

ABDULLAH HUSSEIN

The Sea*

SHE WAS my very first friend on the Caledonia.

“One, two, three ... four, five, six, seven, eight, eight, eight ... fifteen, sixteen, seventeen...” She was counting seagulls, close beside me, as she stood bent over the railing.

We were crossing the Atlantic. On the deck where we stood in the fading light of the day, the ship’s band had struck up a tune minutes ago that had made us sad and happy at the same time. The tune was full of melancholy farewell strains mixed with a joyous sense of anticipation for the coming voyage. It was evening now and we were sailing in coastal waters. The lights of the now distant shore glimmered on the surface of a darkening sea and a southerly wind blew gently.

The sea!—I thought, awash in a sudden onrush of joy—the sea!

“One, two, three, three ...” The little girl in the yellow beret started all over again.

A flock of seagulls had been following us from the moment the ship had raised anchor. There must have been about two dozen in all, but it was impossible to count them one by one. Like us, they seemed to have been tremendously affected by the ship’s departure amidst the slow, sad notes of the farewell tunes. They flew haphazardly—merry drunkards staggering in their gait—cutting across each other’s paths, sometimes dipping into the water, sometimes rocking gently on the waves like so many tiny paper boats. Buffeted by a strong wind that grew more violent by the second, the sea appeared to be a sleeping giant whose breast was rising and falling in massive swells and whose terrible snoring was piercing our eardrums. The ship had begun to roll.

The sea!—I thought, feeling a trifle uneasy.

“Eighteen ...,” she shouted.

“Huh?”

*“Samandar” was first published in *Savērā* 31:39–73.

“Yes, eighteen. I’ve counted them all.”

“You have?” I shouted back. “Well then, congratulations.”

She tucked a lock of her blonde hair under her beret and edged closer to me. “You’ve counted them, too, haven’t you?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t know.”

She giggled and her mouth opened to reveal a line of sparkling, white, regular teeth.

“How come? You’ve been watching them for a long time too.”

“No. I was looking at the shore.”

“The shore?” She hoisted herself up on the middle rail and peered into the blue distance. “Where is the shore?”

“It’s disappeared now.”

“Where?”

“Beyond the sea.”

“Beyond the sea?” she repeated, still clinging to the rail and struggling with a rebellious lock that the strong wind kept blowing back into her eyes. I stretched out my arm and tucked the lock of hair securely under her beret. Then I introduced myself, “My name is Firoz—Ahmad Firoz.”

“And I’m Aeneid.”

“What did you say?”

“Aeneid.”

“Aeneid what?”

“Aeneid Seegell.”

“Seagull?”

“Yes, yes, Aeneid Seegell,” she replied, exasperated.

“Ha-ha-ha, Seagull!—you mean one of those seagulls?”

“Eighteen. I’ve counted them.”

“No. Nineteen.”

“You’ve counted them?”

“Yes.”

“But you just said you hadn’t.”

“I have now. Eighteen over there and this one here ...,” I touched her nose, “is the nineteenth.”

She didn’t understand. She had perhaps never suspected that her name and seagull sounded so much alike. She kept looking at me for a while, puzzled, then decided to drop the matter and started counting the gulls again. “One, two, three, four, four, five ...” she went on.

By now the wind had become more fierce. Lying exposed to its full fury, the slumbering giant of the sea began to toss and turn and hiss with

a deafening violence. The wind blew our hair into our eyes. The rising waves leapt and broke on the deck in a torrent of sprays. The rolling grew worse. Before I even had time to grab Aeneid and hold her tightly against me or steady her against the rail, she jumped down and scampered off flashing her plump white legs.

Shortly afterwards we stood in a neat line before the Purser's Office, passports and other travel documents in hand. The ship creaked and shuddered under our feet as if in an earthquake. There we each got a copy of the ship's rules and regulations. One rule required passengers to appear in full formal evening dress in the dining hall and other public areas after sunset.

The dining hall, located in the lower level of the ship, was a bright, noisy place, large enough to easily seat over three hundred passengers at one time. The first friendships of the voyage were being made at the tables. I met a young, handsome Hungarian couple. Just the three of us were at the table. In fact they had asked me to join them, thinking, perhaps, that I was all alone and needed to be taken into custody immediately. Soon we were chattering away lightheartedly and trying hard to keep the soup from spilling on our clothes.

"That's nothing," the Hungarian husband informed me, "compared to what you're going to get in the mid-Atlantic. The soup will fly up and hit the ceiling. You'll have to follow it everywhere with your mouth wide open—that is, if you care to have it."

"Have you found a girl yet?" the Hungarian wife asked.

I looked at her nervously.

"All the girls will be paired off by tomorrow," she told me. "For your own good, find one now or you'll regret it later."

I looked furtively around the dining hall and spotted her at a table in the corner busily eating her dinner. She was without her beret and her blonde curls, neatly tied with a gold-colored ribbon, fell on her shoulders.

"There," I pointed her out for the Hungarian couple.

"There what?" the wife asked.

"That girl in the yellow dress, the one with the golden ribbon—well, I made friends with her this evening."

"You mean that one, there?"

"Yes." I continued to eat my meal.

The Hungarian husband burst into laughter, his wife did too. So did I, out of politeness. Soon I found them voraciously attacking the food before them. I felt terribly disappointed: my dinner companions were only moderately educated people and belonged to the West's notorious, well-to-do lower-middle class. This class had weighed heavily on my

nerves throughout my stay abroad and caused me untold misery. From the moment I'd set foot on the ship, I had been secretly hoping for the company of a quiet, intelligent and cultured Englishman. That was not to be.

"We were in Budapest when the revolt of 1956 broke out," the Hungarian husband began in a dry, placid voice, abandoning for the first time his labored jocularity as he sipped his after-dinner coffee. "We were working in a factory and had already announced our engagement. We dug trenches in the streets of Budapest close to our homes and kept up a steady barrage for five straight days. When Russian tanks entered the city we quickly went underground. The night we fled the city we were caught in the worst blizzard ever. Do you also have blizzards in your part of the world?"

"No, we don't."

"Then you cannot imagine what it was like. Anyway, we plodded through the snowstorm and covered some forty kilometers in the space of one night. We cut the electric barbed-wire fence and crossed over into Austria. My wife's feet were so sore from walking that I had to carry her on my shoulders the last ten kilometers. By the time we reached Austria even my feet refused to walk. When we arrived in Vienna we got married. You can't imagine the terrible shape my feet were in. What a snowstorm, Lord!"

"It's incredibly hot in my county, but ..."

"Lucky man," he said in a sincere tone as he took a last sip of his coffee.

Just then I saw her coming in the direction of our table. She was holding her mother's hand on their way out of the dining hall. She smiled when she saw me.

"Hi, Aeneid," I greeted her, getting up from the table.

"Oh, hi."

"How was the food?"

"Quite good," she said, then turning to her mother, "Mommy, we were counting the seagulls together. This is—oh I forgot. What is your name, again?"

