

a supposedly fun thing i'll never do again

1

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

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

I have (very briefly) joined a Conga Line.

I've got to say I feel like there's been a kind of Peter Principle in effect on this assignment. A certain swanky East-Coast magazine approved of the results of sending me to a plain old simple State Fair last year to do a directionless essayish thing. So now I get offered this tropical plum assignment w/ the exact same paucity of direction or angle. But this time there's this new feeling of pressure: total expenses for the State Fair were \$27.00 excluding games of chance. This time *Harper's* has shelled out over \$3000 U.S. before seeing pithy sensuous description one. They keep saying — on the phone, Ship-to-Shore, very

patiently — not to fret about it. They are sort of disingenuous, I believe, these magazine people. They say all they want is a sort of really big experiential postcard — go, plow the Caribbean in style, come back, say what you've seen.

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

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

basics of mah-jongg, seen part of a two-day rubber of contract bridge, learned how to secure a life jacket over a tuxedo, and lost at chess to a nine-year-old girl.

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

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

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

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

I now understand the term "Duty Free."

I now know the maximum cruising speed of a cruise ship in knots.¹ I have had escargot, duck, Baked Alaska, salmon w/ fennel, a marzipan pelican, and an omelette made with what were alleged to be trace amounts of Etruscan truffle. I have heard people in deck chairs say in all earnestness that it's the humidity rather than the heat. I have been — thoroughly, professionally, and as promised beforehand — pampered. I have, in dark moods, viewed and logged every type of erythema, keratinosis, pre-melanomic lesion, liver spot, eczema, wart, papular cyst, potbelly, femoral cellulite, varicosity, collagen and silicone enhancement, bad tint, hair transplants that have not taken — i.e. I have seen nearly naked a lot of people I would prefer not to have seen nearly naked. I have felt as bleak as I've felt since puberty, and have filled almost three Mead notebooks trying to figure out whether it was Them or Just Me. I have acquired and nurtured a potentially lifelong grudge against the ship's Hotel Manager — whose name was Mr. Dermatis and whom

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

I now and henceforth christen Mr. Dermatitis² — an almost reverent respect for my waiter, and a searing crush on the cabin steward for my part of Deck 10's port hallway, Petra, she of the dimples and broad candid brow, who always wore a nurse's starched and rustling whites and smelled of the cedary Norwegian disinfectant she swabbed bathrooms down with, and who cleaned my cabin within a cm of its life at least ten times a day but could never be caught in the actual *act* of cleaning — a figure of magical and abiding charm, and well worth a postcard all her own.

2

More specifically: From 11 to 18 March 1995 I, voluntarily and for pay, underwent a 7-Night Caribbean (7NC) Cruise on board the m.v. *Zenith*,³ a 47,255-ton ship owned by Celebrity Cruises Inc., one of the over twenty cruise lines that currently operate out of south Florida.⁴

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

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

⁴ There's also Windstar and Silversea, Tall Ship Adventures and Windjammer Barefoot Cruises, but these Caribbean Cruises are wildly upscale and smaller. The 20+ cruise lines I'm talking run the "Megaships," the floating wedding cakes with occupancies in four figures and engine-propellers the size of branch banks. Of the Megalines out of South FL there's Commodore, Costa, Majesty, Regal, Dolphin, Princess, Royal Caribbean, good old Celebrity. There's Renaissance, Royal Cruise Line, Holland, Holland America, Cunard, Cunard Crown, Cunard Royal Viking. There's Norwegian Cruise Line, there's Crystal, there's Regency Cruises. There's the Wal-Mart of the cruise industry, Carnival, which the other lines refer to sometimes as "Carnivore." I don't

The vessel and facilities were, from what I now understand of the industry's standards, absolutely top-hole. The food was superb, the service impeccable, the shore excursions and shipboard activities organized for maximal stimulation down to the tiniest detail. The ship was so clean and so white it looked boiled. The Western Caribbean's blue varied between baby-blanket and fluorescent; likewise the sky. Temperatures were uterine. The very sun itself seemed preset for our comfort. The crew-to-passenger ratio was 1.2 to 2. It was a Luxury Cruise.

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

recall which line *The Love Boat's Pacific Princess* was supposed to be with (I guess they were probably more like a CA-to-Hawaii-circuit ship, though I seem to recall them going all over the place), but now Princess Cruises has bought the name and uses poor old Gavin MacLeod in full regalia in their TV ads.

The 7NC Megaship cruiser is a type, a genre of ship all its own, like the destroyer. All the Megalines have more than one ship. The industry descends from those old patrician trans-Atlantic deals where the opulence combined with actually getting someplace — e.g. the *Titanic*, *Normandie*, etc. The present Caribbean Cruise market's various niches — Singles, Old People, Theme, Special Interest, Corporate, Party, Family, Mass-Market, Luxury, Absurd Luxury, Grotesque Luxury — have now all pretty much been carved and staked out and are competed for viciously (I heard off-the-record stuff about Carnival v. Princess that'd singe your brows). Megaships tend to be designed in America, built in Germany, registered out of Liberia or Montrovia; and they are both captained and owned, for the most part, by Scandinavians and Greeks, which is kind of interesting, since these are the same peoples who've dominated sea travel pretty much forever. Celebrity Cruises is owned by the Chandris Group; the X on their three ships' smokestacks turns out not to be an X but a Greek chi, for Chandris, a Greek shipping family so ancient and powerful they apparently regarded Onassis as a punk.

before," "... to pamper yourself in our jacuzzis and saunas," "Let us pamper you," "Pamper yourself in the warm zephyrs of the Bahamas."

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

3

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

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

I predict this'll get cut by the editor, but I need to cover some background. I, who had never before this cruise actually been on the ocean, have always associated the ocean with dread and death. As a little kid I used to memorize shark-fatality data. Not just attacks. Fatalities. The Albert Kogler fatality off Baker's Beach CA in 1959 (Great White). The U.S.S. *Indianapolis* smorgasbord off the Philippines in

1945 (many varieties, authorities think mostly Tigers and Blues)⁵; the most-fatalities-attributed-to-a-single-shark series of incidents around Matawan/Spring Lake NJ in 1916 (Great White again; this time they caught a *carcharias* in Raritan Bay NJ and found human parts *in gastro* (I know which parts, and whose)). In school I ended up writing three different papers on "The Castaway" section of *Moby-Dick*, the chapter where the cabin boy Pip falls overboard and is driven mad by the empty immensity of what he finds himself floating in. And when I teach school now I always teach Crane's horrific "The Open Boat," and I get bent out of shape when the kids find the story dull or jaunty-adventurish: I want them to feel the same marrow-level dread of the oceanic I've always felt, the intuition of the sea as primordial *nada*, bottomless, depths inhabited by cackling tooth-studded things rising toward you at the rate a feather falls. Anyway, hence the atavistic shark fetish, which I need to admit came back with a long-repressed vengeance on this Luxury Cruise,⁶ and that I made such a fuss about the one (possible) dorsal fin I saw off starboard that my companions at supper's Table 64 finally had to tell me, with all possible tact, to shut up about the fin already.

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

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

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

Not so the Megalines' ships. It's not an accident they're all so white and clean, for they're clearly meant to represent the Calvinist triumph of capital and industry over the primal decay-action of the sea. The *Nadir* seemed to have a whole battalion of wiry little Third World guys who went around the ship in navy-blue jumpsuits scanning for decay to overcome. Writer Frank Conroy, who has an odd little essaymercial in the front of Celebrity Cruises' 7NC brochure, talks about how "It became a private challenge for me to try to find a piece of dull bright-work, a chipped rail, a stain in the deck, a slack cable or anything that wasn't perfectly shipshape. Eventually, toward the end of the trip, I found a capstan⁷ with a half-dollar-sized patch of rust on the side facing the sea. My delight in this tiny flaw was interrupted by the arrival, even as I stood there, of a crewman with a roller and a bucket of white paint. I watched as he gave the entire capstan a fresh coat of paint and walked away with a nod."

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

⁷ (apparently a type of nautical hoist, like a pulley on steroids)

of various fantasies of triumph over just this death and decay. One way to “triumph” is via the rigors of self-improvement; and the crew’s amphetaminic upkeep of the *Nadir* is an unsubtle analogue to personal titivation: diet, exercise, megavitamin supplements, cosmetic surgery, Franklin Quest time-management seminars, etc.

There’s another way out, too, w/r/t death. Not titivation but titillation. Not hard work but hard play. The 7NC’s constant activities, parties, festivities, gaiety and song; the adrenaline, the excitement, the stimulation. It makes you feel vibrant, alive. It makes your existence seem noncontingent.⁸ The hard-play option promises not a transcendence of death-dread so much as just drowning it out: “Sharing a laugh with your friends⁹ in the lounge after dinner, you glance at your watch and mention that it’s almost showtime. . . . When the curtain comes down after a standing ovation, the talk among your companions¹⁰ turns to, ‘What next?’ Perhaps a visit to the casino or a little dancing in the disco? Maybe a quiet drink in the piano bar or a starlit stroll around the deck? After discussing all your options, everyone agrees: ‘Let’s do it all!’ ”

Dante this isn’t, but Celebrity Cruises’ 7NC brochure is nevertheless an extremely powerful and ingenious piece of advertising. The brochure is magazine-size, heavy and glossy, beautifully laid out, its text offset by art-quality photos of upscale couples¹¹ tanned faces locked in a kind of rictus of pleasure. All the Megalines put out brochures, and they’re

⁸ The *Nadir*’s got literally hundreds of cross-sectional maps of the ship on every deck, at every elevator and junction, each with a red dot and a YOU ARE HERE — and it doesn’t take long to figure out that these are less for orientation than for some weird kind of reassurance.

⁹ Always constant references to “friends” in the brochures’ text; part of this promise of escape from death-dread is that no cruiser is ever alone.

¹⁰ See?

¹¹ Always couples in this brochure, and even in group shots it’s always groups of couples. I never did get hold of a brochure for an actual Singles Cruise, but the mind reels. There was a “Singles Get Together” (sic) on the *Nadir* that first Saturday night, held in Deck 8’s Scorpio Disco, which after an hour of self-hypnosis and controlled breathing I steeled myself to go to, but even the Get Together was 75% established couples, and the few of us Singles under like 70 all looked grim and self-hypnotized, and the whole affair seemed like a true wrist-slitter, and I beat a retreat after half an

essentially interchangeable. The middle part of the brochures detail the different packages and routes. Basic 7NC’s go to the Western Caribbean (Jamaica, Grand Cayman, Cozumel) or the Eastern Caribbean (Puerto Rico, Virgins), or something called the Deep Carribean (Martinique, Barbados, Mayreau). There are also 10- and 11-Night Ultimate Caribbean packages that hit pretty much every exotic coastline between Miami and the Panama Canal. The brochures’ final sections’ boilerplate always details costs,¹² passport stuff, Customs regulations, caveats.

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

4

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

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

¹² From \$2500 to about \$4000 for mass-market Megaships like the *Nadir*, unless you want a Presidential Suite with a skylight, wet bar, automatic palm-fronds, etc., in which case double that.

all of the smiles among the crew. He explains that every Celebrity staff member takes pleasure in making your cruise a completely carefree experience and treating you as an honored guest.¹³ Besides, he adds, there's no place they'd rather be. Looking back out to sea, you couldn't agree more."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

¹⁴ "YOUR PLEASURE," several Megalines' slogans go, "IS OUR BUSINESS." What in a regular ad would be a double entendre is here a triple entendre, and the tertiary connotation — viz. "MIND YOUR OWN BLOODY BUSINESS AND LET US PROFESSIONALS WORRY ABOUT YOUR PLEASURE, FOR CHRIST'S SAKE" — is far from incidental.

all struggle for naught, drowned by time. It is dreadful. But since it's my own choices that'll lock me in, it seems unavoidable — if I want to be any kind of grownup, I have to make choices and regret foreclosures and try to live with them.

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

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

5

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

A bunch of other Megalines besides Celebrity Cruises operate out of Fort Lauderdale,¹⁵ and the flight down from O'Hare is full of festive-looking people dressed for cruising. It turns out the folks sitting next to me on the plane are booked on the *Nadir*. They're a retired couple

¹⁵ Celebrity, Cunard, Princess, and Holland America all use it as a hub. Carnival and Dolphin use Miami; others use Port Canaveral, Puerto Rico, the Bahamas, all over.

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

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

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

Outside, we of the *Nadir* are directed to deectoplasmize ourselves

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

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

¹⁶ I was never in countless tries able to determine just what the Engler Corporation did or made or was about, but they'd apparently sent a quorum of their execs on this 7NC junket together as a weird kind of working vacation or intracompany convention or something.

possible in order to sharpen the favorable contrast between real life and the 7NC experience.

