

1.

THE CRUISE SHIP towered over the dock in San Pedro like an enormous white layer cake, or a floating apartment building. The one thing it didn't look like was an oceangoing vessel. Liv and her family surrendered their bags to porters and carried their backpacks into the terminal building. Her husband, Benjamin, was fascinated by the quay, built to get thousands of people onto fifteen-deck ships.

As they checked in, Liv filled out a form attesting that neither she nor her children had been sick in the last two weeks. It was a lie. Sebastian and Penny were eight and eleven, and it was December—they were walking germ vectors.

“You're saying no illnesses, right?” her cousin Nora murmured beside her. Nora's son, Marcus, was eleven like Penny, and they'd both had the same cold. Nora's six-year-old, June, had a cough.

“Yes,” Liv whispered back.

They turned in the forms. Surely everyone lied and no one was fooled. An agent with bright green glasses took their passports for safekeeping, in exchange for plastic IDs to serve as cabin keys and charge cards.

Penny gazed at her own ID. “So I can buy things with this?”

“If your mom authorizes it,” the agent said.

“Authorize it!” Penny said, brandishing the card at Liv.

“What are you going to buy?” Liv asked.

“Things!”

Two pert young Australian women in white uniforms made them stop for a photograph in front of a life ring. Benjamin put his arm around Liv, with Penny and Sebastian in front of them. These were never satisfying pictures, the family photos. Liv was the same height as Benjamin and she felt herself slouch, even though it was ridiculous to care. The day was unseasonably warm, and she ran a hand up the damp back of her neck, feeling hot and flushed. She kept her hair cropped short so she could swim before work without losing time, but she was reminded by photos that her usually no-nonsense mother thought she should grow it out. Sebastian, blond like Liv, always looked a little wild-eyed in photos, the flash catching him by surprise. Penny had taken to striking poses, as if the world were her own red carpet.

They moved away and Raymond and Nora took their place in front of the life ring with Marcus and June. Liv watched. They were so handsome, Raymond with dark, smooth skin, Nora pale and brunette with a glossy ponytail, the kids tawny-limbed. They looked like an ad featuring a happy biracial family, one that would get horrible troll reactions online. Marcus was tall for eleven and had the beginnings of an Afro, and Junie wore tiny braids. Raymond had cut his hair close for a movie role as a cop.

“Is this the ‘before’ picture?” he asked, after the camera flashed.

“Something like that,” one of the Australians said, smiling. “But you look like the ‘after’ picture.”

Liv couldn’t tell if they had recognized Raymond. She thought not. “He always looks like the ‘after’ picture,” she said.

“I bet,” the girl said.

“Oh my God,” Nora said, as they moved on. “We’re not even on *board* and they’re flirting with him.”

They made their way among milling passengers, across a central court with a patterned marble floor. A giant Christmas tree rose up through three decks.

“*Wow*,” Sebastian breathed.

“It’s like the *Nutcracker*,” Penny said. “But *real*.”

They went up in a glass elevator, past the top of the tree, then down a blue-carpeted corridor. Liv and Nora had booked cabins next to each other, and Liv opened hers with the key card. There was a bottle of champagne and a bowl of fruit inside. The cabinets were pale wood, the bedcovers nautical navy and white. A couch in a little sitting area would pull out for the kids, so the cabin counted as a “suite.” Mirrors made it all look bigger than it was, and the California sun glared bright through the balcony doors. Penny and Sebastian ran outside to look down.

“No going on the balcony unless an adult is here,” Liv said. “Deal?”

“Deal,” they sang in chorus. They ran back in to investigate the clever cupboards and the drawers that latched shut. Marcus and June arrived to compare notes.

“This is exactly backward from ours,” Marcus pronounced.

“That’s so *weird*,” June said, flopping back on the bed, braids bouncing. “I feel like I’m in mirror land!”

A voice came over the loudspeaker, right into the cabin, announcing the lifeboat drill.

“What’s *that*?” June asked.

Their stewardess put her head in the open door. Her name was Perla and she was tiny, her black hair parted in the middle. She showed them where to find the blocky orange foam life preservers in the closet, and pointed out their muster station on the ship’s plan.

“Do we have to get *in* the lifeboats?” Sebastian asked.

“No,” Perla said, laughing. “They only show you.”