"Firoz."

"Yes, Fairouz, Mommy, this is Fairouz."

Her mother, a courteous young woman with a quiet dignity about her, smiled gently and said, "She had me quite worried this evening. I was looking for her everywhere."

"She's my first friend on the boat," I said.

"Mommy, can I make friends with Fairouz?"

“Mister Fairouz—Aeneid,” her mother corrected her, mildly reprimanding.

“Can I please make friends with Mister Fairouz?”

“You may.”

“Mister Fairouz, can I make friends with you?”

“By all means,” I said, “and thank you very much.”

“Mommy, Mommy, can I go out on the deck with Mister Fairouz?”

“No Aeneid, not now. We’re going to bed—remember?”

“Well, good night, Mister Fairouz,” she said, leaving the hall.

“Good night, Aeneid. Good night, Madame Seegell.”

“Good night,” her mother said politely and went to her cabin.

Newly-formed couples were roaming about on the deck. The ship was owned by a Greek company, but the entire crew was German. Most of the passengers on board were also Germans who had settled in the United States and Canada and were returning to Europe for Christmas. Blond, beefy German men—whose faces puff up in a peculiar way when they reach thirty-five—and blonde German women—whose skin doesn’t look quite as fair and fresh from up close as it does from a distance—had just met in the dining hall or in the bar, made friends, and were now strolling on the deck in groups of twos and fours, smoking cigarettes.

I walked along the railing alone for a long time. Aeneid, my only friend, was not there and the Hungarian couple had dropped out of sight too. Coming to the ship’s bow, I stopped short and peered into the distance. All I could see was darkness and more darkness—deep, immense, mysterious, and closing over the eternal giant of the sea who was restlessly tossing and turning as if waking from sleep.

“All your life you’ve yearned for me from afar,” the sea looked at me and said, “but only now have you finally been able to reach me. Now I’ll talk to you. In this fleeting moment I’ll tell you a few things no one else ever will. Listen to me closely and never look back. What you’ve left behind is part of my body. What is part of someone else’s body is beyond your reach in any case because time is frozen where you now stand. You no longer have control over it, not because I’m eternal, mighty, and wrathful, not even because this is my domain and I rule here, but because when you did have control, you held back meekly and failed to reach out to anyone. So now you can’t turn around and look back. Only those who still have control over time can do that because they did reach out, embrace others, and allow others to embrace them. They are now the masters of what is ahead of them and behind, and can talk dispassionately about all they’ve experienced and endured. Listen well lest you should forget, my friend—it happens thus in love, in suffering, in acts of courage

and sacrifice, in everything that truly matters in life. The things that count least are your level of education and your class. You can't imagine that here and now because here I rule. Good night!"

A huge dark wave rose on the strength of the gusting wind and broke high on the deck leaving me drenched up to my knees.

After a long, wakeful night the sea was sleeping peacefully now. The upper deck was bathed in warm, enchanted sunshine and the sea was a crisp deep blue with its surface being swept by a network of small, smooth, gentle waves. In the clear blue distance, at the very edge of the horizon, the Canadian coastline seemed to be a long, faint stripe. The weather was perfectly calm. Breakfast was over and people were coming up onto the deck singly or in pairs to sunbathe, to digest the light but invigorating meal, or simply to smoke. The ship rode smoothly on the sea with the grace of a huge swan. We had entered the open sea. "On what part of your body are we sailing now?" I tried to get him to talk to me. But the sea heard me out without a gesture, without the slightest movement. Seeing him lying there so listless and vanquished, I felt a strange sense of power over him. I felt perfectly at ease as I stood leaning against the rail and began leisurely stuffing tobacco into my pipe.

"Mommy, Mommy, may I stand here with Fairouz?" Aeneid's voice came from somewhere behind me.

"Mister Fairouz!" her mother admonished her in a stern voice.

Turning around, I greeted her mother and she returned my greeting with a smile—a courteous, dignified smile, but terribly aloof—and then walked over to a chair nearby. Aeneid ran and installed herself on the rail.

"Good morning, Aeneid. Did you sleep well?"

"One, two, three ... four, five, six, seven ..."

"Here, here! Stop!" Folding her outstretched arms, I lifted her off the rail and stood her on the deck. "What if you fell overboard?"

"There are more of them today."

"Forget it. What if you fell overboard, then what?"

"Today they are twenty."

"Well, I'll tell you. Had you fallen you'd have become a gull yourself."

"Yes. I've counted them. Yesterday they were eighteen, today twenty."

"Come, sit here." I pulled over a chair and made her sit down.

"Where did the other two come from, Mister Fairouz? Where did the other two come from?"

"You are now in my care," I said, "so you are not allowed to run

around at will or climb up onto the rail. Well, I don't know where the other two came from."

"You really don't?" she giggled. "Come on, tell me, where did the other two come from Mister Fairouz?"

"How come you're so good at arithmetic?"

"Where did the other two come from?"

"All right. Let me think—yes, yes, I know. You see, two gulls got together and gave birth to two more. That's where they came from."

She seemed to be very amused by my explanation and laughed hilariously. "Gulls lay eggs, Mister Fairouz, gulls lay eggs. That's true."

"How do you know?"

"I just know."

"It must be because you're a gull yourself."

"I'm not a gull. I'm Aeneid."

"But you're Aeneid Seagull."

"That's just a name."

"No. You *are* a seagull and all these other seagulls, I know, are your close relatives."

"No!" she screamed, exasperated, then turned round to look at her mother. "Mommy, Mommy, please tell Mister Fairouz it isn't true."

Her mother lifted her head from her knitting briefly, smiled and said, "Well, you must tell him that yourself."

"Okay. Mister Fairouz, my name is spelled S-e-e-g-e-l-l. Yes, that's right, S-e-e-g-e-l-l. And that's my *name*."

"In that case they must be your distant relatives."

"They who?"

"The gulls, of course."

"All our relatives live in Germany."

"Are there gulls in Germany?" I asked.

"And Michael lives there, too. Come Christmas he'll be six."

"Happy to hear that, but just who is this Michael, anyway?"

"We'll get ice cream at eleven o'clock. Mister Fairouz, will you eat ice cream at eleven o'clock?"

"I don't eat ice cream."

"Anna told me that we will ..."

"Anna who?"

"Anna, my friend."

"Does she eat ice cream too?"

"She lives here on the ship. Mister Fairouz, will you play ping-pong with me?"

"With you? Huh! I can't play with you," I said feeling bored.

"You know what? I'll be six in March."

"I guessed as much."

"Now I'm five years and nine months."

"You're a chatterbox, you know that?"

"One, two, three, four ... five, six ..."

"Come, let's go for a walk," I said, getting up.

Hand in hand, we walked along the rail all the way to the tip of the ship's stern.

"Aeneid," I said, "you know what? I think you're a very nice girl."

"Where did the gulls disappear?"

"Aeneid, come sit here."

"They can't be seen from here."

"Come, look, this is a fine stool."