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

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

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

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

have been here for days: they have that glazed encamped look of people at airports in blizzards.

It's now 1132h., and boarding will not commence one second before 1400 sharp; a PA announcement politely but firmly declares Celebrity's seriousness about this.¹⁷ The PA lady's voice is what you imagine a British supermodel would sound like. Everyone's clutching his numbered card like the cards are identity papers at Checkpoint Charley. There's an Ellis Island/pre-Auschwitz aspect to the massed and anxious waiting, but I'm uncomfortable trying to extend the analogy. A lot of the people waiting — Caribbeanish clothing notwithstanding — look Jewish to me, and I'm ashamed to catch myself thinking that I can determine Jewishness from people's appearance.¹⁸ Maybe two-thirds of the total people in here are actually sitting in orange chairs. Pier 21's pre-boarding blimp hangar's not as bad as, say, Grand Central at 1715h. on Friday, but it bears little resemblance to any of the stressless pamper-venues detailed in the Celebrity brochure, which brochure I am not the only person in here thumbing through and looking at wistfully. A lot of people are also reading the *Fort Lauderdale Sentinel* and staring with subwayish blankness at other people. A kid whose T-shirt says SANDY DUNCAN'S EYE is carving something in the plastic of his chair. There are quite a few old people all travelling with really *desperately* old people who are pretty clearly the old people's parents. A couple different guys in different rows are field-stripping their camcorders with military-looking expertise. There's a fair share of WASP-looking passengers, as well. A lot of the WASPs are couples in their twenties and thirties, with a honeymoonish aspect to the way their heads rest on each other's shoulders. Men after a certain age simply should not wear shorts, I've decided; their legs are hairless in a way that's creepy; the skin seems

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

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

denuded and practically crying out for hair, particularly on the calves. It's just about the only body-area where you actually want *more* hair on older men. Is this fibular hairlessness a result of years of chafing in pants and socks? The significance of the numbered cards turns out to be that you're supposed to wait here in Pier 21's blimp hangar until your number is called, then you board in "Lots."¹⁹ So your number doesn't stand for you, but rather for the subherd of cruisers you're part of. Some 7NC-veterans nearby tell me that 7 is not a great Lot-number and advise me to get comfortable. Somewhere past the big gray doors behind the restrooms' roiling lines is an umbilical passage leading to what I assume is the actual *Nadir*, which outside the south wall's windows presents as a tall wall of total white. In the approximate center of the hangar is a long table where creamy-complected women in nursish white from Steiner of London Inc. are doing free little makeup and complexion consultations with women waiting to board, priming the economic pump.²⁰ The Chicago lady and BIG DADDY are in the hangar's southeasternmost row of chairs playing Uno with another couple, who turn out to be friends they'd made on a Princess Alaska Cruise in '93.

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

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

²⁰ Steiner of London'll be on the *Nadir*, it turns out, selling herbal wraps and cellulite-intensive delipidizing massages and facials and assorted aesthetic pampering — they have a whole little wing in the top deck's Olympic Health Club, and it seems like they all but own the Beauty Salon on Deck 5.

can board anytime from 1400 to then, all 1374 *Nadir* passengers look already to be massed here, plus what must be a fair number of relatives and well-wishers, etc.²¹

A major advantage to writing some sort of article about an experience is that at grim junctures like this pre-embarkation blimp hangar you can distract yourself from what the experience feels like by focusing on what look like items of possible interest for the article. This is the occasion I first see the thirteen-year-old kid with the toupee. He's slumped pre-adolescently in his chair with his feet up on some kind of rattan hamper while what I'll bet is his mom talks at him nonstop; he is staring into whatever special distance people in areas of mass public stasis stare into. His toupee isn't one of those horrible black shiny incongruous Howard Cosell toupees, but it's not great either; it's an unlikely orange-brown, and its texture is like one of those local-TV-anchorman toupees where if you tousled the hair it would get broken instead of mussed. A lot of the people from the Engler Corporation are massed in some kind of round informal conference or meeting over near the Pier's glass doors, looking from the distance rather like a rugby scrum. I've decided the perfect description of the orange of the hangar's chairs is *waiting-room* orange. Several driven-looking corporate guys are talking into cellular phones while their wives look stoic. Close to a dozen confirmed sightings of J. Redfield's *The Celestine Prophecy*. The acoustics in here have the nightmarishly echoey quality of some of the Beatles' more conceptual stuff. At the Snack Bar, a plain old candy bar is \$1.50, and soda-pop's even more. The line for the men's room extends NW almost to the Steiner of London table. Several Pier personnel with clipboards are running around w/o any discernible agenda. The crowd has a smattering of college-age kids, all with complex haircuts and already wearing poolside thongs. A little kid right near me is wearing the exact same kind of hat I am, which I might as well admit right now is a full-color Spiderman cap.²²

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

²² Long story, not worth it.

I count over a dozen makes of camera just in the little block of orange chairs within camera-make-discernment range. That's not counting camcorders.

The dress code in here ranges from corporate-informal to tourist-tropical. I am the sweatiest and most disheveled person in view, I'm afraid.²³ There is nothing even remotely nautical about the smell of Pier 21. Two male Engler executives excluded from the corporate scrum are sitting together at the end of the nearest row, right leg over left knee and joggling their loafers in perfect unconscious sync. Every infant within earshot has a promising future in professional opera, it sounds like. Also, every infant being carried or held is being carried or held by its female parent. Over 50% of the purses and handbags are wicker/rattan. The women all somehow give the impression of being on magazine diets. The median age here is at least 45.

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

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

²³ Another odd demographic truth is that whatever sorts of people are neurologically disposed to go on 7NC Luxury Cruises are also neurologically disposed not to sweat — the one venue of exception on board the *Nadir* was the Mayfair Casino.

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

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

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

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

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

And as Inga and Geli of Hospitality walk me on and in (and it's an endless walk — up, fore, aft, serpentine through bulkheads and steel-

²⁵ Like all Megaships, the *Nadir* designates each deck with some 7NC-related name, and on the Cruise it got confusing because they never referred to decks by numbers and you could never remember whether e.g. the Fantasy Deck was Deck 7 or 8. Deck 12 is called the Sun Deck, 11 is the Marina Deck, 10 I forget, 9's the Bahamas Deck, 8 Fantasy and 7 Galaxy (or vice versa), 6 I never did get straight. 5 is the Europa Deck and comprises kind of the *Nadir*'s corporate nerve center and is one huge high-ceilinged bank-looking lobby with everything done in lemon and salmon with brass plating around the Guest Relations Desk and Purser's Desk and Hotel Manager's Desk, and plants, and massive pillars with water running down them with a sound that all but drives you to the nearest urinal. 4 is all cabins and is called I think the Florida Deck. Everything below 4 is all business and unnamed and off-limits w/ the exception of the smidgeon of 3 that has the gangway. I'm henceforth going to refer to the Decks by number, since that's what I had to know in order to take the elevator anywhere. Decks 7 and 8 are where the serious eating and casinoing and discos and entertainment are; 11 has the pools and café; 12 is on top and laid out for serious heliophilia.

²⁶ (a thoroughly silly and superfluous job if ever there was one, on this 7N photocopia)

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

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

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

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

6

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

7

The whole first two days and nights are bad weather, with high-pitched winds and heaving seas, spume²⁷ lashing the porthole's glass, etc. For 40+ hours it's more like a Luxury North Sea Cruise, and the Celebrity staff goes around looking regretful but not apologetic,²⁸ and in all fairness it's hard to find a way to blame Celebrity Cruises Inc. for the weather.²⁹

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

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

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

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

²⁹ (Though I can't help noting that the weather in the Celebrity 7NC brochure was substantially nicer.)

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

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

For the first two nights, who's feeling seasick and who's not and who's not now but was a little while ago or isn't feeling it yet but thinks it's maybe coming on, etc., is a big topic of conversation at good old Table 64 in the Five-Star Caravelle Restaurant.³¹ Common suffering and fear of suffering turn out to be a terrific ice-breaker, and ice-breaking is important, because on a 7NC you eat at the same designated table with the same companions all seven nights.³² Discussing nausea

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

³¹ This is on Deck 7, the serious dining room, and it's never called just the "Caravelle Restaurant" (and *never* just "the Restaurant") — it's always "The Five-Star Caravelle Restaurant."

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

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

With the conspicuous exception of Mona, I liked all my tablemates a lot, and I want

to get a description of supper out of the way in a fast footnote and avoid saying much about them for fear of hurting their feelings by noting any weirdnesses or features that might seem potentially mean. There were some pretty weird aspects to the Table 64 ensemble, though. For one thing, they all had thick and unmistakable NYC accents, and yet they swore up and down that they'd all been born and raised in south Florida (although it did turn out that all the T64 adults' own parents had been New Yorkers, which when you think about it is compelling evidence of the durability of a good thick NYC accent). Besides me there were five women and two men, and both men were completely silent except on the subjects of golf, business, transdermal motion sickness prophylaxis, and the legalities of getting stuff through Customs. The women carried Table 64's conversational ball. One of the reasons I liked all these women (except Mona) so much was because they laughed really hard at my jokes, even lame or very obscure jokes; although they all had this curious way of laughing where they sort of *screamed* before they laughed, I mean really and discernibly screamed, so that for one excruciating second you could never tell whether they were getting ready to laugh or whether they were seeing something hideous and scream-worthy over your shoulder across the 5☆C.R., and this was disconcerting all week. Also, like many other 7NC Luxury Cruise passengers I observed, they all seemed to be uniformly stellar at anecdotes and stories and extended-set-up jokes, employing both hands and faces to maximum dramatic effect, knowing when to pause and when to go run-on, how to double-take and how to set up a straight man.

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

Family Cruises," which folded after just sixteen months — involving outrages too literally incredible to be believed from any duo less knowledgeable and discerning than Trudy and Esther.

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

"Honey you don't look happy with the conch, what's the problem."

"I'm fine. It's fine. Everything's fine."

"Don't lie. Honey with that face who could lie. Frank am I right? This is a person with a face incapable of lying. Is it the potatoes or the conch? Is it the conch?"

"There's nothing wrong Esther darling I swear it."

"You're not happy with the conch."

"All right. I've got a problem with the conch."

"Did I tell you? Frank did I tell her?"

[Frank silently probes own ear with pinkie.]

"Was I right? I could tell just by looking you weren't happy."

"I'm fine with the potatoes. It's the conch."

"Did I tell you about seasonal fish on ships? What did I tell you?"

"The potatoes are good."

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

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

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

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

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

Apparently Mona's special customary little gig on 7NC Luxury Cruises is to lie to the waiter and maitre d' and say that Thursday is her birthday, so that at the Formal supper on Thursday she gets bunting and a heart-shaped helium balloon tied to her chair and her own cake and pretty much the whole restaurant staff comes out and forms a circle around her and sings to her. Her real birthday, she informs me on Monday, is 29 July, and when I observe that 29 July is also the birthday of Benito Mussolini, Mona's grandmother shoots me kind of a death-look, though Mona herself is excited at the coincidence, apparently confusing the names *Mussolini* and *Maserati*. Because it just so happens that Thursday 16 March really *is* the birthday of Trudy's daughter Alice, and because Mona declines to forfeit her fake birthday claim and instead counterclaims that her and Alice's sharing bunting and natal attentions at 3/16's Formal supper promises to be "radical," Alice has decided that she wishes Mona all kinds of ill, and by Tuesday 14 March Alice and I have established a kind of anti-Mona alliance, and we amuse each other across Table 64 by making subtly disguised little strangling and stabbing motions whenever Mona says anything, a set of disguised motions Alice told me she learned at various excruciating public suppers in Miami with her Serious Boyfriend Patrick, who apparently hates almost everyone he eats with.

Rolling, on the other hand, is when waves hit the ship from the side and make it go up and down along its crosswise axis.³³ When the m.v. *Nadir* rolls, what you feel is a very slight increase in the demands placed on the muscles of your left leg, then a strange absence of all demand, then demands on the right leg. The demands shift at the rate of a very long thing swinging, and again the action is usually so subtle that it's almost a meditative exercise to stay conscious of what's going on.