The two families headed down the carpeted stairs, past crew members on the landings. In the muster station in the Yacht Club bar, a graceful young man with a microphone—a dancer?—explained the emergency procedure. All the other passengers seemed to be eighty. There were no other children. Penny and Sebastian feigned agonized drowning, and Junie skipped across the carpet. The old people smiled warily at them. Marcus sat beside his parents.

“I’m hungry,” Penny said. “This is taking too long.”

Liv smoothed Penny’s chestnut hair. Her child of appetite and opinion.

“I shouldn’t be thinking about *Titanic*, right?” Raymond said, clicking the buckle over his chest.

“Yes, you should,” Nora told him. “Think about how not to die if we sink.”

Benjamin said, “You know the orange life jackets and the lights are just for finding bodies.”

“I think that’s on airplanes,” Liv said.

“It’s unlikely that we’ll sink,” Marcus said.

“I know, babe,” Nora told her son. “We’re joking.”

The emergency signal sounded, and Marcus clapped his hands over his ears, digging his fingers into his curls.

“Sorry!” Nora said, pressing her hands over his. “It’ll be over soon.” Seven short blasts of the horn and one long one. Then they were released.

Liv checked the glucose monitor on Sebastian’s waistband. “Let’s go to the buffet.”

“It’s open?” Nora asked.

“It’s *always* open, I think.”

“I’ll go unpack,” Benjamin said, which meant he wanted a nap. Raymond wanted to check out the gym. The men carried everyone’s life jackets away.

On the walk to the buffet, Nora linked her arm through Liv’s and put her head on her shoulder, making Liv feel excessively tall. “I love you,” Nora said. “This was a genius idea.”

The children took trays and each got exactly what they wanted: Chinese noodles for Penny, chicken fingers for Sebastian, nori rolls for Marcus, taquitos for June. Watching them eat, Liv felt her mind relax, easing its calculation. Feeding children, even when you had all available resources, took so much planning and forethought. The low-grade anxiety about the next meal started when you were cleaning up the last. But for two weeks there would never be any question about what was for dinner, or lunch, or snack. That roving hunter-gatherer part of her brain, which sucked a lot of power and made the other lights dim—she could just turn it off.

The trip had been Liv’s idea. Nora’s mother died of pancreatic cancer in early summer: swift and painful. After the death, Nora had been flattened by waves of sadness, sobbing jags where she couldn’t breathe or speak. Her mother had been problematic, borderline, sometimes absent. When they were eight, she’d sent Nora to live with Liv’s family, because her new husband didn’t want children around. The cousins had shared a bedroom for two years, until the

new marriage failed and the prodigal mother came back. Nora had always been wry about her mother's flakiness, and trenchant about motherhood in general. No one had predicted that the loss would hit her so hard.

Nora had called Liv in October in despair about Christmas plans. She didn't want to go to Philadelphia to stay with Raymond's parents when she felt like such a mess. She didn't want to be with Liv's parents, the adoptive family of her abandoned childhood. And she didn't want to be home in LA, where the clear blue skies and the empty freeways would make her feel even more isolated and exposed. She wanted to be with family but *not* with family. She wanted to have Christmas but not have it *feel* like Christmas.

Liv was pragmatic, a problem-solver. She got it from her mother, a flinty Colorado litigator. She believed in finding a third way, when the options seemed intolerable, and she believed in throwing money at problems, when it was possible. She found a two-week cruise down the coast of Mexico and Central America, poking into the Panama Canal long enough to watch the locks work—bait for her engineer husband—and then heading north to LA again. It would be just the two families, Liv and Nora and their husbands and kids. They wouldn't have to fly, they could board in San Pedro. Raymond was between movies, and Liv's office was deserted over Christmas. Benjamin could make his own schedule as long as he kept pace on his projects. They could all take Nora away.

"You always said cruises were tacky," Benjamin said when Liv suggested it.

"They are," she said.

"And an environmental nightmare."

"That's why it's such a good idea," she said. "My parents won't want to go because of fossil fuels and norovirus. Your parents want to

go to Cuba. So no hurt feelings. It will be just us, and it will be different. It's just what Nora wants."

"And the fossil fuels?"

She felt a little shudder of guilt. "The ship is going anyway?"

Benjamin said yes, and Liv called Nora, who started to cry again, and then they went online to look at cabins.