"You swim, don't you, Mister Fairouz?"

"Aeneid—"

"Huh—"

"Let's talk."

"You can swim, can't you?"

"Shut up, Aeneid!"

She quieted down at once and fell into a slight daze, staring at me unbelievably. There was a trace of fear in her innocent eyes. I felt a twinge of remorse and laughed sheepishly. Then I said, "Yes, I can swim."

"Then you'll swim with me, won't you? ... Please."

"Aeneid," I took a long breath, "your mother—well, I mean your mother ..." I hesitated again. Finally I managed, "Why doesn't your mother ever come with us?"

"Mommy, Mommy," she darted her glance apprehensively everywhere on the deck. "Where is Mommy? Where did she go?"

"She's sitting at the other end of the deck."

"You know, Mommy is knitting a pullover for me?"

"And your Daddy?"

"Daddy isn't here."

I felt at ease and drew a deep breath of satisfaction.

"Where is he?"

"Mommy's knitting a pullover for me."

"I know that," I said. "Listen, Aeneid, tell your Mommy this: say, Mr. Firoz was talking about you."

"About me?"

"No. Not about *you*. About your Mommy."

"Saying what?"

"Oh yes, well, well that's okay. Just don't say anything to her."

“Here she comes,” she cried, beaming with joy and spreading her arms. “Is it eleven o’clock yet?”

“I don’t know.”

“Mister Fairouz, won’t you have some ice cream?”

“I hate ice cream.”

One of the crew brought her some ice cream in a paper cup. She scooped it with a plastic spoon and began eating excitedly, making all kinds of faces.

“Only kids eat ice cream,” I teased her.

“I’ll be six years old in March.”

“I already know that.”

She went on eating daintily, looking around every now and then.

“Aeneid,” I said in a dull, almost dead voice, “let’s talk.”

“Okay, let’s talk.” But she kept on eating. After some time she suddenly sprang from the stool and scampered away. Sadly, I watched her run, flashing her plump white legs, and disappear at the other end of the deck.

Before lunch, I sat down in the lounge to write a few letters. Later I took them to the post office. After lunch, as I was coming out of the dining hall, I accidentally ran into Madame Seegell. (Accidentally? Or had I timed my departure from the dining hall in such a way that I would?) She was alone. “Hi!” I greeted her. I wanted to ask her about Aeneid but her timeless, courteous, though infinitely distant smile spread a chill over me. We walked down the stairs together in silence. At some point during our descent, she said good-bye to me with a slight nod. Before going up again, I could not resist the urge to stand still for a moment and look at that exquisite, vibrant body with its spellbinding aura of mystery.

In the afternoon I went to the recreation room. I had brought along a few of my own records. I played them for a while on the phonograph and then returned to my cabin and lay down to catch some sleep before dinner.

The evening ball began soon after dinner. The Hungarian couple once again took me under their wing, suggesting girl after girl as a suitable dance partner for me, and I turned all of them down one by one. Finally I explained. “You see, we don’t have such dances in my country.”

“Well, what kind of dances do you have then?”

“Oh—Kathak dance, for instance.”

“What?”

“Kathak. It is a martial dance,” I said proudly. “We’re a martial race.”

They broke into loud laughter, their mouths thrown wide open. I was so incensed that I laughed along, my mouth equally wide open.

A little later the Hungarian couple got up and left after setting up a time for a bridge party on the following day. I stayed on, sitting a long time, smoking and watching the couples, most of them German, dancing to the music of popular German tunes. One German youth especially caught my attention. He was dancing with such painful concentration and changing partners so fast that for a moment I wondered if he had gone crazy. "But then," I thought with sad, sweet nostalgia, "such is the nature of youth."

Past midnight, when the floor had nearly emptied of dancers and the band had started to yawn from the travails of a hectic evening, I got up and went out on the deck. A few couples still stood bending over the rails talking in undertones. The place where I'd stood earlier in the day wasn't occupied so I walked over to it. Standing there, I saw a pale half moon shining over the sea, which was wide awake. And the sea hissed.

"You talk but then again you don't, although you want to, somehow you can't. It's not because you're weak or have been deprived of speech, that's simply not true. It's because you would rather passively receive than make an effort to reach out. You neither participate nor let others participate. You just want to repossess that primal innocence that's been lost irretrievably, leaving behind a useless empty body. A body that flounders like a blind beggar helplessly crying out for charity. A useless empty body that wants to move forward but is held back by fear, and gropes with uncertain fingers to touch other equally useless empty bodies, grabbing on to them and being dragged along with them. It is unaware that no one has ever possessed anyone in my domain, for even I, furious and mighty and timeless as I am, will ultimately have to spit out all that I've swallowed—even you, my friend—exactly as life, in the end, spits out the skeleton of man. Too bad you can't realize yet that I rule here and it is my dark body that lies stretched all around. You stand alone somewhere on its surface, still alive. Now, good night."

I heard him out, patiently. When he was finished, I lit my pipe and started to leave. I was getting used to his blabbing. The deck lay completely deserted, except for a single couple that lingered on in the half light. As I was passing, I recognized them. I had seen them together most of the day. Their faces looked so much alike they appeared to be brother and sister. But now I found them locked in a passionate embrace, kissing. Quite by accident sometimes, I thought, people on board do get thrown together in very unlikely couples.

The next morning the wind had grown even stronger. The sky was

heavily overcast and the thin, dark strip of shoreline had completely disappeared. No matter where you looked, your eyes saw only water, no longer bright, but rather a deep, dark blue, surging and rising to meet the sky. The surface of the water was covered with a web of small, tangled waves over which the ship rocked gently. The gusts of wind were too strong for me to stay on the deck. Soon I found myself rushing down to the lounge where I joined my Hungarian friends in their game of cards. We were playing bridge. My partner turned out to be an exceptionally beautiful German girl whom I was seeing for the first time, and who had also, evidently, been “adopted” by the Hungarian couple. For the first hour or so I lost continuously but felt cheerful and relaxed. I told them all the bridge jokes I suddenly seemed to recall, even the one about Hitler and his three generals. It went like this: Hitler sat down to play bridge with three of his generals. The general on his left opened the bidding with One Diamond. Hitler’s partner called One Heart. East said One to Trump. Now it was Hitler’s turn. He said One Club. Each of the generals seriously and soberly passed, and the game began.

The joke caused quite an explosion at our table. My beautiful partner, however, remained unimpressed. Her only response was a barely perceptible smile followed by silence. She had been looking sad and forlorn from the start. Being a German herself, maybe she didn’t appreciate a joke about Hitler. I decided to make amends. I cooked up a number of jokes on the spot, but that didn’t help, so I clammed up, feeling exasperated.

“Mister Fairouz,” came her voice from my side, “there are twenty-one today.”

“Oh, good morning,” I said over the cards, but without caring to lift my head. “How are you?”

“I’m fine, thank you. And good morning to you, too. I’ve counted them.”

“Sorry to hear that. Where did this one more come from?”

