

The young girl had never given much thought into how she would die, but being pummeled by a torrent of water and propelling into a dark sea did not seem so terrible. Still, she watched as the small boat descended slowly over the aggressive stream below. The water forced its way relentlessly from the side of the larger ship, curving like a wretched arch and not entering the sea until it spanned past eight feet. The smaller boat dangled above this deluge and continued to lower in a deliberate and slow manner. The boat's leisurely fall compared to the stream's reckless force was comical, especially since it would mean sure death once they met.

Then, an added bonus. A second small boat swung into view and began to lower from the larger ship. This new vessel dropped at a more rapid pace and fell in line directly above the first. The young girl grinned as she pictured this new boat striking the one below, launching it into the torrent and throwing it into the frigid maelstrom of sea. But suddenly, both boats stopped lowering. They froze like two ice crystals dangling above concrete, prepared to shatter at any moment.

A person from the first small boat disengaged an oar and waved it around, clearly in intense conversation with the other passengers. The riders began to move around the small boat like a swarm of confused ants. One of them forced the oar into the side of the large ship, causing their vessel to lurch slightly outward. This was practiced several times until the smaller ship began to sway ten feet from the larger ship's side. The young girl blinked, and then suddenly the boat was released from its holds and plummeting into the inky turbulence below. Surely, this would be the end.

But the boat landed peacefully away from the violent, spewing stream. It glided to peaceful water against a backdrop of similar boats, all making their way into the darkness. The young girl sighed and looked back toward the larger ship, which was now at a violent angle. The front of the ship had gone completely underwater, causing its back to reach skyward. Its lights flickered off. Seven minutes later, it snapped in two.

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As if the last two and a half hours had not dragged, the remaining twenty minutes crawled by relentlessly. Finally, the *Titanic* was completely submerged. The landscape that had

been a whirlwind of movement and chaos suddenly became like a still oil painting. Black water and inky sky were almost indistinguishable in the silence.

The scenery was rapidly replaced by chrome plates. Voices cheered, a few people clapped. Someone nearby dropped his bag of popcorn from the elation. The young girl cheered not from excitement but from relief. Finally she and her parents could move on to the next part of vacation- the more exciting one.

Every year on their tour of the Great Disasters, her parents insist they visit the *Titanic*. The girl's father, an engineer, inevitably breaks into fits of laughter every time the once "state-of-the-art" machinery begins to fail.

"A double bottom and watertight bulkhead compartments...give me a break!" He'll switch to a mocking tone and cackle, "There's *no way* that water could pour from compartment to compartment since we made the dividing walls *only a few feet tall!* People used to be so ignorant."

Just like every year, the girl's mother would pretend to be embarrassed by his outbursts. As an old-world historian, her mother is expected to act in a serious manner when visiting significant events. Nevertheless, she would look at her husband endearingly as she sipped on a cosmopolitan. "Don't laugh too loudly," she'll purr, "Those people on the boat might just hear you."

The little girl rolled her eyes, just like she does every year. Adults always say dumb things. Of course the people below them could not hear them. The time barques were soundproof. They camouflaged with the sky like any other boring plane. A boy at school told her once that the time barques made a red outline in the sky above the visited event, but the girl did not believe him. As if the men who signed the United States Constitution wouldn't notice the red outlines every time there was an elementary field trip? As if Europeans wouldn't notice the red outlines whenever medical students visited the time of the black death? Or all those hippies did not notice the red outlines whenever teenagers came for the concert? And really, that scandal at Watergate would not have happened if everyone back then could see the red outlines above the hotel. What a giveaway. No, the time bargues were completely unnoticeable. It was one thing the little girl was sure of.

The little girl's stomach lurches as the time barque takes off. Pink liquid from her mother's glass sloshes and lands on the girl's dress. Although this dress was her favorite orange satin, the little girl did not let it phase her. They were on her way to her favorite part of vacation.

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It was always spectacular, in a way, to watch the chrome plates disappear to reveal pure sky expanding all around like an ever-growing dream. Whether it revealed silver-greys or floral-blues, it sent a thrill through the little girl. Anticipation of what is to come.

The time barque shifted position to reveal the landscape below. A bustling city, filled with lively activity from the ant-like people in the one way-streets below. These small specks of residents dashed in and out of lavish villas and elegant houses, they visited stylish taverns and cafes, artisan shops and small factories. The young girl could spot even more of them in the luxurious amphitheatre and open-air squares. Over a hundred acres of buzzing, vibrant, yet ignorant life enclosed by a thick outer wall.

The vessel lowered even closer to the city, causing the toy-sized people and buildings to enlarge. It rotated slowly over the lively world below, offering the passengers a glimpse of all its corners. The young girl could now pick out particular residents, some walking around entirely mosaiced courtyards. Others gathering around vats that the girl previously learned produced fish sauce- how primitive. Others were sitting at outdoor tables, eating songbirds, fish, sea urchins, shellfish and pork.