The kids would have each other to play with, their second cousins. When Nora had been crying on Liv's couch over the summer, she was also worrying about Marcus. At five he'd known every country and every capital in the world. (Penny, at the same age, had known Colorado, Disneyland, and Santa Monica, where her modern dance class was.) Certain things, like the emergency horn, were intolerable to Marcus, but he didn't meet all the parameters for a diagnosis. Nora had been looking for a school that would understand her son's strengths and his difficulties. Raymond wanted one where there might be other black kids. Liv had talked them into trying Penny and Sebastian's school. It was small, progressive, and at least working on diversity. Their late application was accepted, and Marcus seemed happy there. His teacher created a special geography project for him, and let him read what he wanted.

So now Penny and Marcus were in sixth grade at the same school, and they would grow up together almost as their mothers had. For most of history, the two sets of children would have been betrothed to each other from birth, and Liv would have been happy with that. Sebastian and June adored each other like two puppies, even though June was younger. Sebastian, sweet-tempered and pliable, could grow up and be drawn in by some damaged girl who would blame him for her pain. Liv would have loved to promise him to funny, curious June, and seal it now.

At the buffet table, Nora studied the ship's schedule. There was an

evening movie in the Kids' Club, one of the *Madagascar* sequels. The ship started to move, and the children ran out on deck and leaned on the varnished honey-colored rail. The bow thrusters churned the blue water white against the dock. Liv hoped Benjamin was watching from the balcony. It was majestic, the stately movement out of San Pedro, the lacy trail of wake behind them, the tiny boats below.

When they were out to sea and had explored the ship—skirting the clanging casino and gaping at the terrible paintings for sale, of martinis and cars—the kids settled in to watch the movie. The chaperones seemed reasonably sane. A New Zealander named Deb promised to sit near Sebastian in case his monitor went off, and Liv and Nora went to change for a grown-up dinner.

When she got back to the cabin, Benjamin was stretched out on top of the bedcovers, waking up from his nap. “Wait, so we can just shunt them off to the Kids' Club?” he asked.

“Good, right?”

“And they're fine with it?”

“They're watching animated animals. They don't love us that much.”

“Oh my God,” Benjamin said, rubbing his hands in his hair. “This is amazing.”

“Did you see the bow thrusters as we left?”

“Not if they weren't on the backs of my eyelids.”

Liv showered and put on a cotton dress, and Benjamin took her place in the bathroom. The panoptic mirrors in the cabin left no secrets, and she wished she were thinner, and then wished she didn't wish that. Her hair was looking a little straw-like these days. She tucked the short strands behind her ears.

At dinner, Raymond ordered champagne from the Russian wine steward. “To Liv,” he said, “for the best idea since Velcro kids' shoes.”

Liv made a demurring noise but held her glass up anyway.

“*And* for generally running my life much better than I do,” Nora said.

Liv smiled. “Not everyone will let me run theirs.”

She had introduced Nora to Raymond. He’d played a marine lieutenant in the first movie Liv ever developed, and was nominated for an Image Award from the NAACP. Liv had invited Nora to the party and loaned her a dress. Nora wore her hair up in a dark sweep, and on her narrow shoulders the neckline of the dress hung fetchingly low. She had a heart-shaped, Quakerish face, and an adorable smallness that made Liv feel like a Norwegian giantess, especially in heels. As the three of them stood at a cocktail table eating passed appetizers, Raymond had turned to Nora with the full light of his dazzling actor handsomeness, and Liv had realized she was superfluous and gone off to get a drink.

The Russian wine steward brought them a bottle of rosé as soon as they finished the champagne. His name tag said YURI. “You were that astronaut in that movie,” he said, pouring the first taste for Raymond.

“He was,” Liv said. The astronaut movie had been hers, too.

“I knew it!” Yuri said. “I watch a lot of movies in my cabin.”

“She made that film happen,” Raymond said, indicating Liv, but the steward wasn’t interested in development, only in stardom.

Caviar and toast arrived, with sour cream and egg and chopped onion in little silver dishes.

“A token of my admiration,” Yuri said with a little bow. “Caviar from my country.”

Liv took a bite, the salty beads bursting on her tongue. There was soup, and fish, and lemon tart. She got slightly, pleasantly drunk, as she and Benjamin never did at a restaurant in LA, where they’d have to drive home.

They collected the children at the Kids' Club and made their way back to their cabins, the surge of the ship making the carpeted corridor into an uphill walk, then a slightly downhill run. The kids raced down, laughing, then did an exaggerated mountaineering trudge when the corridor ran uphill again. There were congratulatory kisses all around as they said goodnight at the cabin doors, and there was a towel twisted into the shape of a swan on the foot of the bed.