We never pitch badly, but every once in a while some really big *Poseidon Adventure*-grade single wave must come and hit the *Nadir*'s side, because every once in a while the asymmetric leg-demands won't stop or reverse and you keep having to put more and more weight on one leg until you're exquisitely close to tipping over and have to grab something.³⁴ It happens very quickly and never twice in a row. The cruise's first night features some really big waves from starboard, and in the casino after supper it's hard to tell who's had too much of the '71 Richebourg and who's just doing a roll-related stagger. Add in the fact that most of the women are wearing high heels, and you can imagine some of the vertiginous staggering/flailing/clutching that goes on. Almost everyone on the *Nadir* has come on in couples, and when they walk during heavy seas they tend to hang on each other like freshman steadies. You can tell they like it — the women have this trick of sort of folding themselves into the men and snuggling as they walk, and the men's postures improve and their faces firm up and you can tell they feel unusually solid and protective. A 7NC Luxury Cruise is full of these odd little unexpected romantic nuggets like trying to help each other walk when the ship rolls — you can sort of tell why older couples like to cruise.

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

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

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

8

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

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

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

³⁵ Conroy took the same Luxury Cruise as I, the Seven-Night Western Caribbean on the good old *Nadir*, in May '94. He and his family cruised for free. I know details like this because Conroy talked to me on the phone, and answered nosy questions, and was frank and forthcoming and in general just totally decent-seeming about the whole thing.

... We became aware that the ship was pulling away. We had felt no warning, no trembling of the deck, throbbing of the engines or the like. It was as if the land were magically receding, like some ever-so-slow reverse zoom in the movies.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

³⁶ E.g. after reading Conroy's essay on board, whenever I'd look up at the sky it wouldn't be the sky I was seeing, it was the *vast lapis lazuli dome of the sky*.

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

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

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

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

(2) From Frank Conroy (with the small sigh that precedes a certain kind of weary candor): "I prostituted myself."

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

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

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

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

⁴⁰ This is related to the phenomenon of the Professional Smile, a national pandemic in the service industry; and noplacé in my experience have I been on the receiving end of as many Professional Smiles as I am on the *Nadir*: maître d's, Chief Stewards, Hotel Managers' minions, Cruise Director — their P.S.'s all come on like switches at my approach. But also back on land at banks, restaurants, airline ticket counters, on and on. You know this smile — the strenuous contraction of circumoral fascia w/ incomplete zygomatic involvement — the smile that doesn't quite reach the smiler's eyes and that signifies nothing more than a calculated attempt to advance the smiler's own interests by pretending to like the smilee. Why do employers and supervisors force professional service people to broadcast the Professional Smile? Am I the only consumer in whom high doses of such a smile produce despair? Am I the only person who's sure that the growing number of cases in which totally average-looking people suddenly open up with automatic weapons in shopping malls and insurance offices and medical complexes and McDonald'ses is somehow causally related to the fact that these venues are well-known dissemination-loci of the Professional Smile?

Who do they think is fooled by the Professional Smile?

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

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

9

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

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

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

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

And but so I come out and spot my duffel among the luggage, and I start to grab and haul it out of the towering pile of leather and nylon, with the idea that I can just whisk the bag back to 1009 myself and root through it and find my good old ZnO;⁴¹ and one of the porters sees me starting to grab the bag, and he dumps all four of the massive pieces of luggage he's staggering with and leaps to intercept me. At first I'm afraid he thinks I'm some kind of baggage thief and wants to see my claim-check or something. But it turns out that what he wants is my duffel: he wants to carry it to 1009 for me. And I, who am about half again this poor herniated little guy's size (as is the duffel bag itself), protest politely, trying to be considerate, saying Don't Fret, Not a Big Deal, Just Need My Good Old ZnO. I indicate to the porter that I can see they have some sort of incredibly organized ordinal luggage-dispersal system under way here and that I don't mean to disrupt it or make him carry a Lot #7 bag before a Lot #2 bag or anything, and no I'll just get the big old heavy weatherstained sucker out of here myself and give the little guy that much less work to do.

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

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

⁴¹ (Which by the way trust me, I used to lifeguard part-time, and fuck this SPF hooha: good old ZnO will keep your nose looking like a newborn's.)

that little Lebanese Deck 10 porter had his head just about chewed off by the (also Lebanese) Deck 10 Head Porter, who'd had his own head chewed off by the Austrian Chief Steward, who'd received confirmed reports that a Deck 10 passenger had been seen carrying his own luggage up the Port hallway of Deck 10 and now demanded rolling Lebanese heads for this clear indication of porterly dereliction, and had reported (the Austrian Chief Steward did) the incident (as is apparently SOP) to an officer in the Guest Relations Dept., a Greek officer with Revo shades and a walkie-talkie and officerial epaulets so complex I never did figure out what his rank was; and this high-ranking Greek guy actually came around to 1009 after Saturday's supper to apologize on behalf of practically the entire Chandris shipping line and to assure me that ragged-necked Lebanese heads were even at that moment rolling down various corridors in piacular recompense for my having had to carry my own bag. And even though this Greek officer's English was in lots of ways better than mine, it took me no less than ten minutes to express my own horror and to claim responsibility and to detail the double-bind I'd put the porter in — brandishing at relevant moments the actual tube of ZnO that had caused the whole snafu — ten or more minutes before I could get enough of a promise from the Greek officer that various chewed-off heads would be reattached and employee records unbesmirched to feel comfortable enough to allow the officer to leave;⁴² and the whole incident was incredibly frazzling and angst-fraught and filled almost a whole Mead notebook and is here recounted in only its barest psychoskeletal outline.

It is everywhere on the *Nadir* you look: evidence of a steely determination to indulge the passenger in ways that go far beyond any halfway-sane passenger's own expectations.⁴³ Some wholly random

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

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

examples: My cabin bathroom has plenty of thick fluffy towels, but when I go up to lie in the sun⁴⁴ I don't have to take any of my cabin's towels, because the two upper decks' sun areas have big carts loaded with even thicker and fluffier towels. These carts are stationed at convenient intervals along endless rows of gymnastically adjustable deck chairs that are themselves phenomenally fine deck chairs, sturdy enough for even the portliest sunbather but also narcoleptically comfortable, with heavy-alloy skeletons over which is stretched some exotic material that combines canvas's quick-drying durability with cotton's absorbency and comfort — the material's precise composition is mysterious, but it's a welcome step up from public pools' deck chairs' surface of Kmartish plastic that sticks and produces farty suction-noises whenever you shift your sweaty weight on it — and the *Nadir*'s chairs' material is not striated or cross-hatched in some web but is a solid expanse stretched drum-tight over the frame, so that you don't get those weird pink chair-stripes on the side you're lying on. Oh, and each upper deck's carts are manned by a special squad of full-time Towel Guys, so that, when you're well-done on both sides and ready to quit and spring easily out of the deck chair, you don't have to pick up your towel and take it with you or even bus it into the cart's Used Towel slot, because a Towel Guy materializes the minute your fanny leaves the chair and removes your towel for you and deposits it in the slot. (Actually the Towel Guys are such overachievers about removing used towels that even if you just get up for a second to reapply ZnO or gaze contemplatively out over the railing, often when you turn back around your towel's gone, and your deck chair's refolded to the uniform 45° at-rest angle, and you have to readjust your chair all over again and go to the cart to get a fresh fluffy towel, of which there's admittedly not a short supply.)

Down in the Five-Star Caravelle Restaurant, the waiter⁴⁵ will not only bring you, e.g., lobster — as well as seconds and even thirds on

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

⁴⁵ Table 64's waiter is Tibor, a Hungarian and a truly exceptional person, about whom if there's any editorial justice you will learn a lot more someplace below.

lobster⁴⁶ — with methamphetaminic speed, but he'll also incline over you⁴⁷ with gleaming claw-cracker and surgical fork and dismantle the lobster for you, saving you the green goopy work that's the only remotely rigorous thing about lobster.

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

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

⁴⁶ Not until Tuesday's lobster night at the 5☆C.R. did I really emphatically understand the Roman phenomenon of the vomitorium.

⁴⁷ (not invasively or obtrusively or condescendingly)

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

grain material that looks too shiny to be real wood but makes a sound when you thump it that's an awful lot like real wood.⁴⁹ The elevators and stairways between decks⁵⁰ seem to be the particular objects of the anal retention of a whole special Elevator-and-Staircase custodial crew.^{51,52}

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

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

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

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

⁵² By the way, the ethnic makeup of the *Nadir*'s crew is a melting-pot mélange on the order of like a Benetton commercial, and it's a constant challenge to trace the racio-geographical makeup of the employees' various hierarchies. All the big-time officers are Greek, but then it's a Greek-owned ship so what do you expect. Them aside, it at first seems like there's some basic Eurocentric caste system in force: waiters, bus-boys, beverage waitresses, sommeliers, casino dealers, entertainers, and stewards seem mostly to be Aryans, while the porters and custodians and swabbies tend to be your swarthier types — Arabs and Filipinos, Cubans, West Indian blacks. But it turns out to be more complex than that, because the Chief Stewards and Chief Sommeliers and maître d's who so beadily oversee the Aryan servants are *themselves* swarthy and non-Aryan — e.g. our maître d' at the 5☆C.R. is Portuguese, with the bull neck and heavy-lidded grin of a Teamsters official, and gives the impression of needing only some very subtle prearranged signal to have a \$10000-an-hour prostitute or unimaginable substances delivered to your cabin; and our whole T64 totally loathes him for no single pinpointable reason, and we've all agreed in advance to fuck him royally on the tip at week's end.

ten or fifteen minutes later a guy who wouldn't even *dream* of hitting you up for a gratuity appears with this . . . this *tray*: "Thinly Sliced Ham and Swiss Cheese on White Bread with Dijon Mustard," "The Combo: Cajun Chicken with Pasta Salad, and Spicy Salsa," on and on, a whole page of sandwiches and platters in the Services Directory — and the stuff deserves to be capitalized, believe me. As a kind of semi-agoraphobe who spends massive amounts of time in my cabin, I come to have a really complex dependency/shame relationship with Cabin Service. Since finally getting around to reading the Services Directory and finding out about it Monday night, I've ended up availing myself of Cabin Service every night — more like twice a night, to be honest — even though I find it extremely embarrassing to be calling up ×72 asking to have even *more* rich food brought to me when there've already been eleven gourmet eating-ops that day.⁵³ Usually what I do is spread out my notebooks and *Fielding's Guide to Worldwide Cruising 1995* and pens and various materials all over the bed, so when the Cabin Service guy appears at the door he'll see all this belletristic material and figure I'm working really hard on something belletristic right here in the cabin and have doubtless been too busy to have hit all the public meals and am thus legitimately entitled to the indulgence of Cabin Service.⁵⁴

But it's my experience with the cabin cleaning that's maybe the ultimate example of stress from a pampering so extravagant that it messes with your head. Searing crush or no, the fact of the matter is I

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

^{53a} (He let me measure it when the reptilian maitre d' wasn't looking.)

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

rarely even see 1009's cabin steward, the diaphanous and epicanthically doe-eyed Petra. But I have good reason to believe she sees me. Because every time I leave 1009 for more than like half an hour, when I get back it's totally cleaned and dusted down again and the towels replaced and the bathroom a gleam. Don't get me wrong: in a way it's great. I am kind of a slob, and I'm in Cabin 1009 a lot, and I also come and go a lot,⁵⁵ and when I'm in here in 1009 I sit in bed and write in bed while eating fruit and generally mess up the bed. But then whenever I dart out and then come back, the bed is freshly made up and hospital-cornered and there's another mint-centered chocolate on the pillow.⁵⁶

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

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

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

⁵⁶ (This FN right here's being written almost a week after the Cruise ended, and I'm still living mainly on these hoarded mint-centered chocolates.)

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

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

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

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

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

10

I don't know how well a claustrophobe would do, but for the agoraphobe a 7NC Luxury Megacruiser presents a whole array of attractively enclosing options. The agoraphobe can choose not to leave

the ship,⁵⁸ or can restrict herself only to certain decks, or can decline to leave the particular deck her cabin is on, or can eschew the view-conductive open-air railings on either side of that certain deck and keep exclusively to the deck's interior enclosed part. Or the agoraphobe can simply not leave her cabin at all.

I — who am not a true, can't-even-go-to-the-supermarket-type agoraphobe, but am what might be called a “borderline-” or “semi-agoraphobe” — come nevertheless to love very deeply Cabin 1009, Exterior Port.⁵⁹ It is made of a fawn-colored enamelish polymer and its walls are extremely thick and solid: I can drum annoyingly on the wall above my bed for up to five minutes before my aft neighbors pound (very faintly) back in annoyance. The cabin is thirteen size-11 Keds long by twelve Keds wide, with a little peninsular vestibule protruding out toward a cabin door that's got three separate locking technologies and trilingual lifeboat instructions bolted to its inside and a whole deck of DO NOT DISTURB cards hanging from the inside knob.⁶⁰ The vestibule is one-and-one-half times as wide as I. The cabin's bathroom is off one side of the vestibule, and off the other side is the Wondercloset, a complicated honeycomb of shelves and drawers and hangers and cubbyholes and Personal Fireproof Safe. The Wondercloset is so intricate in its utilization of every available cubic cm that all I can say is it must have been designed by a very organized person indeed.

