

SHIPPING OUT

*On the (nearly lethal)
comforts of a
luxury cruise*

BY DAVID FOSTER WALLACE

THE FOUR-COLOR BROCHURE, PART I

I have now seen sucrose beaches and water a very bright blue. I have seen an all-red leisure suit with flared lapels. I have smelled suntan lotion spread over 2,100 pounds of hot flesh. I have been addressed as "Mon" in three different nations. I have seen 500 upscale Americans dance the Electric Slide. I have seen sunsets that looked computer-enhanced. I have (very briefly) joined a conga line.

I have seen a lot of really big white ships. I have seen schools of little fish with fins that glow. I have seen and smelled all 145 cats inside the Ernest Hemingway residence in Key West, Florida. I now know the difference between straight bingo and Prize-O. I have seen fluorescent luggage and fluorescent sunglasses

and fluorescent pince-nez and over twenty different makes of rubber thong. I have heard steel drums and eaten conch fritters and watched a woman in silver lamé projectile-vomit inside a glass elevator. I have pointed rhythmically at the ceiling to the two-four beat of the same disco music I hated pointing at the ceiling to in 1977.

I have learned that there are actually intensities of blue beyond *very bright blue*. I have eaten more and classier food than I've ever eaten, and done this during a week when I've also learned the difference between "rolling" in heavy seas and "pitching" in heavy seas. I have heard a professional cruise-ship comedian tell folks, without irony, "But seriously." I have seen fuchsia pantsuits



David Foster Wallace is a contributing editor of Harper's Magazine. His most recent novel, *Infinite Jest*, will be published by Little, Brown in February. His last piece for Harper's, "Ticket to the Fair," appeared in the July 1994 issue.

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and pink sport coats and maroon-and-purple warm-ups and white loafers worn without socks. I have seen professional blackjack dealers so lovely they make you want to clutch your chest. I have heard upscale adult U.S. citizens ask the ship's Guest Relations Desk whether snorkeling necessitates getting wet, whether the trapshooting will be held outside, whether the crew sleeps on board, and what time the Midnight Buffet is. I now know the precise mixological difference between a Slippery Nipple and a Fuzzy Navel. I have, in one week, been the object of over 1,500 professional smiles. I have burned and peeled twice. I have met Cruise Staff with the monikers "Mojo Mike," "Cocopuff," and "Dave the Bingo Boy."

I have felt the full clothy weight of a subtropical sky. I have jumped a dozen times at the shattering, flatulence-of-the-gods-like sound of a cruise ship's horn. I have absorbed the basics of mah-jongg and learned how to secure a life jacket over a tuxedo. I have dickered over trinkets with malnourished children. I have learned what it is to become afraid of one's own cabin toilet. I have now heard—and am powerless to describe—reggae elevator music.

I now know the maximum cruising speed of a cruise ship in knots (though I never did get clear on just what a knot is). I have heard people in deck chairs say in all earnestness that it's the humidity rather than the heat. I have seen every type of erythema, pre-melanomic lesion, liver spot, eczema, wart, papular cyst, pot belly, femoral cellulite, varicosity, collagen and silicone enhancement, bad tint, hair transplants that have not taken—i.e., I have seen nearly naked a lot of people I would prefer not to have seen nearly naked. I have acquired and nurtured a potentially lifelong grudge against the ship's hotel manager (whose name was Mr. Dermatis and whom I now and henceforth christen Mr. Dermatitis¹), an almost reverent respect for my table's waiter, and a searing crush on my cabin steward, Petra, she of the dimples and broad candid brow, who always wore a nurse's starched and rustling whites and smelled of the

¹ Somewhere he'd gotten the impression that I was an investigative journalist and wouldn't let me see the galley, bridge, or staff decks, or interview any of the crew in an on-the-record way, and he wore sunglasses indoors, and epalets, and kept talking on the phone for long stretches of time in Greek when I was in his office after I'd skipped the karaoke semifinals in the Rendez-Vous Lounge to make a special appointment to see him, and I wish him ill.

cedary Norwegian disinfectant she swabbed bathrooms down with, and who cleaned my cabin within a centimeter of its life at least ten times a day but could never be caught in the actual act of cleaning—a figure of magical and abiding charm, and well worth a postcard all her own.

