomes a mystic wireless operator, unerringly connecting them to loved ones above. There is a frenzy in the air, the dark cloud of some unimagined terror stalks them all, they want to reach out to their kin or look back through time's frayed tapestries as Lorramaie unravels the warp of their lives past. Shipboard debates boil into chessgames of wit and passion, the books of scholars and seers are read as holy writ. The redoubtable Mrs. Garrison Wiedolph II claims to have deciphered all the riddles of Nostradamus, spinning these stories like children's fables late into the night. Everywhere, everywhere there is the din of soul-searching, voices raised in nervous parlors and in companionways, twisted brows and long faces chasing ageless riddles that elude their grasp like wild hares on a coursing field. One question weighs heavier than all others, "Whose voice spoke to us when the light came on?"

x

March hurries with injudicious passion towards April. Lorramaie hasn't heard laughter in weeks, the ship is awash in nonsense and Gregor remains incurable in his disbelief. He walks with Lorramaie and the mutt Hemlock in the bittersweet light of the outer promenades where Gregor tells of his ambitions to escape the *Titanic* so that he might find the Kagayaite Iru Kurai Kao.

"When I was a teenager I couldn't stop thinking about the secrets of the world, the real truths kept hidden from us by our priests and kings. I left for Europe before completing school. I wanted to learn from Mr. Nietzsche and the great thinkers. I begged like a blind man in front of cathedrals, worked little jobs. Slept in alleys and cemeteries. Cologne, Brussels, Leipzig, Berlin. I never found Mr. Nietzsche. The noise of Europe began to pound in my head, people kicked me like they would your dog. I had to get to Japan so I stole from the money box of a

cobbler shop on Albrechtstrasse in Munich. I stole money to make this trip," he confesses.

Up the aft staircase, round and through the dining halls, down to the mail room and gymnasium, on first-morning strolls to the balmy spaces of the bridge deck and wheelhouse, Lorramaie and the dog Hemlock are at Gregor's heels, at every turn, when he sips French coffee in the Cafe Parisien or savors a handrolled cigar after lunch, when he naps blanketed and cozy beneath the shadows of the docking bridge and always she is near when he reads the ponderous works of morbid philosophers who've failed to bring a smile to his face. Gregor tells Lorramaie how unhappy he is on the ship, screaming in disdain at the passengers who accept their fate without question. "They are like little children, bribed with toys and creamcakes. Tricked into believing this dream, this twisted fantasy." Lorramaie never comments, waiting for quiet moments when she spins intricate tales of past lives, a maid who saved a mad Czar's life, the man in ancient China who made the first flute, a eunuch who sang at King Nebuchadnezzar's funeral, she-wolves in Abyssinia.

On a particularly gloomy day in April Lorramaie takes matters in hand. She recalls, with great sadness, the simple joy of standing in sunlight. She urgently wants that light to return to her life. Gregor has been sitting like Humpty on the wall and she is ready to push.

"Tell me, Gregor, about those days when you lived in the manor house in Århus, when you had hunting dogs and servants and boyhood friends, when you were happy." Saying this she puts her hands to his face and kisses him. "Tell me that story just as I tell you mine."

"Yes, I was happy," Gregor recalls. "When I was four, or was it five, my father and the butler once flew a kite to the moon. I saw it! To the moon!" With that Gregor cracks, not like Humpty but in a flood of remembrances that lead them through the day and halfway into the long, subterranean night. Past midnight Hemlock is fast asleep. Stray voices echo through the ironclad honeycomb of darkened, mysterious gangways. Lorramaie and Gregor sit on deck chairs with the dog at their feet. Beyond them is the vast nothingness that separates Gregor from his dream. "Hold me Gregor," Lorramaie begs of him.