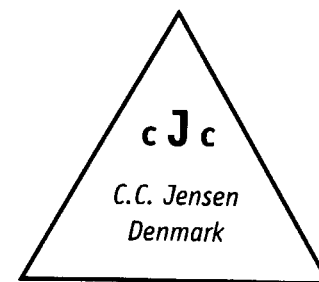
All the way across the cabin, there's a deep enamel ledge running

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

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

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

along the port wall under a window that I think is called my porthole.⁶¹ As are the portholes in ships on TV, this porthole is indeed round, but it is not small, and in terms of its importance to the room's mood and *raison* it resembles a cathedral's rose window. It's made of that kind of very thick glass that Drive-Up bank tellers stand behind. In the corner of the porthole's glass is this:



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

Cabin 1009's dimensions are just barely on the good side of the line between very very snug and cramped. Packed into its near-square are a big good bed and two bedside tables w/ lamps and an 18" TV with five At-Sea Cable® options, two of which show continuous loops of the Simpson trial.⁶² There's also a white enamel desk that doubles as a vanity, and a round glass table on which is a basket that's alternately

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

⁶² There are also continual showings of about a dozen second-run movies, via what I get the sense is a VCR somewhere right here on board, because certain irregularities in tracking show up in certain films over and over. The movies run 24/7, and I end up watching several of them so many times that I can now do their dialogue verbatim. These movies include *It Could Happen to You* (the *It's a Wonderful Life*-w/-lottery twist

filled with fresh fruit and with husks and rinds of same. I don't know whether it's SOP or a subtle journalistic perq, but every time I leave the cabin for more than the requisite half-hour I come back to find a new basket of fruit, covered in snug blue-tinted Saran, on the glass table. It's good fresh fruit and it's always there. I've never eaten so much fruit in my life.

Cabin 1009's bathroom deserves extravagant praise. I've seen more than my share of bathrooms, and this is one bitchingly nice bathroom. It is five-and-a-half Keds to the edge of the shower's step up and sign to Watch Your Step. The room's done in white enamel and gleaming brushed and stainless steel. Its overhead lighting is luxury lighting, some kind of blue-intensive Eurofluorescence that's run through a diffusion filter so it's diagnostically acute without being brutal.⁶³ Right by the light switch is an Alisco Sirocco-brand hairdryer that's brazed right onto the wall and comes on automatically when you take it out of the mount; the Sirocco's *High* setting just about takes your head off. Next to the hairdryer there's both 115v and 230v sockets, plus a grounded 110v for razors.

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

Keep in mind that 1009 is a mid-price single cabin. The mind

thing), *Jurassic Park* (which does not stand up well: its essential plotlessness doesn't emerge until the third viewing, but after that the semi-agoraphobe treats it like a porno flic, twiddling his thumbs until the T. Rex and Velociraptor parts (which do stand up well)), *Wolf* (stupid), *The Little Rascals* (nauseous), *Andre* (kind of *Old Yeller* with a seal), *The Client* (with another incredibly good child actor — where do they get all these Olivier-grade children?), and *Renaissance Man* (w/ Danny DeVito, a movie that tugs at your sentiments like a dog at a pantcuff, except it's hard not to like any movie that has an academic as the hero).

⁶³ What it is lighting for upscale and appearance-conscious adults who want a clear picture of whatever might be aesthetically problematic that day but also want to be reassured that the overall aesthetic situation is pretty darn good.

positively reels at what a luxury-penthouse-type cabin's bathroom must be like.⁶⁴

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

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

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

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

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

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

⁶⁷ This detachable and concussive showerhead can allegedly also be employed for non-hygienic and even prurient purposes, apparently. I overheard guys from a small U. of Texas spring-break contingent (the only college-age group on the whole *Nadir*)

Toiletry-wise, flanking the sink's mirror are broad shallow bolted steel minibaskets with all sorts of free stuff in them. There's Caswell-Massey Conditioning Shampoo in a convenient airplane-liquor-size bottle. There's Caswell-Massey Almond and Aloe Hand and Body Emulsion With Silk. There's a sturdy plastic shoehorn and a chamois mitt for either eyeglasses or light shoeshining — both these items are the navy-blue-on-searing-white that are Celebrity's colors.⁶⁸ There's not one but *two* fresh showercaps at all times. There's good old unpretentious unswishy Safeguard soap. There's washcloths w/o nubble or nap, and of course towels you want to propose to.

In the vestibule's Wondercloset are extra chamois blankets and hypoallergenic pillows and plastic CELEBRITY CRUISES—emblazoned bags of all different sizes and configurations for your laundry and optional dry cleaning, etc.⁶⁹

But all this is still small potatoes compared to 1009's fascinating and potentially malevolent toilet. A harmonious concordance of elegant form and vigorous function, flanked by rolls of tissue so soft as to be without the usual perforates for tearing, my toilet has above it this sign: **THIS TOILET IS CONNECTED TO A VACUUM SEWAGE SYSTEM. PLEASE DO NOT THROW INTO THE TOILET ANYTHING THAN ORDINARY TOILET WASTE AND TOILET PAPER**⁷⁰

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

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

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

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

Yes that's right a *vacuum toilet*. And, as with the exhaust fan above, not a lightweight or unambitious vacuum. The toilet's flush produces a brief but traumatizing sound, a kind of held high-B gargle, as of some gastric disturbance on a cosmic scale. Along with this sound comes a concussive suction so awesomely powerful that it's both scary and strangely comforting — your waste seems less removed than *hurled* from you, and hurled with a velocity that lets you feel as though the waste is going to end up someplace so far away from you that it will have become an abstraction . . . a kind of existential-level sewage treatment.^{71,72}

⁷¹ It's pretty hard not to see connections between the exhaust fan and the toilet's vacuums — an almost Final Solution—like eradication of animal wastes and odors (wastes and odors that are by all rights a natural consequence of Henry VIII—like meals and unlimited free Cabin Service and fruit baskets) — and the death-denial/-transcendence fantasies that the 7NC Luxury Megacruise is trying to enable.

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

11

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

12

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

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

^{72a} (literally)

⁷³ It is not "beautiful"; it is "pretty." There's a difference.

minutes,⁷⁴ but other than that it's just me and the ZnO and hat and about a thousand empty and identically folded high-quality deck chairs. The 12-Aft Towel Guy has almost nobody to exercise his zeal on, and by 1000h. I'm on my fifth new towel.

Here the semi-agoraphobe can stand alone at the ship's highest port rail and gaze pensively out to sea. The sea off Cozumel is a kind of watery indigo through which you can see the powder-white of the bottom. In the middle distance, underwater coral formations are big cloud-shapes of deep purple. You can see why people say of calm seas that they're "glassy": at 1000h. the sun assumes a kind of Brewster's Angle w/r/t the surface and the harbor lights up as far as the eye can see: the water moves a million little ways at once, and each move makes a sparkle. Out past the coral, the water gets progressively darker in orderly baconish stripes — I think this phenomenon has to do with perspective. It's all extremely pretty and peaceful. Besides me and the T.G. and the orbiting joggers, there's only a supine older lady reading *Codependent No More* and a man standing way up at the fore part of the starboard rail videotaping the sea. This sad and cadaverous guy, who by the second day I'd christened Captain Video, has tall hard gray hair and Birkenstocks and very thin hairless calves, and he is one of the cruise's more prominent eccentrics.⁷⁵ Pretty much everybody on the *Nadir* qualifies as camera-crazy, but Captain Video camcords absolutely *everything*, including

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

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

meals, empty hallways, endless games of geriatric bridge — even leaping onto Deck 11's raised stage during Pool Party to get the crowd from the musicians' angle. You can tell that the magnetic record of Captain Video's Megacruise experience is going to be this Warholianly dull thing that is exactly as long as the Cruise itself. Captain Video's the only passenger besides me who I know for a fact is cruising without a relative or companion, and certain additional similarities between C.V. and me (the semi-agoraphobic reluctance to leave the ship in port, for one thing) tend to make me uncomfortable, and I try to avoid him as much as possible.

The semi-agoraphobe can also stand at Deck 12's starboard rail and look way down at the army of *Nadir* passengers being disgorged by the Deck 3 egress. They keep pouring out the door and down the narrow gangway. As each person's sandal hits the pier, a sociolinguistic transformation from *cruiser* to *tourist* is effected. At this very moment, 1300+ upscale tourists with currency to unload and experiences to experience and record compose a serpentine line stretching all the way down the Cozumel pier, which pier is poured cement and a good quarter-mile long and leads to the TOURISM CENTER,⁷⁶ a kind of mega-Quonset structure where Organized Shore Excursions⁷⁷ and cabs

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

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

⁷⁶ (its sign's in English, significantly)

⁷⁷ In Ocho Rios on Monday the big tourist-draw was apparently some sort of waterfall a whole group of *Nadirites* could walk up inside with a guide and umbrellas to protect their cameras. In Grand Cayman yesterday the big thing was Duty-Free rum and something called Bernard Passman Black Coral Art. Here in Cozumel it's supposedly silver jewelry hawked by hard-dickering peddlers, and more Duty-Free liquor, and a

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

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

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

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

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

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

⁷⁹ The anchor is gigantic and must weigh a hundred tons, and — delightfully — it really is anchor-shaped, i.e. the same shape as anchors in tattoos.

knotted onto what look like giant railroad ties studding the pier. The crew insist on calling the ropes "lines" even though each one is at least the same diameter as a tourist's head.

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

Looking down from a great height at your countrymen waddling in expensive sandals into poverty-stricken ports is not one of the funner moments of a 7NC Luxury Cruise, however. There is something inescapably *bovine* about an American tourist in motion as part of a group. A certain greedy placidity about them. Us, rather. In port we automatically become *Peregrinator americanus*, *Die Lumpenamerikaner*. The Ugly Ones. For me, *boviscopophobia*⁸⁰ is an even stronger motive than semi-agoraphobia for staying on the ship when we're in port. It's in port that I feel most implicated, guilty by perceived association. I've barely been out of the U.S.A. before, and never as part of a high-income herd, and in port — even up here above it all on Deck 12, just watching — I'm newly and unpleasantly conscious of being an American, the same way I'm always suddenly conscious of being white every time I'm around a lot of nonwhite people. I cannot help imagining us as we appear to them, the impassive Jamaicans and Mexicans,⁸¹ or especially to the non-Aryan preterite crew of the *Nadir*. All week I've

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

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

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

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

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

And then in the late A.M. the isolate clouds overhead start moving toward one another, and in the early P.M. they begin very slowly interlocking like jigsaw pieces, and by evening the puzzle will be solved and the sky will be the color of old dimes.⁸²

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

⁸² This dawn-and-dusk cloudiness was a pattern. In all, three of the week's days could be called substantially cloudy, and it rained a bunch of times, including all Friday in port in Key West. Again, I can see no way to blame the *Nadir* or Celebrity Cruises Inc. for this happenstance.

Here, as in the other ports, Jet Skis buzz the *Nadir* all morning. There's about half a dozen this time. Jet Skis are the mosquitoes of Caribbean ports, annoying and irrelevant and apparently always there. Their noise is a cross between a gargle and a chain saw. I am tired of Jet Skis already and have never even been on a Jet Ski. I remember reading somewhere that Jet Skis are incredibly dangerous and accident-prone, and I take a certain unkind comfort in this as I watch blond guys with washboard stomachs and sunglasses on fluorescent cords buzz around making hieroglyphs of foam.