I now know every conceivable rationale for somebody spending more than \$3,000 to go on a Caribbean cruise. To be specific: voluntarily and for pay, I underwent a 7-Night Caribbean (7NC) Cruise on board the m.v. Zenith (which no wag could resist immediately rechristening the m.v. Nadir), a 47,255-ton ship owned by Celebrity Cruises, Inc., one of the twenty-odd cruise lines that operate out of south Florida and specialize in "Megaships," the floating wedding cakes with occupancies in four figures and engines the size of branch banks.² The vessel and facilities were, from what I now understand of the industry's standards, absolutely top-hole. The food was beyond belief, the service unimpeachable, the shore excursions and shipboard activities organized for maximal stimulation down to the tiniest detail. The ship was so clean and white it looked boiled. The western Caribbean's blue varied between baby-blanket and fluorescent; likewise the sky. Temperatures were uterine. The very sun itself seemed preset for our comfort. The crew-to-passenger ratio was 1.2 to 2. It was a Luxury Cruise.

All of the Megalines offer the same basic product—not a service or a set of services but more like a feeling: a blend of relaxation and stimulation, stressless indulgence and frantic tourism, that special mix of servility and condescension that's marketed under configurations of the verb "to pamper." This verb positively studs the Megalines' various brochures: "...as you've never been pampered before," "...to pamper

² Of the Megalines out of south Florida there's also Commodore, Costa, Majesty, Regal, Dolphin, Princess, Royal Caribbean, Renaissance, Royal Cruise Line, Holland America, Cunard, Norwegian Cruise Line, Crystal, and Regency Cruises. Plus the Wal-Mart of the cruise industry, Carnival, which the other lines refer to sometimes as "Carnivore." The present market's various niches—Singles, Old People, Theme, Special Interest, Corporate, Party, Family, Mass-Market, Luxury, Absurd Luxury, Grotesque Luxury—have all pretty much been carved and staked out and are now competed for viciously. The 7NC Megaship cruiser is a genre of ship all its own, like the destroyer. The ships tend to be designed in America, built in Germany, registered out of Liberia, and both captained and owned, for the most part, by Scandinavians and Greeks, which is kind of interesting, since these are the same peoples who have dominated sea travel pretty much forever. Celebrity Cruises is owned by the Chandris Group; the X on their three ships' smokestacks isn't an X but a Greek chi, for Chandris, a Greek shipping family so ancient and powerful they apparently regarded Onassis as a punk.

yourself in our Jacuzzis and saunas," "Let us pamper you," "Pamper yourself in the warm zephyrs of the Bahamas." The fact that adult Americans tend to associate the word "pamper" with a certain *other* consumer product is not an accident, I think, and the connotation is not lost on the mass-market Megalines and their advertisers.