In the morning, Benjamin took Penny and Sebastian off to the Kids' Club, leaving Liv to luxuriate in the empty cabin, in the wide, soft bed between the pressed, clean sheets. Ironed sheets always reminded her of her grandmother, looping the fabric at the ironing board to keep it off the floor. Pressed sheets seemed like the ultimate in both domestic comfort and domestic drudgery.

At lunch they met an Argentinian family, very glamorous, the father silver-haired, the mother with discreet and expensive-looking work done on her face. She'd left the forehead alone. They had two striking adolescent children, a boy and a girl, and they were all going ashore in Acapulco the next morning. After some private discussion, Liv and Nora decided not to join them. Why go ashore in a country of beheadings and food-borne pathogens? Everything they needed was here.

Marcus studied the chart on a wall near the bridge, where an officer updated the ship's position every hour. Nora stood with her son and talked through the itinerary, their turnaround in Panama and return back up the coast.

That night, the towel on the bed was shaped like an elephant. Liv and Benjamin got Penny and Sebastian into their pajamas, then crowded into Nora and Raymond's cabin for a bedtime book. Raymond read aloud from *Treasure Island*, doing all the pirate voices. The book was heavier going than Liv remembered, but it didn't matter with Raymond narrating. He was more than they deserved, as a

bedtime reader. Most people's husbands just made you appreciate your own, but not Raymond. Marcus and June leaned against him in the big bed. Liv lay on the pullout beside Benjamin and fell asleep. Sebastian had to prod her arm when it was time to go back to their own cabin.

The next morning, anchored in the blue sea off Acapulco, Liv went for a run on deck and came upon her husband with a notebook, sketching the davits that suspended the lifeboats. She loved Benjamin's capacity for total absorption in the structure of things, even though she sometimes felt she had to tug on his leg to get him back to earth.

Liv and Nora had an unserious game of paddle tennis after lunch, then sat in deck chairs reading novels and talking. Benjamin called it "estro-lock," the way the two women could talk for hours and lose track of time. They ended up in conversation across any table, screening out noise from kids and men. They could talk about shallow things without judgment and deep things without self-consciousness. They shared a childhood vocabulary, a set of references. Old ladies beamed at their handsome children in swimsuits—freckled Penny and towheaded Sebastian, tall Marcus with his long legs and tiny June in her many braids. Liv felt like a young mother in a Fitzgerald novel, glowing with life. If she'd had pearls she would have sunned them.

A few times during the day, Liv saw the ship's tenders ferrying people ashore and wondered if they should have gone. That was something she was trying to work on: not always second-guessing her decisions, wondering if she'd made the wrong one. But how could you know if you'd made the right decision, when you only saw one version play out?

The Argentinian family came aboard from their excursion, looking exhausted and hot. "We went snorkeling on a catamaran," the teenage daughter said. "I threw up four times."

So maybe that was all Liv needed—someone to check out the alternate path and report back.

At dinner, they debriefed on the day. Raymond said that the Brazilian trainer in the gym was trying to sell him one of the spa treatments.

Nora made a face. “She just wants to slather you in mud and roll you in cling wrap.”

“Is that what the treatment is?” Liv asked. She hadn’t been sure what the ads were selling. Pills? Colonics?

“I think they put electrodes on your—problem areas,” Nora said.

“Wait,” Benjamin said. “This woman thinks *Raymond* has problem areas?”

“Is it bad that I’m intrigued?” Raymond asked.

“Yes!” the rest of them said, all together.

After dinner, they gathered in the other cabin for Raymond to read aloud. The children stared wide-eyed in dread of the Black Spot, just as Liv had once.

“If I were in *Treasure Island*,” Sebastian said, nestled under her arm, “there wouldn’t be a book, because as soon as the first scary thing happened, I would just run home.”

“I would go be a pirate,” Junie whispered, into her father’s shoulder.

“You would be a great pirate,” Raymond told her. “And Sebastian could stay back and mind the fort. That’s important, too.”

Liv reminded herself to be grateful for Nora and Raymond, and never to take them for granted. They were her family, and they were also the family she had chosen, and she loved them and felt extraordinarily lucky. If hell was other people, you just had to find the people who weren’t the inferno, and make space for them in your life.