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

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

The 12-Aft Towel Guy, a spectral Czech with eyes so inset they're black from brow-shadow, stands very straight and expressionless by his cart, playing what looks like Rock-Paper-Scissors with himself. I've learned that the 12-Aft Towel Guy is immune to chatty journalistic probing — he gives me a look of what I can only call *withering neutrality* whenever I go get another towel. I am reapplying ZnO. Captain Video isn't filming now but is looking at the harbor through a square he's made of his hands. He's the type where you can tell without even looking closely that he's talking to himself. This other Megacruise ship is now docking right next to us, a procedure which apparently demands a lot of coded blasts on its world-ending horn. But maybe the single best A.M. visual in the harbor is another big organized 7NC-tourist thing: A group of *Nadirites* is learning to snorkel in the lagoonish waters just

⁸³ A further self-esteem-lowerer is how bored all the locals look when they're dealing with U.S. tourists. We bore them. Boring somebody seems way worse than offending or disgusting him.

offshore; off the port bow I can see a good 150 solid citizens floating on their stomachs, motionless, the classic Dead Man's Float, looking like the massed and floating victims of some hideous mishap — from this height a macabre and riveting sight. I have given up looking for dorsal fins in port. It turns out that sharks, apparently being short on aesthetic sense, are never seen in pretty Caribbean ports, though a couple Jamaicans had lurid if dubious stories of barracudas that could take off a limb in one surgical drive-by. Nor in Caribbean ports is there ever any evident kelp, glasswort, algaeic scuz, or any of the sapropel the regular ocean's supposed to have. Probably sharks like murkier and scuzzier waters; potential victims could see them coming too easily down here.

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

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

look up at us, and more than a few of the *Dreamward*ites way below lift their own camcorders and point them up our way in a kind of almost defensive or retaliatory gesture, and for just a moment they and C.V. compose a tableau that looks almost classically postmodern.

Because the *Dreamward* is lined up right next to us, almost porthole to porthole, with its Deck 12's port rail right up flush⁸⁴ against our Deck 12's starboard rail, the *Dreamward*'s semi-agoraphobic shore-shunners and I can stand at the rails and sort of check each other out in the sideways way of two muscle cars lined up at a stoplight. We can sort of see how we stack up against each other. I can see the *Dreamward*'s rail-leaners looking the *Nadir* up and down. Their faces are shiny with high-SPF sunblock. The *Dreamward* is blindingly white, white to a degree that seems somehow aggressive and makes the *Nadir*'s own white look more like buff or cream. The *Dreamward*'s snout is a little more tapered and aerodynamic-looking than our snout, and its trim is a kind of fluorescent peach, and the beach umbrellas around its Deck 11 pools⁸⁵ are also peach — our beach umbrellas are light orange, which has always seemed odd given the white-and-navy motif of the *Nadir*, and now seems to me ad hoc and shabby. The *Dreamward* has more pools on Deck 11 than we do, plus what looks like a whole other additional pool behind glass on Deck 6; and their pools' blue is that distinctive chlorine-blue — the *Nadir*'s two small pools are both seawater and kind of icky, even though the pools in the Celebrity brochure had sneakily had that electric-blue look of good old chlorine.

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

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

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

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

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

This saturnine line of thinking proceeds as the clouds overhead start to coalesce and the sky takes on its regular clothly P.M. weight. I am suffering here from a delusion, and I know it's a delusion, this envy of another ship, and still it's painful. It's also representative of a psychological syndrome that I notice has gotten steadily worse as the Cruise wears on, a mental list of dissatisfactions and grievances that started picayune but has quickly become nearly despair-grade. I know that the syndrome's cause is not simply the contempt bred of a week's familiarity with the poor old *Nadir*, and that the source of all

the dissatisfactions isn't the *Nadir* at all but rather plain old humanly conscious me, or, more precisely, that ur-American part of me that craves and responds to pampering and passive pleasure: the Dissatisfied Infant part of me, the part that always and indiscriminately WANTS. Hence this syndrome by which, for example, just four days ago I experienced such embarrassment over the perceived self-indulgence of ordering even more gratis food from Cabin Service that I littered the bed with fake evidence of hard work and missed meals, whereas by last night I find myself looking at my watch in real annoyance after fifteen minutes and wondering where the fuck is that Cabin Service guy with the tray already. And by now I notice how the tray's sandwiches are kind of small, and how the wedge of dill pickle⁸⁶ always soaks into the starboard crust of the bread, and how the damn Port hallway is too narrow to really let me put the used Cabin Service tray outside 1009's door at night when I'm done eating, so that the tray sits in the cabin all night and in the A.M. adulterates the olfactory sterility of 1009 with a smell of rancid horseradish, and how this seems, by the Luxury Cruise's fifth day, deeply dissatisfying.

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

⁸⁶ (I hate dill pickles, and C.S. churlishly refuses to substitute gherkins or butter chips)

⁸⁷ It may well be *the* Big One, come to think of it.

⁸⁸ The fantasy they're selling is the whole reason why all the subjects in all the brochures' photos have facial expressions that are at once orgasmic and oddly slack: these expressions are the facial equivalent of going "Aaaahhhhh," and the sound is not just that of somebody's Infantile part exulting in finally getting the total pampering it's always wanted but also that of the relief all the other parts of that person feel when the Infantile part finally *shuts up*.

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

I'm standing here on Deck 12 looking at a *Dreamward* that I bet has cold water that'd turn your knuckles blue, and, like Frank Conroy, part of me realizes that I haven't washed a dish or tapped my foot in line behind somebody with multiple coupons at a supermarket checkout in a week; and yet instead of feeling refreshed and renewed I'm anticipating just how totally stressful and demanding and unpleasurable regular landlocked adult life is going to be now that even just the premature removal of a towel by a sepulchral crewman seems like an

assault on my basic rights, and plus now the sluggishness of the Aft elevator is an outrage, and the absence of 22.5-lb dumbbells in the Olympic Health Club's dumbbell rack is a personal affront. And now as I'm getting ready to go down to lunch I'm mentally drafting a really mordant footnote on my single biggest peeve about the *Nadir*: *soda-pop is not free*, not even at dinner: you have to order a Mr. Pibb from the 5☆C.R.'s maddeningly E.S.L.-hampered cocktail waitress just like it was a fucking Slippery Nipple, and then you have to sign for it right there at the table, and they *charge* you — and they don't even *have* Mr. Pibb; they foist Dr Pepper on you with a maddeningly unapologetic shrug when any *fool* knows Dr Pepper is *no substitute* for Mr. Pibb, and it's an absolute goddamned travesty, or at any rate extremely dissatisfying indeed.⁸⁹

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

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

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

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Every night, the 10-Port cabin steward, Petra, when she turns down your bed, leaves on your pillow — along with the day's last mint and Celebrity's printed card wishing you sweet dreams in six languages — the next day's *Nadir Daily*, a phatic little four-page ersatz newspaper printed on white vellum in a navy-blue font. The *ND* has historical nuggets on upcoming ports, pitches for Organized Shore

But of course you can't go just by ticket revenues, because where movie theaters really make their money is at the concession stand.

The *Nadir* sells a shitload of drinks. Full-time beverage waitresses in khaki shorts and Celebrity visors are unobtrusively everywhere — poolside, on Deck 12, at meals, entertainments, Bingo. Soda-pop is \$2.00 for a very skinny glass (you don't pay cash right there; you sign for it and then they sock you with a printed Statement of Charges on the final night), and exotic cocktails like Wallbangers and Fuzzy Navels go as high as \$5.50. The *Nadir* doesn't do tacky stuff like oversalt the soup or put bowls of pretzels all over the place, but a 7NC Luxury Cruise's crafted atmosphere of indulgence and endless partying — “Go on, You Deserve It” — more than conduces to freeflowing wine. (Let's not forget the cost of a fine wine w/supper, the ever-present sommeliers). Of the different passengers I asked, more than half estimated their party's total beverage tab at over \$500. And if you know even a little about the beverage markups in any restaurant/bar operation, you know a lot of that \$500's going to end up as net profit. Other keys to profitability: a lot of the ship's service staff's income isn't figured into the price of the Cruise ticket: you have to tip them at week's end or they're screwed (another peeve is that the Celebrity brochure neglects to mention this). And it turns out that a lot of the paid entertainment on the *Nadir* is “vended out” — agencies contract with Celebrity Cruises to supply teams like the Matrix Dancers for all the stage shows, the Electric Slide lessons, etc.

Another contracted vendor is Deck 8's Mayfair Casino, whose corporate proprietor pays a flat weekly rate plus an unspecified percentage to the *Nadir* for the privilege of sending their gorgeous dealers and four-deck shoes against passengers who've learned the rules of 21 and Caribbean Stud Poker from an “Educational Video” that plays continuously on one of the At-Sea TV's channels. I didn't spend all that much time in the Mayfair Casino — the eyes of 74-year-old Cleveland grandmothers pumping quarters into the slots of twittering machines are not much fun to spend time looking at — but I was in there long enough to see that if the *Nadir* gets even a 10% vig on the Mayfair's weekly net, then Celebrity is making a killing.

Excursions and specials in the Gift Shop, and stern stuff in boxes with malaprop-headlines like QUARANTINES ON TRANSIT OF FOOD and MISUSE OF DRUG ACTS 1972.⁹⁰

Right now it's Thursday 16 March, 0710h., and I'm alone at the 5☆C.R.'s Early Seating Breakfast, Table 64's waiter and towering busboy hovering nearby.⁹¹ We've rounded the final turn and are on our return trajectory toward Key West, and today is one of the week's two "At-Sea" days when shipboard activities are at their densest and most organized; and this is the day I've picked to use the *Nadir Daily* as a Baedeker as I leave Cabin 1009 for a period well in excess of half an hour and plunge headfirst into the recreational fray and keep a precise and detailed log of some really representative experiences as together now we go In Quest of Managed Fun. So everything that follows from here on out is from this day's p.&d. experiential log:

⁹⁰ Snippet of latter item: "All persons entering each island [?] are warned that it is a CRIMINAL OFFENSE to import or have possession of narcotics and other Controlled Drugs, including marijuana. Penalties for drug offenders are severe." Half of the Port Lecture before we hit Jamaica consisted of advice about stuff like two-timing street dealers who'll sell you a quarter-oz. of crummy pot and then trot down to a constable and collect a bounty for fingering you. Conditions in the local jails are described just enough to engage the grimmer parts of the imagination.

Celebrity Cruises' own onboard drug policy remains obscure. Although there are always a half-dozen humorless Security guys standing burlily around the *Nadir's* gangway in port, you never get searched when you reboard. I never saw or smelled evidence of drug use on the *Nadir* — as with concupiscence, it just doesn't seem like that kind of crowd. But there must be colorful incidents in the *Nadir's* past, because the Cruise staff became almost operatic in their cautions to us as we headed back to Fort Lauderdale on Friday, though every warning was preceded by an acknowledgment that the exhortation to flush/toss anything Controlled *surely* couldn't apply to anyone on this particular cruise. Apparently Fort Lauderdale's Customs guys regard homebound 7NC passengers sort of the way small-town cops regard out-of-state speeders in Saab Turbos. An old veteran of many 7NCLCs told one of the U. Texas kids ahead of me in the Customs line the last day "Kiddo, if one of those dogs stops at your bag, you better hope he lifts his leg."

⁹¹ It's a total mystery when these waiters sleep. They serve at the Midnight Buffet every night, and then help clean up after, and then they appear in the 5☆C.R. in clean tuxes all over again at 0630h. the next day, always so fresh and alert they look slapped.

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

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

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

Table 64's waiter's name is, as mentioned before, Tibor. Mentally I refer to him as "The Tibster," but never out loud. Tibor has dismantled my artichokes and my lobsters and taught me that extra-well-done is not the only way meat can be palatable. We have sort of bonded, I feel. He is 35 and about 5'4" and plump, and his movements have the birdlike economy characteristic of small plump graceful men. Menu-wise, Tibor advises and recommends, but without the hauteur that's always made me hate the gastropedantic waiters in classy restaurants. Tibor is omnipresent without being unctuous or oppressive; he is kind and warm and fun. I sort of love him. His hometown is Budapest and he has a postgraduate degree in Restaurant Management from an unpronounceable Hungarian college. His wife back home is expecting their first child. He is the Head Waiter for Tables 64–67 at all three meals. He can carry three trays w/o precarity and never looks harried or on-the-edge the way most multitabled waiters look. He seems like he cares. His face is at once round and pointy, and rosy. His tux never wrinkles. His hands are soft and pink, and his thumb-joint's skin is unwrinkled, like the thumb-joint of a small child.

Tibor's cuteness has been compared by the women at Table 64 to that of a button. But I have learned not to let his cuteness fool me. Tibor is a pro. His commitment to personally instantiating the *Nadir's* fanatical commitment to excellence is the one thing about which he shows no sense of humor. If you fuck with him in this area he will feel pain and will make no effort to conceal it. See for example the second night, Sunday, at supper: Tibor was circling the table and asking each of us how our entrée was, and we all regarded this as just one of those perfunctory waiter-questions and all perfunctorily smiled and cleared our mouths and said Fine, Fine — and Tibor finally stopped and looked down at us all with a pained expression and changed his timbre slightly so it was clear he was addressing the whole table: "Please. I ask each: is excellent? Please. If excellent, you say, and I am happy. If not excellent, please: do not say excellent. Let me fix. Please." There was no hauteur or pedantry as he addressed us. He just meant what he said. His expression was babe-naked, and we heard him, and nothing was perfunctory again.