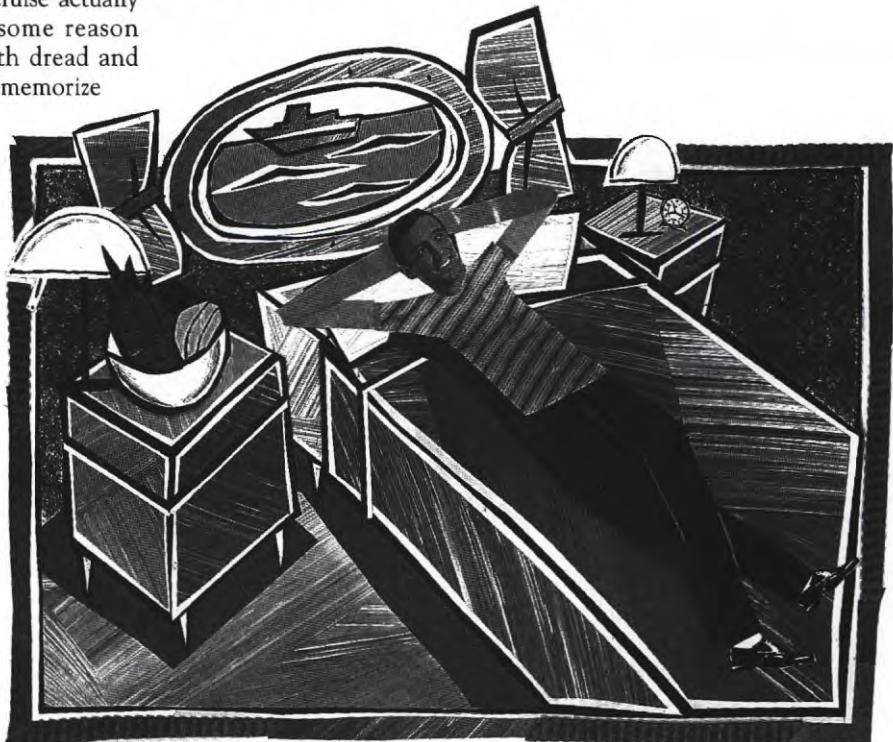
PAMPERED TO DEATH, PART I

Some weeks before I underwent my own Luxury Cruise, a sixteen-year-old male did a half-gainer off the upper deck of a Megaship. The news version of the suicide was that it had been an unhappy adolescent love thing, a shipboard romance gone bad. But I think part of it was something no news story could cover. There's something about a mass-market Luxury Cruise that's unbearably sad. Like most unbearably sad things, it seems incredibly elusive and complex in its causes yet simple in its effect: on board the *Nadir* (especially at night, when all the ship's structured fun and reassurances and gaiety ceased) I felt despair. The word "despair" is overused and banalized now, but it's a serious word, and I'm using it seriously. It's close to what people call dread or angst, but it's not these things, quite. It's more like wanting to die in order to escape the unbearable sadness of knowing I'm small and weak and selfish and going, without doubt, to die. It's wanting to jump overboard.

I, who had never before this cruise actually been on the ocean, have for some reason always associated the ocean with dread and death. As a little kid I used to memorize shark-fatality data. Not just attacks. Fatalities. The Albert Kogler fatality off Baker's Beach, California, in 1963 (great white); the USS *Indianapolis* smorgasbord off Tinian in 1945 (many varieties, authorities think mostly makos and blacktip)³; the most-fatalities-attributed-to-a-single-shark series of incidents around Matawan/Spring Lake, New Jersey, in 1926 (great white again; this time they netted the fish in Raritan Bay and found human parts in gastro—I know

which parts, and whose). In school I ended up writing three different papers on "The Castaway" section of *Moby-Dick*, the chapter in which a cabin boy falls overboard and is driven mad by the empty immensity of what he finds himself floating in. And when I teach school now I always teach Stephen Crane's horrific "The Open Boat," and I get bent out of shape when the kids think the story's dull or just a jaunty adventure: I want them to suffer the same marrow-level dread of the oceanic I've always felt, the intuition of the sea as primordial nada, bottomless depths inhabited by tooth-studded things rising angelically toward you. This fixation came back with a long-repressed vengeance on my Luxury Cruise,⁴ and I made

⁴ I'll admit that on the very first night of the 7NC I asked the staff of the *Nadir*'s Five-Star Caravelle Restaurant whether I could maybe have a spare bucket of au jus drippings from supper so that I could try chumming for sharks off the back rail of the top deck, and that this request struck everybody from the maître d' on down as disturbing and maybe even disturbed, and that it turned out to be a serious journalistic faux pas, because I'm almost positive the maître d' passed this disturbing tidbit on to Mr. Dermatitis and that it was a big reason why I was denied access to places like the ship's galley, thereby impoverishing the sensuous scope of this article. It also revealed how little I understood the *Nadir*'s sheer size: twelve decks up is 150 feet, and the au jus drippings would have dispersed into a vague red cologne by the time they hit the water, with concentrations of blood inadequate to attract or excite a serious shark, whose fin would have probably looked like a pushpin from that height anyway.