Then the little girl's favorite came into view- the graffiti. Children crouched near the bottom of the city walls drawing sick-and-rectangle animals. Adults inscribed what the little girl knew now to be various transactions, the sale receipts of slaves and goods. The funniest one to the girl was etched onto the side of a building: *Epaphra glaber es*- "Oh, Epaphras, thou art bald". The time barque continued to rotate and the little girl picked out a piece of graffiti she hadn't learned before. She turned to her mother for a translation.

"The smallest evil, if neglected, will reach the greatest proportions."

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The little girl once heard an adult say that while a pessimist complains about the wind, the optimist expects it to change, and the realist adjusts its sails. Certainly the realists would not have been aboard the great ship on her last vacation stop- those fools could have adjusted their imaginary sails and moved away from the iceberg. The same goes for the residents of her current vacation stop. The wind here was the greatest factor. Usually it blew in the opposite direction, but today of all days, it blew directly toward them from the direction of the great Mount

Vestivus. No, the residents of this city were not realists at all, or they would have adjusted their imaginary sails after that disastrous earthquake sixteen years before. The earthquake that offered a warning rumble of the catastrophe to come. Yet people still flocked to the shores of the Bay of Naples and the city was crowded on the day the winds blew in the wrong direction.

The time barque changed position once again to show how the sky arced heavenward as the greatest *basilica cupola*. In the glamorous center rose the sun, marking the start of noon. As if on cue, a giant mushroom of ash and pumice rocks appeared above the great volcano. Unforgiving debris rocketed hundreds of feet into the air and rained down onto the city. The little girl clapped wildly as the people rushed out of buildings and factories, dashing for one of the seven city gates. The smart ones would leave their weak, old, and young friends behind. Yet, as the girl knew, people of the past were much too stupid to be selfish. As the ash hailed down, it filled courtyards and blocked doorways. The girl could see the stupid rashly resolving to shelter in place, barricading themselves under roofs that were piling up with pumice. Her father handed her a bag of popcorn as the first of the inferior roofs collapsed inward. The buildings seemed to rock back and forth as still more people scrambled about, tying pillows on their heads tied down with cloths.

The city below seemed to be covering itself with a thick gray blanket. Pumice covered the fish sauce vats, blocked out the graffiti. Through the vessel's window, the girl could see specks of ash dancing about. She thought again about the boy who told her the time barques created a red outline in the sky. Well, she knew for sure the people below would only be able to see grey death above. The hail continued to spew from Mount Vestivus, it was relentless and unending- and the girl knew it would be for another 18 hours.

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The sun blooms in the distance, yellow petals blossoming into a new day. It would be beautiful, that is if anyone below could see it. Impenetrable ash clouds continue to stomp on the city of ants below. The gold and white and blue colors are barricaded by debris and pumice.

The little girl, refreshed after a brief nap in the sleeping chambers, grins as the new dawn approaches. The world below is silent, as if in the wake of a snowstorm. Just at the moment a first-time visitor might think this is the moment the city was officially emptied of life- a door is pushed open. Thirteen people dash into the dust. Other groups also emerge, about 80 survivors scrambling in the streets. But it is the thirteen that the girl enjoys best.

She can almost taste their hope as they evade still-falling pumice and nimbly dance over the buried mounds of their dead neighbors. The ragtag group finds their way to what used to be a fruit orchard. Once vibrant and abundant trees were now broken and laden with grey. The little girl knows that the group can see the city gates in the near distance. They have almost made it out. She leans closer to the window to make out two small boys holding hands. A mother holding a baby. An older man with shaking, arthritic-like hands moving in a protective way around two others. It is time.

Tremendously, the volcano's cone collapsed in the distance. In a beautiful wave, boiling mud and ash bucket down at 100mph. The steaming wave tumbles down past the city gates, over the amphitheatre and villas. Before the thirteen survivors have a chance to move, they too are crushed.

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Every time she has to return home from vacation, the little girl feels a knot of dread tie in her stomach. As she follows her parents through their home's front door, she reminds herself of what her father tells her each time they return. "Don't cry because it's over, smile because it happened"

She heads into her bedroom and hurls her suitcase onto her large bed. With a sigh, she opens the latch and begins to unload its contents. School begins again tomorrow, and the girl will need her clothes washed before then. She pulls out the orange satin dress and remembers the stain left by her mother's alcohol in the time barque. The girl recalls that at the moment, she had not been upset. She had just been excited to travel to Pompeii, she had been ready for their time barque to appear in their next destination.

The little girl moves into the hallway and opens the closet that held the stain remover. It is on the tallest shelf, so she has to stand on tiptoes to reach it. When she closes the door, the window beyond catches her eye. Almost in a trance, the girl walks closer and peers outward.

The sky is dappled with white clouds, it is blue and bright and soft all at once. She can see a large bird moving in the distance, moving fast as if to flee. To flee? The girl squints, studies the clouds. The clouds are all different shades of white- some almost clear, some thick, some... red? She rubs a hand over her eyes and looks again. It is there after all- a faint red outline of what has to be a time barque. The world goes black.