“Mister Fairouz,” she installed herself on the back of my chair and rose above my head, “we’ll get to swim today. Yes. Anna told me.”

“I see,” I replied inattentively.

“Who is she?” my partner asked.

“Oh she is *my* ‘adopted one,’” I replied stressing “my,” and the four of us had a loud, open-mouthed laugh. I felt sorry for my partner. I wished she hadn’t opened her mouth. She was probably aware of that too. For the next hour I kept losing consistently and feeling lousy. Aeneid chattered away right over my head, which irritated me a great deal. By the time we quit playing, I had lost close to five dollars. I thanked my partner without looking at her and walked out.

Outside, we started counting the gulls: twenty-one—exactly. And then we looked at the sea in silence.

“Aeneid.”

“Yes.”

“Nothing.”

She started talking about all kinds of things; sometimes I listened, sometimes I didn't.

“Aeneid.”

“Yes?”

“Come on,” I said swallowing, “let's talk.”

“Okay, let's talk.”

And she talked and talked. Again and again I searched through the crowd, but I could only see other faces. It was other people who sat in the chairs. When I turned my attention to Aeneid again, I found her screaming as a young German woman with strawberry-blonde hair stood bent over her trying to feed her some ice cream.

“Don't feed me. I'll eat it myself. I'll eat it myself.”

“No, you won't. I'll feed it to you instead.” The voice of the young blonde sounded firm.

Aeneid kicked up quite a fuss. “I'll eat it myself, myself, *myself*,” she screamed. She finally succeeded in snatching the cup from the blonde and began eating daintily from it as she stood pressed against the railing.

“Hi!” I greeted the blonde.

“Hi!” she greeted back. “Your young friend is pretty wild today.”

“She was my first friend on board.”

“Mine too. The smartest kid on board, wouldn't you say?” she asked and, without waiting for the reply, introduced herself. “I'm Anna.”

“Anna ...?”

“Anna Hamburger,” she replied. “I'm the ship's First Hostess.”

“And who's the Second?”

“No one. I'm the only female crew member on board.”

“Miss Anna Hamburger, the First Hostess,” I said, “how do you do?”

“I'm fine, thank you.” She laughed. “You look like an interesting person.”

“I think so too. I'm Firoz.”

“Yesterday evening I was looking for you.”

“Me?”

“I wanted to borrow one of your records.”

“Which one?”

“The one you were playing yesterday—Ella Fitzgerald.”

“Oh, that—Ella's.”

“Yes, the one that goes ‘I’m glad there’s you in this world of ordinary people.’”

“I see, the very first song.”

“May I borrow it for a little while?”

“Certainly,” I replied. “Let’s go.” But then, without any reason, I became nervous and said, “Maybe you’d like to wait here. I’ll get it for you.”

I went to my cabin and took out the record. As I was leaving, I faltered. I stood for a minute in the middle of the cabin—dazed, lost, the record dangling in my hand. I could not have mistaken that feeling, it was all too familiar.

I returned to the deck and gave Anna the record. She beamed, happy to have been able to get it, and said, “Listen, if you want to, come after lunch to the Staff Room and we’ll listen to it together.”

“Sure, I’d love to.”

“Bye now.”

“Bye.”

I stood on the deck for quite some time, lost in my thoughts, vaguely aware of Aeneid’s presence and her intermittent “Mister Fairouz, Mister Fairouz,” which seemed to be coming through a fog. When I emerged from my torpor and looked around, I noticed with a start that she had already been gone for some time. It was getting close to lunch time.

I returned to my cabin after lunch, shaved carefully, took a shower, put on clean clothes, and then found my way to the Staff Room. Anna was dusting her small phonograph. A young boy stood beside her talking. I settled into a chair and lit a cigarette. A young officer in a white uniform sat behind a table in the corner with his legs stretched out on the table. He was looking over some papers and whistling softly. A few minutes later the boy suddenly turned around and walked out of the room. I recognized him then: the same adolescent I had seen dancing with such nervous energy the previous evening. I looked at Anna and smiled. She placed the record on the platter and turned on the machine, then she sat down on the table and kept time by gently tapping the floor with her feet. Halfway through the record, the young officer threw his legs down, rolled the papers up and stuffed them into his pocket, and got up. He listened to the music for a while, standing in the middle of the room, legs slightly spread, hands stuffed into his pockets, and then spoke briefly with Anna in German before leaving. When the record ended, Anna grabbed the tone-arm and put the stylus back to the beginning, humming along with the record: “I’m glad there’s you in this world of ordinary people ...”

I got up from the chair, walked over and sat down beside her on the table.

“Oh, I just adore her voice—it’s divine!” she said, closing her eyes ecstatically.

The next song was playing now. There were six songs in all on that side.

“I once got to hear Ella sing in New York,” she said, adding “in a nightclub.”

“Really?”

“I’m a fan of hers.”

“So am I.”

“You are?”

“Yes. You know what that means? It means we’re lovers.”

“Perhaps,” she laughed.

“Perhaps?”

“Yes. Only if you reckon it through some weird geometrical formula,” she said as she gently but firmly removed my hand from her shoulder. She got down from the table, walked over to a chair nearby, sat down and then said, “You haven’t told me anything about yourself. To start with, where are you headed?”

“I come from Pakistan and I’m returning home after two years.”

“Pakistan?”

“Yes, Pakistan. It’s a South Asian country—the cradle of the oldest civilization in the world,” I said proudly, then added, “some six thousand years old.”

“But we aren’t sailing towards South Asia, are we?”

“It’s the same route though. First Europe, next Africa, and then ...”

“Oh, I see,” she laughed. “You came to Canada to do what?”

“To study—of course.”

“To study?” She seemed terribly surprised.

“Sure. What’s wrong with that? Or do you think I’m too old to study?”

“No, no. I didn’t mean that.” She laughed apologetically. “You see, I thought you were on a business trip. Something of that sort, you know.”

I felt a strange bitter taste in my mouth. She played the record again. We listened to the first song in silence and the bitterness in my mouth slowly began to dissolve.

“Is this the first time you’ve been aboard a ship?”

“Absolutely! I had been wanting to do it all my life.”

“You haven’t gotten seasick, have you?”

“No, not at all. I feel just fine.”

“How did you go to Canada?”

“I flew.”

“According to the weather forecast there will be rough seas tomor-

row. Watch out.”

“Don’t worry,” I puffed up my chest, “I’ve never been sick in my whole life.”

“Are you married?”

“No. And you?”

“Me?” she laughed. “Yes, in a manner of speaking—to the sea.”

“I am the sea,” I spread out my arms.

She rose from the chair. The record had played itself out.

“I’ve got to go now. Duty time.” She carefully removed the record from the platter and handed it back to me. “Thanks.”

“J-j-just a minute,” I said, choking on my words. “They’re going to show a movie ... in a few minutes. Let’s go and watch.”

“I can’t. I’ve got to go on duty now. Maybe tomorrow.”

“You will come to the dance then, tonight, won’t you?”