When she is tight in his embrace she lifts her head, saying, "You've been looking in the wrong places, my friend. The dog and myself, we

are your Japan. I am the mountain and he is the creature who sees everything.”

xi

She is a child of seventeen lives from seventeen lands and has a tale for each. Gregor loves her voice, the passion in her eyes with her tented brows and pupils wide as a startled cat. Lorramaie and Gregor stroll the *Titanic*, talking nonstop, Lorramaie touching a finger to the back of his hand to emphasize a point. She knows history and what she doesn't know she makes up or they run to his room and his books for answers to more questions than he'd ever imagined. Their friendship brings fresh winds of calm to the ship just as it has brought a smile to Gregor's face. The dog laughs as well, Hemlock sidestepping, ears cocked like a high-court barrister.

Gregor's mood signals an end to harsh winter, the air is perfumed, inventive ears hear the chirrup of songbirds. The tempered breezes of spring lift the fogbank of pessimism that settled in on New Year's day. Gregor and Lorramaie and the mutt are greeted with smiles and goodwill, much of which is confusing to Gregor. He questions motives of fellow passengers, dismissing them with a nod and a curt "Goodday." "They are just being happy, Gregor," Lorramaie tells him. Try as she may, Gregor seems not to understand the concept, as if it was a language foreign to his way of thinking. Lorramaie stalls until the end of April, waiting to be certain that the welcomed spring is not an illusion. They are standing behind the flag standard on the aft well deck. It is nearing dark and they wait in the sundown-moondown light, mellow as the ship itself. Lorramaie chooses the silence of the moment to speak.

"You are the only person on this boat who has never had another life. This is your only chance, you have to invent it now, invent yourself! Your friend Nietzsche said that we make our own Gods. Make yourself, Gregor! The opposite of nothing is something, perhaps everything! Think of it, my dear friend, everything! There are fifteen hundred people by your side, your fellow travelers. So different, all of them. So many Gods they have created. You can believe anything the human mind can imagine, Gregor, anything. Be kind to yourself, invent happiness!"

My Dear Aunt Cleo . . . Just as Aggie Vickers blows on the ink she hears the ship's band, the music roaring down the outer gangway. *It is Midsummer's Eve and . . .* Aggie pushes the pen aside, grabs her shawl and tiptoes around Della's mess. There is a snowfield of powder flowing from the dresser onto the floor in a ghost-like oval large as Della herself. The younger sister has a date with Mullavey. The band's already into Strauss and the party has just begun. Aggie hurries out the door and runs to the Verandah where she stops, hand over mouth. The *Titanic* is ablaze in light, the deck crew has strung ropes of twinkling bulbs all through the Verandah and Palm Court, circling the grand stairways and into the open promenades where the band is spit and polish and full of itself playing *Weiner Blut* in a whirlwind tempo. The rooms are packed, reeling with the shouts of merrymaking. It's a gathering like none she's ever seen. Somewhere in the crowd is her sister, dressed to the nines in sequins and satin, dancing with Mullavey who'd come to fetch her in tails and a tophat. Aggie pauses by an oak and mother-of-pearl panel that splinters the light into a hundred rainbows. Catching her breath to make a mental note, she is interrupted by the Bishop.

"You look charming tonight, Miss Aggie."

"Oh, and you look spiffy yourself."

"It's that kind of night, isn't it!" The Bishop asks that she call him Henry, his given name.

"How lovely. Henry!"

"May I have the honor of a dance?"

They waltz straight into a perfumed sea of bodies, dancing elbow to elbow with the very rich and the very poor, all classes invited. Bystanders throw champagne corks at Smyth the magician who is standing on a Louis Quinze table, hands ablur as he performs the gentlest alchemy of all, turning the corks into singing finches. Mrs. Garrison Wiedolph II holds court in the First Class lounge, cheerioing at the top of her lungs in her silly, crooked, lusting old lady's smile. Fifteen hundred people are packed in the dancing areas and dining rooms, the crowd flowing onto the outer decks and walkways of the most beautiful ship in the world. Bart the mailman and the fiddler from steerage vie for the company of one Millicent Whorely who's come to the party nearly naked in a sprite costume. After the band's intermission

Gwendolyn Hamer from Llandidloes gives a rousing rendition of *Rule, Britannia* which brings tears to both Aggie and the Bishop. There is a cry for a toast and she sings it again. Della and Mullavey appear as the band livens up the mood with a foxtrot, Mullavey begging his pardon for he's been honored to dance with Annalea Huffinton, sparkling as the ship itself in the layers of diamonds she's retrieved from the ship's safe.