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

This morning The Tibster wears a red bow tie and smells faintly of sandalwood. Early Seating Breakfast is the best time to be around him, because he's not very busy and can be initiated into chitchat without looking pained at neglecting his duties. He doesn't know I'm on the *Nadir* as a pseudojournalist. I'm not sure why I haven't told him — somehow I think it might make things hard for him. During E.S.B. chitchat I never ask him anything about Celebrity Cruises or the *Nadir*,⁹² not out of deference to Mr. Dermatitis's pissy injunctions but because I feel like I'd just about die if Tibor got into trouble on my account.

⁹² (except for precise descriptions of whatever dorsal fins he's seen)

Tibor's ambition is someday to return to Budapest⁹³ for good and with his *Nadir*-savings open a sort of newspaper-and-beret-type sidewalk cafe that specializes in something called Cherry Soup. With this in mind, two days from now in Ft. Lauderdale I'm going to tip The Tibster way, way more than the suggested \$3.00 U.S./diem,⁹⁴ balancing out total expenses by radically undertipping both the liplessly sinister maitre d' and our sommelier, an unctuously creepy Ceylonese guy the whole table has christened The Velvet Vulture.

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

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

⁹³ (he pronounces the "-pest" part of this "-persht")

⁹⁴ The last night's *ND* breaks the news about tipping and gives tactful "suggestions" on going rates.

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

⁹⁶ If Pepperidge Farm made communion wafers, these would be them.

service and entertainment personnel, etc. — will I'm afraid be forever unclear: Father DeSandre explains he has no time after the recession for professional queries, because of

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

0930h.: **The Library is open for check-out of games, cards, and books, Location: Library,⁹⁷ Deck 7.**

The *Nadir's* Library is a little glassed-in salon set obliquely off Deck 7's Rendez-Vous Lounge. The Library's all good wood and leather and three-way lamping, an extremely pleasant place, but it's open only at weird and inconvenient times. Only one wall is even shelved, and most of the books are the sorts of books you see on the coffeetables of older people who live in condominiums near unchallenging golf courses: folio-sized, color-plated, with titles like *Great Villas of Italy* and *Famous Tea Sets of the Modern World*, etc. But it's a great place to just hang around and moss out, the Library. Plus this is where the chess sets are. This week also features an unbelievably large and involved jigsaw puzzle that sits about half-done on an oak table in

⁹⁷ Duh.

the corner, which all sorts of different old people come in and work on in shifts. There's also a seemingly endless game of contract bridge always going on in the Card Room right next door, and the bridge players' motionless silhouettes are always there through the frosted glass between Library and C.R. when I'm mosing out and playing with the chess sets.

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

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

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

⁹⁸ Heavy expensive art-carved sets are for dorks.

⁹⁹ This is something else Mr. Dermatitis declined to let me see, but by all reports the daycare on these Megaships is phenomenal, w/squads of nurturing and hyperkinetic young daycare ladies keeping the kids manically stimulated for up to ten-hour stretches via an endless number of incredibly well-structured activities, so tuckering the kids out that they collapse mutely into bed at 2000h. and leave their parents free to plunge into the ship's nightlife and Do It All.

Deirdre pulls up a chair and says she usually likes to be black and informs me that in lots of cultures black isn't thanatotic or morbid but is the spiritual equivalent of what white is in the U.S. and that in these other cultures it's *white* that's morbid. I tell her I already know all that. We start. I push some pawns and Deirdre develops a knight. Deirdre's mom watches the whole game from a standing position behind the kid's seat,¹⁰⁰ motionless except for her eyes. I know within seconds that I despise this mom. She's like some kind of stage-mother of chess. Deirdre seems like an OK type, though — I've played precocious kids before, and at least Deirdre doesn't hoot or smirk. If anything, she seems a little sad that I don't turn out to be more of a stretch for her.

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

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

¹⁰⁰ The only chairs in the Library are leather wing chairs with low seats, so only Deirdre's eyes and nose clear the board's table as she sits across from me, adding a Kilroyishly surreal quality to the humiliation.

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

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

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

Below the center table is an enormous box of fresh Ping-Pong balls, and apparently several more of these boxes are in the storage locker behind the Golf-Drive Net, which again seems judicious given the number of balls in each game that get smashed or blown out to sea.¹⁰¹ They also have a big peg-studded board on the bulkhead's wall with over a dozen different paddles, both the plain-wooden-grip-and-head-

¹⁰¹ I imagine it would be pretty interesting to trail a Megaship through a 7NC Cruise and just catalogue the trail of stuff that bobs in its wake.

with-thin-skin-of-cheap-pebbly-rubber kind and the fancy-wrapped-grip-and-head-with-thick-mushy-skin-of-unpebbled-rubber kind, all in Celebrity's snazzy white/navy motif.¹⁰²

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

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

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

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

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

"Wicked hat. I want that hat. Boss hat."

"Can't have it."

"Wicked motherfucking hat. Spiderman be dope."¹⁰⁴

"Sentimental value. Long story behind this hat."

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

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

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

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

¹⁰⁶ The single most confounding thing about the young and hip cruisers on the *Nadir* is that they seem truly to love the exact same cheesy disco music that we who were young and hip in the late '70s loathed and made fun of, boycotting Prom when Donna Summer's "MacArthur Park" was chosen Official Prom Theme, etc.

he's an incredible chatterbox when he's losing. He's been a student at the U. of South Florida for a rather mysterious seven years, and has taken this year off to "get fucking *paid* for a change for a while" on the *Nadir*. He claims to have seen all manner of sharks in these waters, but his descriptions don't inspire much real confidence or dread. We're in the middle of our second game and on our fifth ball. Winston says he's had the chance to do some serious ocean-gazing and soul-searching during his off hours these last few months and has decided to return to U.S.F. in Fall '95 and start college more or less all over, this time majoring not in Business Administration but in something he claims is called "Multimediated Production."

"They have a department in that?"

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

I'm up 18–12. "Sport of the future."

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

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

"Word up."

"No passports. No seasickness. No wind or sunburn or insipid Cruise staff.¹⁰⁷ Total Virtual Motionless Stay-At-Home Simulated Pampering."

"Word."

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

1105h.: Navigation Lecture — Join Captain Nico and learn about the ship's Engine Room, the Bridge, and the basic "nuts 'n bolts" of the ship's operation!

The m.v. *Nadir* can carry 460,000 gallons of nautical-grade diesel fuel. It burns between 40 and 70 tons of this fuel a day, depending on how hard it's travelling. The ship has two turbine engines on each side, one big "Papa" and one (comparatively) little "Son."¹⁰⁸ Each engine has a propeller that's 17 feet in diameter and is adjustable through a lateral rotation of 23.5° for maximum torque. It takes the *Nadir* 0.9 nautical miles to come to a complete stop from its standard speed of 18 knots. The ship can go slightly faster in certain kinds of rough seas than it can go in calm seas — this is for technical reasons that won't fit on the napkin I'm taking notes on. The ship has a rudder, and the rudder has two complex alloy "flaps" that somehow interconfigure to allow a 90° turn. Captain Nico's¹⁰⁹ English is not going to win any elocution ribbons, but he is a veritable blowhole of hard data. He's about my age and height but is just ridiculously good-looking,¹¹⁰ like an extremely fit and tan Paul Auster. The venue here is Deck 11's Fleet Bar,¹¹¹ all blue and white and trimmed

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

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

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

¹¹¹ The Fleet Bar was also the site of **Elegant Tea Time** later that same day, where elderly female passengers wore long white stripper-gloves and pinkies protruded from cups, and where among my breaches of **Elegant Tea Time** etiquette apparently were: (a) imagining people would be amused by the tuxedo-design T-shirt I wore because I hadn't taken seriously the Celebrity brochure's instruction to bring a real tux on the Cruise; (b) imagining the elderly ladies at my table would be charmed by the off-color

in stainless steel, and so abundantly fenestrated that the sunlight makes Captain Nico's illustrative slides look ghostly and vague. Captain Nico wears Ray-Bans but w/o a fluorescent cord. Thursday 16 March is also the day my paranoia about Mr. Dermatitis's contriving somehow to jettison me from the *Nadir* via Cabin 1009's vacuum toilet is at its emotional zenith, and I've decided in advance to keep a real low journalistic profile at this event. I ask a total of just one little innocuous question, right at the start, and Captain Nico responds with a witticism —

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

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

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

Rorschach jokes I made about the rather obscene shapes the linen napkins at each place were origami-folded into; (c) imagining these same ladies might be interested to learn what sorts of things have to be done to a goose over its lifetime in order to produce pâté-grade liver; (d) putting a 3-ounce mass of what looked like glossy black buckshot on a big white cracker and then putting the whole cracker in my mouth; (e) assuming one second thereafter a facial expression I'm told was, under even the most charitable interpretation, inelegant; (f) trying to respond with a full mouth when an elderly lady across the table with a pince-nez and buff-colored gloves and lipstick on her right incisor told me this was Beluga caviar, resulting in (f(1)) the expulsion of several crumbs and what appeared to be a large black bubble and (f(2)) the distorted production of a word that I was told sounded to the entire table like a genital expletive; (g) trying to spit the whole indescribable nauseous glob into a flimsy *paper* napkin instead of one of the plentiful and sturdier *linen* napkins, with results I'd prefer not to describe in any more detail than as *unfortunate*; and (h) concurring, when the little kid (in a bow tie and [no kidding] *tuxedo-shorts*) seated next to me pronounced Beluga caviar "blucky," with a spontaneous and unconsidered expression that was, indeed and unmistakably, a genital expletive.

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

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

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

A deeply sunburned man next to me is taking notes with a Mont Blanc pen in a leatherbound notebook with ENGLER embossed on it.¹¹² Just one moment of foresight on the way from Ping-Pong to Fleet Bar would have prevented my sitting here trying to take notes on paper napkins with a big felt-tip HiLiter. The *Nadir*'s officers have their quarters, mess, and a private bar on Deck 3, it turns out. "In the Bridge also we have different compass to see where we are going." The ship's four patro-filial turbines cannot ever be turned off except in drydock. What they do to deactivate an engine is simply disengage its propeller. It turns out that parallel parking a semi on LSD doesn't even come close to what Captain G. Panagiotakis experiences when he docks the m.v. *Nadir*. The Engler man next to me is drinking a \$5.50 Slippery Nipple, which comes with not one but two umbrellas in it. The rest of the *Nadir*'s crew's quarters are on Deck 2, which also houses the ship's laundry and "the areas of processing of garbage and wastes." Like all Megacruisers, the *Nadir* needs no tugboat in port; this is because it's got "the sternal thrusters and bow thrusters."¹¹³

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

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

¹¹³ (not — mercifully — "bowal thrusters")

out of that company's engineering dept. instead of some fancy MBA program.¹¹⁴ A number of them are clearly Navy veterans or yachtsmen or something. They all compose a very knowledgeable audience and ask involved questions about the bore and stroke of the engines, the management of multiradial torque, the precise distinctions between a C-Class Captain and a B-Class Captain. My attempts at technical notes are bleeding out into the paper napkins until the yellow letters are all ballooned and goofy like subway graffiti. The male 7NC cruisers all want to know stuff about the hydrodynamics of midship stabilizers. They're all the kind of men who look like they're smoking cigars even when they're not smoking cigars. Everybody's complexion is hectic from sun and salt spray and a surfeit of Slippery Nipples. 21.4 knots is a 7NC Megaship's maximum possible cruising speed. There's no way I'm going to raise my hand in this kind of crowd and ask what a knot is.

Several unreproducible questions concern the ship's system of satellite navigation. Captain Nico explains that the *Nadir* subscribes to something called GPS: "This Global Positioning System is using the satellites above to know the position at all times, which gives this data to the computer." It emerges that when we're not negotiating ports and piers, a kind of computerized Autocaptain pilots the ship.¹¹⁵ There's no actual "tiller" or "con" anymore, is the sense I get; there's certainly no protrusive-spoked wooden captain's wheel like these that line the walls

¹¹⁴ In other words, the self-made brass-balled no-bullshit type of older U.S. male whom you least want the dad to turn out to be when you go over to a girl's house to take her to a movie or something with dishonorable intentions rattling around in the back of your mind — an ur-authority figure.