“I will. That’s part of my official duties,” she said. “Good-bye now.”

“Good-bye, Beautiful.”

I sat for a half hour in the dark theater hall. One of Gina Lollobrigida’s movies was being screened. Then, unable to take it anymore, I left the hall and walked about the decks aimlessly. People were lolling around on deck chairs everywhere. I had my afternoon tea and returned to my cabin.

There’s so much to do on the ship if one feels up to it, I thought, stretching out on the bed—swim in the heated pool on the lower deck, play tennis on the upper deck, or bridge and chess in the lounge, or just melt in with the crowds chatting and laughing one’s head off, or take pictures—yes, so much to do, if one felt up to doing anything at all. But I stayed in bed, smoking and staring at the ceiling until dinner time.

The evening dance got under way soon after dinner. Because the ship had started to roll and pitch, there were fewer couples on the floor that night. I went over to Anna and politely asked her for a dance. “The Viennese Waltz” was playing.

“I see you dance very well,” Anna remarked, half in jest, half seriously.

“Thank you.”

“I thought you’d have slowed down a bit by now.”

“My health, thank God, is in perfect shape,” I said, rising on my toes and bringing myself to her face.

I asked her for a second dance. When the music died out, Anna left the hall without a word.

“Still determined to fight me, eh?” the sea began almost as soon as I took my usual place on the deck. “As you’ve always done? But you’ll regret you ever tried, and you’ll lose—as always. You’ve labored so hard

and wasted so much effort, and you've lived so long now that you only inspire pity in the hearts of those who see you. But you've surely stumbled now, not knowing how to stop and not wanting to stop, because you equate stopping with being limited somehow. You don't know that you're neither limited nor strong, and you certainly can't hear me because you're just a defeated man who doesn't want to admit defeat, because in that admission lies your final and most crushing defeat, a defeat that is creeping ever closer to you and tears you apart and forces you to carry on the battle you've already lost—the battle you launched on the strength and encouragement of those youthful gods who seduced you into dreaming dreams of freedom from innocence, but who have themselves died one by one because the loss of innocence is just another name for the loss of life. Nevertheless, you're still alive and you'll remain alive for a long time and taste the fruit of your toil because sooner or later there always comes a day when man tastes that fruit, be it sweet or bitter. Good night."

I commended him on his impassioned rhetoric with an ironical smile so faint he couldn't have suspected that his untimely tirade had left me unimpressed and that, for me at any rate, Anna's young body was packed with a ravishing mystery, which this guileless friend of mine knew nothing about, waiting to be unlocked. When I started to leave I heard his awesome but utterly helpless laugh rise behind me. As I turned around and peered at him, he sprang at me with a frightening hiss, the entire dark mass of his body writhing in silent agony. Feeling perfectly secure on the deck, I tossed a long, jeering laugh at him full in the face and began to go down the stairs.

Returning to my cabin, I took a few sips of my special tonic for nervous exhaustion, swallowed, as usual, a few sleeping pills, and waited to fall asleep. Only then, little by little, but with brutal clarity, did I begin to comprehend the true implications of the sea's ominous laugh.

I got up the next morning feeling very relaxed and full of life. Instead of tea, I asked for pineapple juice. I shaved, took a shower, changed, and went to the dining room. I treated myself to a hearty breakfast and enjoyed every morsel of it. Then I walked to the bar and bought myself a can of the finest English tobacco, leisurely found my way to the deck, installed myself in a chair, and began filling my pipe slowly and deliberately. People were scattered all over the deck, some strolling, others just lounging in their chairs. I looked among the crowd a few times, searching, but couldn't spot anyone I knew—not even Aeneid.

“Hello.”

“Hello.”

The hoary old German who sat alone drinking beer all day in the lounge walked past me. Out there, way down in front of me, the seagulls were enjoying their favorite breakfast of fish, rocking on the water's surface like tiny paper boats. I counted them three times over—twenty-four. All of them were catching fish, some gracefully, others like clumsy circus clowns. I dozed off at some point while watching them perform their acrobatics and awoke after a series of short, fascinating dreams. The sea lay stretched out before me as far as the eye could see, its surface gathered into turbulent hills of different sizes. For a few moments I sat spellbound in a strange mental and physical vacuum, aware only of an immense feeling of exhilaration and ease sweeping across me. All of a sudden a strong gust of wind tilted the whole ship to one side so that it seemed to be touching the surface of the water. An unseen force pulled me to my feet with a tremendous jolt and sent me lurching down the sloping deck with an incredible push. I only stopped after I had crashed into the railing. Then, before I had time to steady myself, another even fiercer assault of wind tilted the ship to the other side, sending me stumbling backwards to my chair. Now, this side of the deck kept rising steadily until it seemed to be touching the sky, the sea having altogether disappeared from sight leaving behind only its frightful respirations made more fearful by the eerie howling of the wind. The gusts of wind lashed out harder by the second and the ship, exposed to their full fury, rocked and rolled perilously. The few people still left on the deck staggered back and forth, trying to hold on to their clothes that the furious wind seemed to be blowing right off, screaming with joy and fear at the same time, moving cautiously along the railing towards the stairs. I quickly grabbed my can of tobacco and joined them.

Down in the lounge, in the green room, and in the bar, people held on to each other, peered through the portholes, watched the incredible spectacle of the ship's perilous drop and rise with nervous delight, and laughed in short, loud, forced guffaws to hide their panic.

“Hello,” the pretty girl who had been my partner in the bridge game last evening smiled pleasantly.

“Hello,” I greeted her without bothering to stop. Far down the corridor I caught a glimpse of Anna and darted off toward her, but before I could catch up, she had vanished.

I wandered around the ship and watched its precipitous drop and abrupt, tumultuous climb until lunch time. Every time it rolled to one side, all you saw was the sea rising evenly above windows and portholes and

nothing but the unbroken blue of the sky on the other side. And when it rolled the other way, it was just the opposite. When you watched the seesawing motion continually, for a while you felt as if the ship was perfectly still, only the vast, deep, blue sea rose and fell mechanically around it. It was a strange and wondrous sight, one I had never seen before in my life. People would watch it awhile, then feel a strange rumbling in their stomachs and scamper away to the toilets or out to the open deck. By lunch time about half the passengers had come down with seasickness.

The rolling was growing progressively worse. By afternoon I had become pretty fed up with it all since I was still kicking around in fine health and couldn't find anything interesting enough to keep me occupied. Finally I settled down in the lounge and wrote letters to my wife and older daughter in which I described this novel experience at sea. Then I got up and deposited the letters at the post office and returned to my cabin. For the next three hours I devoured a number of illustrated magazines as I lay on my bed—turning every now and then from side to side in an effort to keep myself from falling on the floor, and listening to the yells and screams of boys and girls as they scurried about excitedly outside in the hallways.

It was almost evening before the first really stormy seas hit us. The rain pelted down and the raw, gusting wind hit the ship like a sheet of metal. The strapping, dark demon of the sea was back in its prime, proudly bearing all 23,000 tons of the ship as easily as a straw.