Towards midnight Aggie and the Bishop steal away for a private stroll then return hand in hand down the fabled forward Grand Staircase, pausing in front of two bas relief figures who are crowning victorious Time with wreaths of laurel, the figures clad just like Millicent Whorley.

"Haven't seen a thing of our friend Andersen," the Bishop remarks.

"Down in his room reading books. It's books and dressin' up silly that makes him happy, along with the dog and that Lorramaie. Now that's a pair."

"A passing fancy. Shipboard romances never last very long."

xiii

It is no easier for Gregor Andersen to invent happiness than it would have been for him to bring it like a lighted birthday candle to each and every sojourner on the ship. His inner gaze is drawn invariably to the seaspawn of unseen worlds, to mankind's shipwrecks and urchins that lie huddled and shy on ocean valleys and plains. With Lorramaie and the dog Hemlock by his side the elemental unfairness of the world seems less cruel, less threatening. There are even the odd moments when Gregor finds humor in that oldest of paradoxes, the nature of the wellspring that both feeds the river of life and brings courage to the trolls who wait beneath Mr. Gruff's bridge.

Lorramaie and Gregor and the dog share the closeted spaces of his Second Class berth. There is scarcely room for them to sleep but they manage, shuffling books and pillows and tins of oily kippers like pawn-brokers, tiptoeing around Hemlock as they settle in for a night. The dog has made a bed of the damask coverlet. Often as not he is snoring by the time they stretch and yawn into a first caress. Come morning there is the mayhem of clutter and fussing, Gregor stumbling over books, notepads, Lorramaie, and teacups as the dog waits impatiently.

When Gregor returns from the morning walk he sits by her side, Lorramaie posing her face on his shoulder or touching a forehead to his cheek, neither moving until the gentle paralysis of shyness leaves them silly and laughing. They read, separately or aloud, sometimes Lorramaie singing invented songs about knights and maidens in times past, her gifts of imagination never in doubt. They dine at noon by the outer wall of the Second Class saloon, sitting in mahogany swivel chairs beneath the carved oval window from which midday light pours like a distillation of the sea itself. They talk to friends, briefly, chatting with Annalea and Henry and Aggie and Mullavey and Sparks, Gregor careful to greet them in formal language, Lorramaie equally respectful with her cultivated “Ma’am” and “Sir.”

Day by day he opens himself to her and her odd way of thinking, her itinerants’ list of First Timers and Old Souls, her dazzling reinventing of life! It is when he is apart from her that a new terror arises, a foreboding greater than all the doubts of his past. Stern faces pass in endless parade, Madame Blavatsky, Nietzsche and Immanuel Kant, the mystics Gurdjieff and Ouspensky, Theosophists, anarchists, freethinkers, mediums, a day-long babble of voices speaking of illusion and mystic veils, of human beings whose misery creates the afterworlds of their minds, their flirtation with madness. *What have we in common with the rosebud, which trembles because a drop of dew is lying upon it?* Mr. Nietzsche once asked. Gregor knows, the rosebud trembles because someday all will come to an end. Footsteps and shadows bring a chill to Gregor’s heart, he imagines unseen spirits come to rescue him to a strange land he’s all but forgotten.

Gregor runs to their world within a world, the Japan of Lorramaie’s making. He holds her tightly so that she can’t breathe as his tears fall freely onto her pale skin. “Stay with me, stay,” he says as he holds her ransom against the nightmares of his own invention. “I want your dreams, not mine.”

“Come,” Lorramaie says, “come to my side.” They embrace as children touching for the first time. It is her way of telling him of the eternal recurrence of all things. Gregor understands this later, after they have melted one into the other and reawakened to the feel of salt air and the sound of the sleeping dog.