¹¹⁵ This helps explain why Captain G. Panagiotakis usually seems so phenomenally unbusy, why his real job seems to be to stand in various parts of the *Nadir* and try to look vaguely presidential, which he would (look presidential) except for the business of wearing sunglasses inside,^{115a} which makes him look more like a Third World strongman.

^{115a} All the ship's officers wore sunglasses inside, it turned out, and always stood off to the side of everything with their hands behind their backs, usually in groups of three, conferring hieratically in technical Greek.

of the jaunty Fleet Bar, each captain's wheel centered with thole pins that hold up a small and verdant fern.

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

Among the *Nadirites*, only the radically old and formalphiliacal hit Luncheon at the 5☆C.R., where you can't wear swim trunks or a floppy hat. The really happening place for lunch is the buffet at the Windsurf Cafe off the pools and plasticene grotto on Deck 11. Just inside both sets of the Windsurf's automatic doors, in two big bins whose sides are decorated to look like coconut skin, are cornucopias of fresh fruit¹¹⁶ presided over by ice sculptures of a madonna and a whale. The crowds' flow is skillfully directed along several different vectors so that delays are minimal, and the experience of waiting to feed in the Windsurf Cafe is not as bovine as lots of other 7NC experiences.

Eating in the Windsurf Cafe, where things are out in the open and not brought in from behind a mysterious swinging door, makes it even clearer that everything ingestible on the *Nadir* is designed to be absolutely top-of-the-line: the tea isn't Lipton but *Sir Thomas Lipton* in a classy individual vacuum packet of buff-colored foil; the lunch meat is the really good fat- and gristle-free kind that gentiles usually have to crash kosher delis to get; the mustard is something even fancier-tasting than Grey Poupon that I keep forgetting to write down the brand of. And the Windsurf Cafe's coffee — which burbles merrily from spigots in big brushed-steel dispensers — the coffee is, quite simply, the kind of coffee you marry somebody for being able to make. I normally have a firm and neurologically imperative one-cup limit on coffee, but the Windsurf's coffee is so good,¹¹⁷ and the job of deciphering the big

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

¹¹⁷ And it's just coffee qua coffee — it's not Blue Mountain Hazlenut Half-Caf or Sudanese Vanilla With Special Chicory Enzymes or any of that bushwa. The *Nadir*'s is a level-headed approach to coffee that I hereby salute.

yellow Rorschachian blobs of my Navigation Lecture notes so taxing, that on this day I exceed my limit, by rather a lot, which may help explain why the next few hours of this log get kind of kaleidoscopic and unfocused.

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

1314h.: I am now seated back in Deck 8's Rainbow Room watching "Ernst," the *Nadir's* mysterious and ubiquitous Art Auctioneer,¹¹⁸ mediate spirited bidding for a signed Leroy Neiman print. Let me iterate this. Bidding is spirited and fast approaching four figures for a signed Leroy Neiman print — not a signed Leroy Neiman, a signed Leroy Neiman *print*.

1330h.: Poolside Shenanigans! Join Cruise Director Scott Peterson and Staff for some crazy antics and the Men's Best Legs Contest judged by all the ladies at poolside!

Starting to feel the first unpleasant symptoms of caffeine toxicity, hair tucked at staff suggestion into a complimentary Celebrity Cruises swimcap, I take full and active part in the prenominate Shenanigans, which consist mostly of a tourney-style contest where gals in the Gal division and then guys in the Guy division have to slide out on a

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

plastic telephone pole slathered with Vaseline¹¹⁹ and face off against another gal/guy and try to knock each other off the pole and into the pool's nauseous brine by hitting each other with pillowcases filled with balloons. I make it through two rounds and then am knocked off by a hulking and hairy-shouldered Milwaukee newlywed who actually *hits me with his fist* — which as people start to lose their balance and compensate by leaning far forward¹²⁰ can happen — knocking my swimcap almost clear off my head and toppling me over hard to starboard into a pool that's not only got a really high Na-content but is also now covered with a shiny and full-spectrum scum of Vaseline, and I emerge so icky and befouled and cross-eyed from the guy's right hook that I blow what should have been a very legitimate shot at the title in the Men's Best Legs Contest, in which I end up placing third but am told later I would have won the whole thing except for the scowl, swollen and strabismic left eye, and askew swimcap that formed a contextual backdrop too downright goofy to let the full force of my gams' shapeliness come through to the judges.

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

¹¹⁹ (the pole)

¹²⁰ This is what I did, leaned too far forward and into the guy's fist that was clutching the hem of his pillowcase, which is why I didn't cry Foul, even though the vision in my right eye still drifts in and out of focus even back here on land a week later.

at the end of the 1983 Vienna Boys Choir's seminal recording of the mediévally lugubrious *Tenebrae Factae Sunt*. 1420h.: And now I'm in Deck 12's Olympic Health Club, in the back area, the part that's owned by Steiner of London,¹²¹ where the same creamy-faced French women who'd worked 3/11's crowd at Pier 21 now all hang out, and I'm asking to be allowed to watch one of the "Phytomer/Ionithermie Combination Treatment De-Toxifying Inch Loss Treatments"¹²² that some of the heftier ladies on board have been raving about, and I am being told that it's not really a spectator-type thing, that there's nakedness involved, and that if I want to see a P./I.C.T.D.-T.I.L.T. it's going to have to be as the subject of one; and between the quoted price of the treatment and the sensuous recall of the smell of my own singed nostril-hair in Chem. 205 in 1983, I opt to forfeit this bit of managed pampering. If you back off from something really big, the creamy ladies then try to sell you on a facial, which they say "a great large number" of male *Nadirites* have pampered themselves with this week, but I also decline the facial, figuring that at this point in the week the procedure for me would consist mostly in exfoliating half-peeled skin. 1425h.: Now I'm in the small public loo of the Olympic Health Club, a one-holer notable only

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

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

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

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

because O. Newton-John's "Let's Get Physical" plays on an apparently unending loop out of the overhead speaker. I'll go ahead and admit that I have, this week, come in a couple times between UV bombardments and pumped a little iron here in the *Nadir's* Olympic Health Club. Except in the O.H.C. it's more like pumping ultrarefined titanium alloy: all the weights are polished stainless steel, and the place is one of these clubs with mirrors on all four walls that force you into displays of public self-scrutiny that are as excruciating as they are irresistible, and there are huge and insectile-looking pieces of machinery that mimic the aerobic demands of staircases and rowboats and racing bikes and improperly waxed cross-country skis, etc., complete with heart-monitor electrodes and radio headphones; and on these machines there are people in spandex whom you really want to take aside and advise in the most tactful and loving way not to wear spandex.

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

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

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

¹²³ He's also a bit like those small-town politicians and police chiefs who go to shameless lengths to get mentioned in the local newspaper. Scott Peterson's name appears in each day's *Nadir Daily* over a dozen times: "**Backgammon Tournament with your Cruise Director Scott Peterson**"; "**'The World Goes Round' with Jane McDonald,**

to like Scott Peterson a lot, and really do enjoy his talk, a talk that, not surprisingly, turns out to be more about what it's like to be Scott Peterson than what it's like to work on the good old *Nadir*. Topics covered include where and under what circumstances Scott Peterson grew up, how Scott Peterson got interested in cruise ships, how Scott Peterson and his college roommate got their first jobs together on a cruise ship, some hilarious boobos in Scott Peterson's first months on the job, every celebrity Scott Peterson has personally met and shaken the hand of, how much Scott Peterson loves the people he gets to meet working on a cruise ship, how much Scott Peterson loves just working on a cruise ship in general, how Scott Peterson met the future Mrs. Scott Peterson working on a cruise ship, and how Mrs. Scott Peterson now works on a different cruise ship and how challenging it is to sustain an intimate relation as warm and in all respects wonderful as that of Mr. and Mrs. Scott Peterson when you (i.e., Mr. and Mrs. Scott Peterson) work on different cruise ships and lay eyes on each other only about every sixth week, except how but now Scott Peterson's tickled to be able to announce that Mrs. Scott Peterson happens to be on a well-earned vacation and is as a rare treat here this week cruising on the m.v. *Nadir* with him, Scott Peterson, and is as a matter of fact right here with us in the audience today, and wouldn't Mrs. S.P. like to stand up and take a bow.

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

called. So Mrs. Scott Peterson apparently gets out of the shower still wet and sits down on Scott Peterson's stateroom's bathroom's commode. Scott Peterson, in a narrative aside, says how perhaps we've all noticed that the commodes on the m.v. *Nadir* are linked to a state-of-the-art Vacuum Sewage System that happens to generate not a weak or incidental flush-suction. Other *Nadirites* besides just me must fear their toilet, because this gets a big jagged tension-related laugh. Mrs. Scott Peterson¹²⁴ is sinking lower and lower in her salmon-colored chair. Scott Peterson says but so Mrs. Scott Peterson sits down on the commode, still naked and wet from the shower, and attends to nature's summons, and when she's done she reaches over and hits the commode's Flush mechanism, and Scott Peterson says that, in Mrs. Scott Peterson's wet slick condition, the incredible suction of the *Nadir's* state-of-the-art V.S.S. starts actually *pulling her down through the seat's central hole*,¹²⁵ and apparently Mrs. Scott Peterson is just a bit too broad abeam to get sucked down all the way and hurled into some abstract excremental void but rather *sticks*, wedged, halfway down in the seat's hole, and can't get out, and is of course stark naked, and starts screeching for help (by now the live Mrs. Scott Peterson seems very interested in something going on down underneath her table, and mostly only her left shoulder — leather-brown and stippled with freckles — is visible from where I'm sitting); and Scott Peterson tells us that he, Scott Peterson, hears her and comes rushing into the bathroom from the stateroom where he'd been practicing his Professional Smile

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

¹²⁵ At this point in the anecdote I'm absolutely rigid with interest and empathic terror, which will help explain why it's such a huge letdown when this whole anecdote turns out to be nothing but a cheesy Catskills-type joke, one that Scott Peterson has clearly been telling once a week for eons (although maybe not with poor Mrs. Scott Peterson actually sitting right there in the audience, and I find myself hopefully imagining all sorts of nuptial vengeance being wreaked on Scott Peterson for embarrassing Mrs. Scott Peterson like that), the dweeb.

in the bedside table's enormous vanity mirror,¹²⁶ comes rushing in and sees what's happened to Mrs. Scott Peterson and tries to pull her out — her feet kicking pathetically and buttocks and popliteals purpling from the seat's adhesive pressure — but he can't pull her out, she's been wedged in too tight by the horrific V.S.S. suction, and so thanks to some quick thinking Scott Peterson gets on the phone and calls one of the *Nadir's* Staff Plumbers, and the Staff Plumber says Yes Sir Mr. Scott Peterson Sir I'm on my way, and Scott Peterson runs back into the bathroom and reports to Mrs. Scott Peterson that professional help is on the way, at which point it only then occurs to Mrs. Scott Peterson that she's starkers, and that not only are her ectomorphic breasts exposed to full Eurofluorescent view but a portion of her own personal pudendum is clearly visible above the rim of the occlusive seat that holds her fast,¹²⁷ and she screeches Britishly at Scott Peterson to for the bloody love of Christ do something to cover her legally betrothed nethers against the swart blue-collar gaze of the impending Staff Plumber, and so Scott Peterson goes and gets Mrs. Scott Peterson's favorite sun hat, a huge sombrero, in fact the very same huge sombrero Scott Peterson's beloved wife is wearing right . . . umm, just a couple seconds ago was wearing right here in this very Rainbow Room; and but so via the quick and resourceful thinking of Scott Peterson the sombrero is brought from the stateroom into the bathroom and placed over Mrs. Scott Peterson's inbent concave naked thorax, to cover her private parts. And the *Nadir's* Staff Plumber knocks and comes in all overlarge and machine-oil-redolent, w/ tool-belt ajingle, and badly out of breath, and sure enough swart, and he comes into the bathroom and appraises the situation and takes certain complex measurements and performs some calculations and finally tells Mr. Scott Peterson that he thinks he (the Staff Plumber) can get indeed get Mrs. Scott Peterson out of the toilet seat, but that

¹²⁶ [authorial postulate]

¹²⁷ [Again an authorial postulate, but it's the only way to make sense of the remedy she's about to resort to (at this point I still don't know this is all just a corny joke — I'm rigid and bug-eyed with empathic horror for both the intra- and extranarrative Mrs. S.P.).]

extracting that there Mexican fellow in there with Mrs. S.P. is going to be a whole nother story.