An announcement on the captain's behalf instructed the passengers not to use any of the upper or lower decks. All passages leading to the various decks were blocked off by fat ropes tied crossways over their mouths. Now people crowded into the public rooms at all hours. Practically all activity came to a sudden halt. Ensnared in their chairs, or on sofas and bar stools, their noses pressed hard against the glass panes, people peered out through the portholes with mixed feelings of fear and excitement as the sea rose in rebellious waves that came crashing down on the decks, slopped around a while and then receded. Every time anyone wanted to cross a hallway or walk into a room, he had to do so with the dexterity and balance of a tightrope walker. For the first twelve hours or so people amused themselves watching others struggle comically with what was otherwise a simple act of walking. Soon, however, the spectacle lost its novelty. Since there could be no dancing after dinner, people just sat and drank. I repeatedly tried to spot the gulls from behind the window but they had dropped out of sight altogether.

Twenty-four hours later we found ourselves trapped by a terrible

snowstorm. The wind screamed past the ship with the speed of bullets and the crisp snowflakes slashed against the portholes in the midst of their flight. The sea rose to attack the ship in small, dark, swift-moving ridges that sent it whirling around like a tiny, weightless boat. Another announcement from the captain advised us to remain in our cabins and refrain from moving around unnecessarily. That advice was followed by a stern admonition. All public areas were closed, the furniture in them having been piled face down in the center and secured tightly to the floor with heavy ropes. The bar was also shut down and locked. About three-fourths of the passengers had now been struck with nausea, so only a handful of people showed up in the dining hall for meals, ready to be served by a whole slew of eager, obliging waiters.

A strange, amusing sight could now be seen on the ship. Young lovers—painfully aware of how fast time was slipping by and pushing the insane, transient but terribly fascinating, romantic, unrestrained world of the ship to its inevitable end—were drifting from hallway to hallway, frantically searching for a dark, quiet corner and, finding none, just dangled like monkeys from the heavy ropes wherever they could. The girls stood in small groups, laughing themselves hoarse with a strange wistfulness, with longing and impatience. And the old addicts cooked up ingenious ways to bribe the waiters for a drop of alcohol. Children were conspicuously absent from the scene.

Outside, the huge, ravaging, blind beast of the sea was locked in a test of strength with the ship, which stood guard over seven hundred human lives.

I found it impossible to sleep during those fifty hours. I traversed the small space of my cabin more than five hundred times, read twelve illustrated magazines from cover to cover, emptied two cans of tobacco, and lifted up the lid of the porthole to watch the furious assaults of the sea twenty-one times, but feeling suddenly nervous, I pulled it down over the frame quickly. A few times, after I had let the lid drop, I felt very irritated because I realized the absurdity of my fear, so, summoning up my courage, I lifted the lid again, pressed my face against the green, round glass, bared my teeth and peered at him in a mocking grimace. I swung my fist in the air and shouted, "Eat your heart out, Sea!" Then, seeing him come charging at me, I retreated hastily, letting the lid bang down. I burst into loud, mocking laughter only to hear its hollowness ring back brutally in my ears for a long time. Thinking he might be trying to speak to me as usual, I pressed my ear hard against the cold glass again and again. But the sea wasn't talking. Instead, he was coming at the ship in one unrelenting assault after another—mute but frightening, writhing

continuously in a fruitless fury, in his helpless rage, his impotent anger. I pulled back quickly, feeling secretly happy at his loss of speech. Many times as I peered through the porthole and paced inside my cabin, mustering all my will against becoming seasick, I couldn't help but feel that the sea and I were like a pair of dumb, deadly beasts locked in our separate cages, attacking each other every now and then and feeling terribly embarrassed about having failed to inflict injury on the other, but also feeling secretly happy at having been placed out of the other's destructive reach. When exhausted by the fight, each one slumped over, facing the other, to toss bitter, caustic laughter their way, deluding themselves with the thought that each had wounded the other.

Only once during this time did I venture out of my cabin. Hanging clumsily from the ropes tied to the landing of the first deck, I watched the girls as they flitted about in small groups. Then I went and tiptoed into the small Staff Room where, two days ago, Anna and I had played that Ella Fitzgerald record. The room was empty. I went into the adjacent hallway and, after walking its entire length three times over, I finally stopped at one door and knocked. The door was opened after a while.

"Hi!"

"Hi!"

Anna stood before me in a pink gown. "Pardon me, but I'm not on duty at the moment," she said tossing her hair a little. "You aren't sick, I hope?"

"Oh no. I'm perfectly fine."

"You're not supposed to be wandering about—remember?"

"It's been ages since I last saw you."

"I'm off duty." She laughed, adding, "Go back to your cabin and rest."

"W-w-wait a minute. I-I-I, well, oh yes, you see I missed the drill, I mean the lifeboat drill. I thought I'd come and ask you for a demonstration."

"I said I'm not on duty. You may go and ask the Purser about it. Good-bye now."

She shut the door gently.

"Good-bye," I mumbled to the closing door.

A little later I found myself hovering in another hallway. I passed by that door several times, but, finally, I summoned my courage and knocked.

"Hello," she said after opening the door.

I could tell at a glance that the heart of this woman was nobler, and her attitude would be less forbidding.

"Hello, Madame Seegell."

“What a storm!” she laughed gently.

“Yes, what a storm! By the way, how’s Aeneid?”

“She’s been sick the last three days. And she’s very angry with you. You didn’t come to see her once. She’s sleeping now, though.”

“Oh, I wanted to—many times. But I was sick myself.”

“Sorry to hear that. Who can remain healthy in these seas!”

“True. Who can?”

We talked for a while at the door. Then, getting tired of small talk, I sidled up to her. “Your cabin,” I said, looking over her shoulder, “is bigger than mine.”

“I think all the cabins are the same size.”

“But this definitely looks bigger—positively. It has a different floor plan. Look for yourself.”

“The doctor has advised Aeneid to take complete rest,” she said courteously but firmly. “I don’t want her to be awakened. Good-bye, Mr. Fairouz.”

“Good-bye,” I said to the closed door.

Returning to my cabin, I went to the porthole straightaway and opened the lid. Seeing a wave thirty feet high poised to attack me, I instinctively withdrew, but not without first swinging my fist at him and shouting, “Beat yourself to death!”

The storm finally let up sometime during the night, but I wasn’t aware of it. I slept uninterruptedly for twelve hours, through the night, and well into the next day. Later the porter told me that he had come to wake me up twice but each time I told him to get lost so curtly that he thought I was wide awake and perhaps involved in some terribly clandestine activity that I didn’t want him to know anything about. He would never believe that I have absolutely no memory of any of that happening at all.