The long days of July vanish from an unwatched calendar, giving way to August. It is 1985, Andersen's Year. Gregor treads carefully on the charmed decks, eyes alert, heart and breath vying for the same allotted space, the loyal Hemlock at his side. The ship about him is back on course, "top-hole and ticketyboo!" as Mrs. Garrison Wiedolph II ejaculates with infecting glee. Della and Mullavey camp out in the smoking rooms, sipping brandy as Mullavey spins yarns of tugboats and the foggy Thames. The Bishop and Aggie stargaze on the poop deck. Millicent Whorely has a man on each arm, the child Timmy practices sleight-of-hand with old Smyth and the band plays every night excepting Thursdays when the chefs imitate the best of Parisian cooking. When Gregor dares to look aside he sees so much happiness, the joy of living in full bloom. He returns to Lorramaie with a foolish tale, that he, Gregor, has invented it with the snap of a finger, from the proud flags flying high over the after decks to the waltzes tinkling on the out-of-tune upright in the Third Class general room. "All of it, like that!"

"Thank you," Lorramaie replies. "You've done well."

On the first of September Gregor leaves her napping on the rumpled bed; he and the dog walk the outer stairs onto the upper decks, Gregor gazing into the ineffable pale that brings light each new day. They meander, as is their habit, walking through once-forbidden promenades, past the parlor suites and forward to the brief stairs leading to the Forecastle deck. Dog and master stand at the rail and imitate all mariners from all of time, legs braced for the meditative roll and pitch of the deck, nerves calmed by the orderliness of the sea, of waves and mounting swells. Gregor's mind is lost to the pleasure of the moment, he stands idle until the dog barks. "Shh," he hushes the animal only to hear Hemlock bark again, rudely and sharp, almost angrily. Gregor comforts the animal but the dog isn't to be stopped.

From the distant murk Gregor sees a spark, a reflecting glint from the silverscales of a fish where there are no fish. Hemlock growls. The spark splits for a moment then recombines, stronger, brighter, crawling toward him from the abiding emptiness that has surrounded them for seventy years. Gregor strains to make it out, fingers tight against the rail, his breath gone. A light floats as if on a fishing bobber, approach-

ing slowly, an idly carried torch, a firefly gone far astray. "No," Gregor says. "Go away." It is too foreign, too out of place to be a freak of nature. It is as if the long-forgotten sun has come to visit. Bright rays cut through the water, searching for him, he feels it as a knife in his chest. If it is the messenger he'd petitioned for so many years he wants it to leave. "Go away," he shouts. Taking the dog in his arms he runs past standing bollards to the short ladder leading to the well deck. "Lorramaie, Lorramaie," he whispers as the dog slips from his arms. Other passengers have seen the light and are gathering in the public spaces. Hemlock disappears into a doorway when the light turns on itself and finds Gregor, blinding him. He hears the mounting din of terror from within. Facing the light full on, Gregor shouts again and raises his hands in absolute defiance. "No," he screams, "no," as the unstopped waves of a sea-wall fall onto him.

xv

Emerging from the black hole, our proud little robot soldier, an R2D2 of the deep, shone his lights toward our sub as we watched him approach on Big Bird's video. For a moment, I felt as though we were being visited by aliens. Instead of us looking out into an uninhabited world, something was looking back at us. Robert D. Ballard, *The Discovery of the Titanic*.

xvi

"All this—this mirage, this dreamplay, this self-willed indulgence in fantasy—all of it is a mistake—compounded and twisted into a farce! I am an illusion, I am dust, I am the wind, I am myth, a fabrication of your minds." Gregor Andersen.

xvii

The Titanic lies in 13,000 feet of water on a gently sloping alpine-like countryside overlooking a small canyon below. Its bow faced north and the ship sits upright on the bottom. There is no light at this great depth and little life can be found. It is a quiet and peaceful and fitting place for the remains of this greatest of sea tragedies to rest. May it forever remain that way and may God bless these found souls. Robert D. Ballard, *The Discovery of the Titanic*.