1305h.: I've darted just for a second into Deck 7's Celebrity Show Lounge to catch some of the rehearsals for tomorrow night's climactic Passenger Talent Show. Two crew-cut and badly burned U. Texas guys are doing a minimally choreographed dance number to a recording of "Shake Your Groove Thing." Asst. Cruise Director "Dave the Bingo Boy" is coordinating activities from a canvas director's chair at stage left. A septuagenarian from Halifax VA tells four ethnic jokes and sings "One Day at a Time (Sweet Jesus)." A retired Century 21 Realtor from Idaho does a long drum solo to "Caravan." The climactic Passenger Talent Show is apparently a 7NC tradition, as was Tuesday night's Special Costume Party.¹²⁸ Some of the *Nadirites* are deeply into this stuff and have brought their own costumes, music, props. A lithe Canadian couple does a tango complete w/ pointy black shoes and an interdental rose. Then the finale of the P.T.S. is apparently going to be four consecutive stand-up comedy routines delivered by very old men. These men totter on one after the other. One has one of those three-footed canes, another a necktie that looks uncannily like a Denver omelette, another an excruciating stutter. What follow are four successive interchangeable routines where the manner and humor are like exhumed time capsules of the 1950s: jokes about how impossible it is to understand women, about how very much men want to play golf and how their wives try to keep them from playing golf, etc. The routines have the same kind of flamboyant unhipness that makes my own grandparents objects of my pity, awe, and embarrassment all at once. One of the senescent quartet refers to his appearance tomorrow night as a "gig." The one with the tridental cane stops suddenly in the middle of a long joke about skipping

¹²⁸ It was this kind of stuff that combined with the micromanagement of activities to make the *Nadir* weirdly reminiscent of the summer camp I attended for three straight Julys in early childhood, another venue where the food was great and everyone was sunburned and I spent as much time as possible in my cabin avoiding micromanaged activities.

his wife's funeral to play golf and, pointing the cane's tips at Dave the Bingo Boy, demands an immediate and accurate estimate of what the attendance will be for tomorrow night's Passenger Talent Show. Dave the Bingo Boy sort of shrugs and looks at his emery board and says that it's hard to say, that it like varies week to week, whereupon the old guy kind of brandishes his cane and says well it better be substantial because he goddamn well hates playing to an empty house.

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

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

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

From the line, watching, three things are striking: (a) what on TV is a brisk crack is here a whooming roar that apparently is what a shotgun really sounds like; (b) skeetshooting looks comparatively easy, because

now the stocky older guy who's replaced the trim bearded guy at the rail is also blowing these fluorescent skeet away one after the other, so that a steady rain of lumpy orange crud is falling into the *Nadir's* wake; (c) a flying skeet,¹²⁹ when shot, undergoes a frighteningly familiar-looking midflight peripeteia — erupting material, changing vector, and plummeting seaward in a distinctive corkscrewy way that all eerily recalls footage of the 1986 *Challenger* disaster.

Striking thing (b) turns out to be an illusion, one not unlike the illusion I'd had about the comparative easiness of golf from watching golf on TV before I'd actually ever tried to play golf. The shooters who precede me do all seem to fire with a kind of casual scorn, and they all get 8/10 or above. But it turns out that, of these six guys, three have military-combat backgrounds, another two are insufferable East-Coast retro-Yuppie brothers who spend weeks every year hunting various fast-flying species with their "Papa" in southern Canada, and the last has not only his own earmuffs, plus his own shotgun in a special crushed-velvet-lined case, but also his own skeetshooting range in his backyard¹³⁰ in North Carolina. When it's finally my turn, the earmuffs they give me have somebody else's ear-oil on them and don't fit my head. The gun itself is shockingly heavy and stinks of what I'm told is cordite, small pubic spirals of which are still exiting the barrel from the Korea-vet who preceded me and is tied for first with 10/10. The two Yuppie brothers are the only entrants even near my age; both got scores of 9/10 and are now appraising me coolly from identical prep-school-slouch positions against the starboard rail. The Greek non-coms seem extremely bored. I am handed the heavy gun and told to "be bracing a hip" against the aft rail and then to place the stock of the weapon against no *not* the shoulder of my hold-the-gun arm but the shoulder of my pull-the-trigger arm — my initial error in this latter regard results in a severely distorted aim that makes the Greek by the catapult do a rather neat drop-and-roll.

¹²⁹ (these skeet made, I posit, from some kind of extra-brittle clay for maximum frag)

¹³⁰ !

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

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

1600h. – 1700h.: Lacuna.

1700h. – 1815h.: Shower, personal grooming, third viewing of the heart-tweaking last act of *Andre*, attempted shower-steam-rehabilitation of

wool slacks and funereal sportcoat for tonight's 5☆C.R. supper, which in the *ND* is designated sartorially "Formal."¹³¹

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

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

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

Please, let my dickheadedness and humiliation have served some purpose: take my advice and *bring Formalwear*, no matter how absurd it seems, if you go.

week to Tibor about it — i.e. her own birthday — and sits tonight across from Mona wearing just the sort of face you would expect from one privileged child watching another privileged child receive natal treats and attentions that are by all rights her own.

The result of all this is that stony-faced Alice and I¹³² have tonight established a deep and high-voltage bond across the table, united in our total disapproval and hatred of Mona, and are engaging in a veritable ballet of coded little stab-, strangle-, and slap-Mona pantomimes for each other's amusement, Alice and I are, which I've got to say is for me a fun and therapeutic anger-outlet after the day's tribulations.

But the supper's tensest development is that Alice's mother and my own new friend Trudy — whose purslane-and-endive salad, rice pilaf, and Tender Medallions of Braised Veal are simply too perfect tonight to engage any of her critical attention, and who I should mention has, all week, made little secret of the fact that she's not exactly crazy about Alice's Serious Boyfriend Patrick, or about his and Alice's Serious Relationship¹³³ — that Trudy notices and misconstrues my and Alice's coded gestures and stifled giggles as signs of some kind of burgeoning romantic connection between us, and Trudy begins yet once again extracting and spreading out her purse's 4×5s of Alice, and relating little tales of Alice's childhood designed to make Alice appear adorable, and talking Patrick down, and in general I have to say acting like a procuress . . . and this would be bad enough, tension-wise (especially when Esther gets into the act), but now poor Alice — who, even though deeply preoccupied with birthday-deprivation and Mona-hatred, is by no means dim or unperceptive — quickly sees what Trudy's doing, and, apparently terrified that I might possibly share her mother's mispercep-

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

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

tion of my connection with her as anything more than an anti-Mona alliance, begins directing my way a kind of Ophelia-type mad monologue of unconnected Patrick-references and Patrick-anecdotes, all of which causes Trudy to start making her weird dentally asymmetric grimace at the same time she begins cutting at her Tender Medallions of Braised Veal so hard that the sound of her knife against the 5☆C.R.'s bone china gives everybody at the table tooth-shivers; and the mounting tension causes fresh sweatstains to appear in the underarms of my funereal sportcoat and spread nearly to the perimeter of the faded salty remains of Pier 21's original sweatstains; and when Tibor makes his customary post-entrée circuit of the table and asks How Is All Of Everything, I am for the first time since the educational second night unable to say anything other than: Fine.

2045h.

CELEBRITY SHOWTIME

Celebrity Cruises Proudly Presents

HYPNOTIST

NIGEL ELLERY

Hosted by your Cruise Director Scott Peterson

PLEASE NOTE: *Video and audio taping of all shows is strictly prohibited.*

Children, please remain seated with your parents during shows.

No children in the front row.

CELEBRITY SHOW LOUNGE

Other Celebrity Showtime headline entertainments this week have included a Vietnamese comedian who juggles chain saws, a husband-and-wife team that specializes in Broadway love medleys, and, most notably, a singing impressionist named Paul Tanner, who made simply an enormous impression on Table 64's Trudy and Esther, and whose impressions of Engelbert Humperdinck, Tom Jones, and particularly Perry Como were apparently so stirring that a second Popular Demand

Encore Performance by Paul Tanner has been hastily scheduled to follow tomorrow night's climactic Passenger Talent Show.¹³⁴

Stage-hypnotist Nigel Ellery is British¹³⁵ and looks uncannily like 1950s B-movie villain Kevin McCarthy. Introducing him, Cruise Director Scott Peterson informs us that Nigel Ellery "has had the honor of hypnotizing both Queen Elizabeth II and the Dalai Lama."¹³⁶ Nigel Ellery's act combines hypnotic highjinks with a lot of rather standard Borscht Belt patter and audience abuse. And it ends up being such a ridiculously apposite symbolic microcosm of the week's whole 7NC Luxury Cruise experience that it's almost like a setup, some weird form of journalistic pampering.

First off, we learn that not everyone is susceptible to serious hypnosis — Nigel Ellery puts the C.S.L.'s whole 300+ crowd through some simple in-your-seat tests¹³⁷ to determine who in the C.S.L.'s crowd is "suggestibly gifted" enough to participate in the "fun" to come.

¹³⁴ At least guaranteeing the old *Nadirite* comedian w/ cane a full house, I guess.

¹³⁵ His accent indicates origins in London's East End.

¹³⁶ (Not, one would presume, at the same time.)

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

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

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

Maybe the single most strikingly comprehensive 7NC symbol, though, is Nigel Ellery himself. The hypnotist's boredom and hostility are not only undisguised, they are incorporated kind of ingeniously into the entertainment itself: Ellery's boredom gives him the same air of weary expertise that makes us trust doctors and policemen, and his hostility — via the same kind of phenomenon that makes Don Rickles a big star in Las Vegas, I guess — is what gets the biggest roars of laughter from the lounge's crowd. The guy's stage persona is extremely hostile and mean. He does unkind imitations of people's U.S. accents. He ridicules questions from both the subjects and the audience. He makes his eyes burn Rasputinishly and tells people they're going to wet the bed at exactly 3:00 A.M. or drop trou at the office in exactly two weeks. The spectators — mostly middle-aged, it looks like — rock back and forth with mirth and slap their knee and dab at their eyes with hankies. Each moment of naked ill will from Ellery is followed by an enormous circumoral constriction and a palms-out assurance that he's just kidding and that he loves us and that we are a simply marvelous bunch of human beings who are clearly having a very good time indeed.

For me, at the end of a full day of Managed Fun, Nigel Ellery's act is not particularly astounding or side-splitting or entertaining — but neither is it depressing or offensive or despair-fraught. What it is is weird. It's the same sort of weird feeling that having an elusive word on the tip of your tongue evokes. There's something crucially key about Luxury Cruises in evidence here: being entertained by someone who clearly dislikes you, and feeling that you deserve the dislike at the same time that you resent it. All six subjects are now lined up doing syncopated Rockette kicks, and the show is approaching its climax, Nigel Ellery at the microphone getting us ready for something that will apparently involve furiously flapping arms and the astounding mesmeric illusion of flight. Because my own dangerous susceptibility makes it important that I not follow Ellery's hypnotic suggestions too closely or get too deeply involved, I find myself, in my comfortable navy-blue seat, going farther and farther away inside my head, sort of Creatively Visualizing a kind of epiphanic Frank Conroy-type moment of my own, pulling mentally back, seeing the hypnotist and subjects and audience and Celebrity Show Lounge and deck and then whole motorized vessel itself with the eyes of someone not aboard, visualizing the m.v. *Nadir* at night, right at this moment, steaming north at 21.4 knots, with a strong warm west wind pulling the moon backwards through a skein of clouds, hearing muffled laughter and music and Papas' throb and the hiss of receding wake and seeing, from the perspective of this nighttime sea, the good old *Nadir* complexly aglow, angelically white, lit up from within, festive, imperial, palatial . . . yes, this: like a palace: it would look like a kind of floating palace, majestic and terrible, to any poor soul out here on the ocean at night, alone in a dinghy, or not even in a dinghy but simply and terribly floating, a man overboard, treading water, out of sight of all land. This deep and creative visual trance — N. Ellery's true and accidental gift to me — lasted all through the next day and night, which period I spent entirely in Cabin 1009, in bed, mostly looking out the spotless porthole, with trays and various rinds all around me, feeling maybe a little bit glassy-eyed but mostly good — good to be on the *Nadir* and good soon to be off, good that I had survived (in a way) being pampered to death (in a way) — and so I stayed in bed. And even though the tranced stasis caused me to miss the final night's climactic P.T.S. and the Farewell Midnight Buffet and then Saturday's docking and

a chance to have my After photo taken with Captain G. Panagiotakis, subsequent reentry into the adult demands of landlocked real-world life wasn't nearly as bad as a week of Absolutely Nothing had led me to fear.

1995