Anyway, I got up just before lunch time feeling well rested and exuberant. The first thing I did was walk to the porthole, lift the iron lid and peek outside. A bright blue sea lay stretched out before me—perfectly calm, its surface gathered into faint, gentle ripples, a bright, warm sun shining over it. I shaved in a leisurely way but with great care, took a shower, put on clean clothes and then went out for lunch. The ravaging storm of the previous evening was over. In its place, a veritable riot of colors, smells, and sounds seemed to have suddenly exploded on the ship. Weak, pale faces recovering from seasickness looked like frozen flowers that the bright morning sun had caressed back to life and that now stood revealed with their infinite grace, refreshing loveliness and

gentle smiles. Man, woman, young, old—almost everyone in the dining hall seemed to have been seized by a frenzy to rush through their meals and stream out, just out—

A world had scrambled to the deck. A milling, jostling crowd. A joyous din. A giant rosebud, barely noticeable until yesterday, had come into full bloom within the space of a single night and dazzled every eye with its sudden inflorescence, its unexpected spread, and the sheer eloquence of its screaming color. A sparkler had exploded in midair, sending a cascade of colors down to the earth. Colors, colors, and more colors—the deep blue sea, the crisp, bright azure sky glistening overhead, the immense white mast, the red skirts and yellow pullovers, green coats, crimson hats and black stockings, the milky-white skins, golden hair and honey-brown eyes—deep, intense, dazzling, bright colors that seemed to be screaming so loud you could barely hear a sound or keep your eyes focused on anything because you felt your heart swell with a feeling of immense happiness, freedom and beauty. In that profusion of beauty, I lifted my eyes briefly and saw the most stunning sight: there, in front of us, another ship was passing by. Bright, spotlessly white, tall, long and elegant, this other ship rode gently on the blue-green waters with the quiet majesty, ease and aloofness of a huge swan, holding its neck up proudly. Water stretched out to the limit of vision, and beyond it was the limitless sky. And somewhere in that dazzling void, the generous sun poured down its wealth of gold silently upon that solitary marble palace in motion. My eyes have seen the world's many wondrous sights, both natural and man-made, but this sight was wholly out of this world. Its sheer beauty filled me with a restlessness I knew all too well.

Standing spellbound on the deck, people watched the other ship floating by for a long time. Then an uproar swept through the dazed crowd as everyone began waving and clamoring in response to the greetings of the passengers of that ship.

We were sailing on calm Irish seas now. As I walked on the deck I counted the gulls. They were twenty-six today and they seemed to be dozing.

“Hello!”

“Hello!”

I sat down on a chair and asked, “How do you feel?”

“I feel fine, thank you. And you?”

“Fine, fine, thanks. Where's Aeneid? I don't see her around.”

“She came out for the first time this morning. She's resting at the moment, though. She hasn't yet fully recovered from her illness, you know.”

“I'm sorry I wasn't able to come and see her. You see, I overslept and

didn't get up until afternoon."

"Oh," she smiled.

"Madame Seegell."

"Yes?"

"Did you see that?"

"What?"

"That ship—there?"

"Oh, yes. A gorgeous sight!"

"Madame Seegell."

"Yes?"

"Oh, no. Nothing." I laughed. "Yes, a gorgeous sight!"

A gull suddenly took off from the flock and settled some distance away. At the farther end of the deck I saw Anna cross over to the other side.

"You knit so well."

She smiled evasively.

"Madame Seegell."

"Yes?"

"Oh nothing." I laughed again. "You *really* do knit very well."

"I attended a knitting school."

"In Canada?"

"No, in Germany. But that was a long time ago."

"Where did you live in Germany?"

"In a village near Hamburg."

"Your folks live there?"

"Just my mother."

"Madame Seegell."

"Yes?"

"Aeneid is an English name, isn't it?"

She pretended not to hear.

"Madame Seegell."

"Yes."

"Why don't you ever come to the dance?"

She turned pink. "Oh, I don't much care for dancing, that's all."

In the distance I saw Anna go down the stairs and disappear. A little later I got up to leave.

The few acquaintances I had made on the ship soon found me out and took me all around the ship. I had my afternoon tea in one place, talked to somebody in another, but with whom and where I could scarcely remember. The fact is, I don't remember clearly what I did that evening, except from the time I entered The Tavern.

The Tavern was a small, dimly-lit room attached to the bar. Its walls were lined with steel-framed chairs, sofas and tables. Here a band of just three musicians played only the loudest, most melancholy jazz. People only came to The Tavern after midnight and danced holding their partners tightly, all the way into the small hours of the morning, and only drank alcohol.

I clearly remember the moment I entered The Tavern. I had just finished my dinner and went there snaking my way through a crowd of dancers on the floor of the main ballroom. I remember it clearly because when I came in I noticed a young man kissing Anna madly on a corner sofa. Anna, however, sat there passively. I blinked my eyes a few times in the sudden darkness and then walked over to the other corner and sat down.

Once my eyes got used to the darkness, I saw that The Tavern was nearly empty. Only a few old men sat quietly around a table drinking wine and talking in hushed voices. I lifted my head furtively and aimed a meandering glance toward Anna's corner. Her glass was full, the boy's empty. He looked drunk already. He was the same young man I had seen dancing with wild abandon on my first day aboard the ship and then again talking with Anna in the Staff Room the next day. At the moment he was staring groggily at the table in front of him. One of his arms was wrapped intimately round Anna's neck. Suddenly he turned to face her again and, as if seized by a fit of madness, began kissing her almost everywhere on her body, drawing her close to himself at the same time. When, after a slight struggle, Anna managed to gently and almost without feeling free herself from his embrace, I watched, stunned, as he crumbled in her lap and seemingly dozed off. Anna glanced at me hurriedly a couple of times with tense, nervous eyes, but withdrew her eyes just as hurriedly each time. The boy let out a few sobs as he lay heaped in her lap, then sprang up and began kissing her again with renewed wild intensity.

For twenty minutes or so the boy went on with this comic performance before rising to his feet and dashing out. Anna, her hands thrust into her lap, gazed blankly at the wine glass before her awhile. An absurd, unrelenting anger churned up inside me and gradually spiraled up to my head like smoke. I got up, walked along the wall and installed myself over her formidably. Then I leaned over her and let out a brief, mocking laugh.

"Miss Hamburger!" I said as I bowed slightly in what might have seemed like a formal request for a dance. In reality, I wasn't requesting anything at all, I was only making fun of her. Before she could answer, I

had already flung my arm around her shoulder and practically dragged her to the middle of the room.

For a while, Anna danced with that same disturbing apathy that had been evident when she disengaged herself from the boy's stifling embrace. Then, gradually, she regained her self-control. With a start, she tore herself away from my chest, but kept dancing all the same.

"Some act you put on," I said, pulling her closer. Her body resisted and stiffened. "Who was that boy?" She didn't bother to reply. "Who was he?" I almost demanded.

Our silent tug of war continued unabated. The veins in the trumpeter's neck puffed up and seemed ready to pop any second.

"No, no," she finally managed, tore her hands from mine and stopped dancing.

"What's the matter?"

"I won't dance like this."

"Oh," I laughed. "Okay."

"Take me to the ballroom."

"No, here—right here," I insisted.

"Never," she said with a cool finality, "only in the ballroom."

So we walked over to the ballroom and stepped onto the crowded floor. The days of total inactivity had sent people scrambling off to the ballroom. Quite a few men approached us in an effort to snatch her from me, but I shrugged them all off impolitely. The first dance tune came to an end, followed by a thunderous applause, then a second, a third, a fourth, and so on. We went on dancing, our silent war in full swing.

Finally, feeling cornered and utterly helpless, she looked at me in despair. "Why are you doing this to me?" she said. "What do you hope to gain?"

The dance continued.

"I know everything," I said. "What's the difference?"

She gave me a distressed look. The musicians had now struck up "In the Streets of Berlin." The German couples, overcome by nostalgia, sang along loudly. I noticed a strange glint in Anna's eyes and became ill at ease for a moment. She was silent. The German chorus was getting louder. Anna opened her mouth, her lips quivered faintly, but then she suddenly relaxed her body and came drifting toward me like a lifeless object. Her feet froze, her legs buckled. I quickly thrust my arms down and pulled her up. Twice she beat her head against my chest, then let it rest there and burst into tears.

We remained unnoticed in the rising crescendo of singing. I was more or less unnerved. I tried my best to calm her down as I helped her

out of the room and into the bar. She put her cheek against the cold marble top of the counter and shut her eyes. The bartender called out her name a couple of times, then said something in German which Anna took a long time to reply to. The bartender quickly poured some whisky in a glass and set it before her gently stroking her hair. She emptied the glass in a few gulps, dried her tears, and said to me, "Please take me outside."

The deck was nearly empty. Walking beside her, stricken by remorse and nervousness, I faltered as I asked her several times to forgive me. She smiled sadly, leaned over the railing and peered into the bottomless darkness of the sea. When, after a while, she finally spoke, her voice was remarkably deep and lucid.

"Mr. Firoz," she said, "do you know the things I've seen?"

"No. What?" I looked up at her quizzically.

Perhaps she didn't hear me for she repeated, "Do you know the things I've seen? At one time I was an air hostess, so I got to see sunrise from an altitude of 20,000 feet. You can't imagine how incredibly glorious and sublime sunrises look from that height." She stopped, resuming a little later, "And I've also seen the sun go down over perfectly tranquil seas. In Paris I've gazed for ten hours at the Mona Lisa until she seemed to have sunk into my eyes. After that—do you really believe after that the heart can possibly desire more?"

I shifted uneasily to my other side.

"That boy is a good twelve years younger than me. He's returning home. Do you know where?" She laughed with a strange, heart-melting wistfulness, "Nowhere at all!"

"What do you mean?"

"He's fled from East Germany and cannot return, but he wants to go back and go back he will. He knows he'll be caught and most likely shot dead, but that won't stop him. He's decided to slip over the border at night. Why? Because his mother lives there. That alone is his home in the whole world. You must have been young yourself once, Mr. Firoz. Put yourself in his place and think. He's hardly eighteen years old."

A terrible bitter taste suddenly gripped my throat.

"My own father used to live in East Germany," she reminisced. "On sunny days I used to play with my cat on the front steps of our porch. My mother's voice would rise from inside, calling me to come in to eat, and my father would sit in the backyard reading his newspaper. I spent my entire childhood in that backyard playing with my friends. On summer evenings just before sundown—Mr. Firoz, after a lifetime of experiences all one remembers is one's childhood—anyway, on summer evenings just before sundown ..." She stopped, gently touched my arm and said,

“Look, there, our little friend.”

I turned round and looked. Some distance away, Aeneid was playing on the deck. Her mother sat nearby knitting a pullover.

“Hers is the generation that has truly become homeless,” Anna remarked.

“But ...” I swallowed the phlegm in my throat, “but she comes from ...”

“A village near Hamburg,” she completed the sentence with marked indifference. “So what? Do you know what she does for a living?”

“What?”

“She’s a stripper.”

“What?” my mouth fell open.

“Yes, a stripper. That’s the truth. And she was jilted by Aeneid’s father before marriage.” She looked at me with a question in her eyes. “Where is her home?”

Just then it struck me. It was the same old place, the same old place where we stood—absolutely. I shuddered and looked into the darkness. His dark chest was heaving prodigiously.

Then he addressed me for the last time:

“This is the brave generation which has lost everything but preserved its intelligence. And human intelligence—let me tell you—does not mean the ability to compute your gains and losses. It means to recognize the suffering of others and reach out to participate in it. For you can only participate in, not possess, even something like suffering, because you lose every breath you take even before you’ve taken it. While it’s still inside you and is alive and vibrant, it has already been lost. Man is not fated to possess anything. It is lost the moment he thinks he possesses it. Such is the mystery of things. If a man tries hard and persistently to possess things, he can only lose them completely and be turned into a thing that is a dead mass, without feelings or sensations. A thing can neither touch another thing, nor reach out to it, nor possess it, and this is the intrinsic deficiency of things. So—let me repeat—your breath is lost even when it isn’t yet exhaled and still lies safely hidden inside your chest. Once a breath is taken it can no longer be stopped or revoked or turned back, it can only escape from you, because when you possess a thing you must also simultaneously lose it, and this is the incontrovertible law of possession. When primal innocence is lost, only those among you will be blessed with the gift of intelligence who make an effort not to possess, but only to celebrate beauty when they behold it. This is the only way for man to partake of beauty, the rest is sheer emptiness.”

My lifelong companion, the bitter taste in my throat, had now spread

throughout my being. God knows when Anna had gotten up and left. I walked with small, heavy steps to a chair and slumped down into it.

“Hi Aeneid,” I greeted.

“I’m not talking to you.”

“Why?”

“You didn’t visit me once all the time I was sick.”

“But I did. You were sleeping.”

“Mommy, Mommy, did Mister Fairouz really visit?”

“Yes,” Madame Seegell answered. “Didn’t I tell you?”

“When did you tell me?”

“I did, Aeneid. Perhaps you’ve forgotten.”

“In that case,” she cheered up, “I’ll start talking to you, Mister Fairouz.”

“Aeneid.”

“Yes.”

“Today there are twenty-six gulls.”

“Really?”

She kept playing with her doll.

“Aeneid.”

“Yes.”

“Come,” I said in a drained voice, “let’s talk.”

“Okay.” But she continued to play with her doll. A little later, she jumped up and trotted over to her mother who also quickly got up from her chair. Both of them said “Good night!” to me and went down the stairs to their cabin. In front of me lay a perfectly calm but dark, chilly sea. A deathly stillness hung all around. Inside, the evening dance was in progress. The musicians were playing their instruments, people were laughing in loud voices at the bar, and the ship’s engines rumbled on somewhere beneath our feet. An immense silence.

In twenty-four hours we’ll reach the coast of England—I thought to myself to lessen that awesome, crushing silence. Then I yawned and returned to my cabin. □

—Translated by Mubammad Umar Memon