³ Robert Shaw as Quint reprised the whole incident in 1975's *Jaws*, a film, as you can imagine, that was like fetish-porn to me at age thirteen.

such a fuss about the one (possible) dorsal fin I saw off starboard that my dinner companions at Table 64 finally had to tell me, with all possible tact, to shut up about the fin already.

I don't think it's an accident that 7NC Luxury Cruises appeal mostly to older people. I don't mean decrepitly old, but like fiftyish people for whom their own mortality is something more than an abstraction. Most of the exposed bodies to be seen all over the daytime *Nadir* were in various stages of disintegration. And the ocean itself turns out to be one enormous engine of decay. Seawater corrodes vessels with amazing speed—rusts them, exfoliates paint, strips varnish, dulls shine, coats ships' hulls with barnacles and kelp and a vague and ubiquitous nautical snot that seems like death incarnate. We saw some real horrors in port, local boats that looked as if they had been dipped in a mixture of acid and shit, scabbed with rust and goo, ravaged by what they float in.

Not so the Megalines' ships. It's no accident they're so white and clean, for they're clearly meant to represent the Calvinist triumph of capital and industry over the primal decay-action of the sea. The *Nadir* seemed to have a whole battalion of wiry little Third World guys who went around the ship in navy-blue jump-suits scanning for decay to overcome. Writer Frank Conroy, who has an odd little essay-commercial in the front of Celebrity Cruises' 7NC brochure, talks about how "it became a private challenge for me to try to find a piece of dull bright-work, a chipped rail, a stain in the deck, a slack cable, or anything that wasn't perfectly shipshape. Eventually, toward the end of the trip, I found a capstan [a type of nautical hoist, like a pulley on steroids] with a half-dollar-sized patch of rust on the side facing the sea. My delight in this tiny flaw was interrupted by the arrival, even as I stood there, of a crewman with a roller and a bucket of white paint. I watched as he gave the entire capstan a fresh coat and walked away with a nod."

Here's the thing: A vacation is a respite from unpleasantness, and since consciousness of death and decay are unpleasant, it may seem weird that the ultimate American fantasy vacation involves being plunked down in an enormous primordial stew of death and decay. But on a 7NC Luxury Cruise, we are skillfully enabled in the construction of various fantasies of triumph over just this death and decay. One way to "triumph" is via the rigors of self-improvement (diet, exercise, cosmetic surgery, Franklin Quest time-management seminars), to which the crew's amphetamine upkeep of the *Nadir* is an unsubtle analogue. But there's another way out, too: not titivation but titillation; not hard work but hard play. See in this

regard the 7NC's constant activities, festivities, gaiety, song; the adrenaline, the stimulation. It makes you feel vibrant, alive. It makes your existence seem non-contingent.⁵ The hard-play option promises not a transcendence of death-dread so much as just drowning it out: "Sharing a laugh with your friends"⁶ in the lounge after dinner, you glance at your watch and mention that it's almost showtime. . . . When the curtain comes down after a standing ovation, the talk among your companions turns to, 'What next?' Perhaps a visit to the casino or a little dancing in the disco? Maybe a quiet drink in the piano bar or a starlit stroll around the deck? After discussing all your options, everyone agrees: 'Let's do it all!'

Dante this isn't, but Celebrity Cruises' brochure is an extremely powerful and ingenious piece of advertising. Luxury Megalines' brochures are always magazine-size, heavy and glossy, beautifully laid out, their text offset by art-quality photos of upscale couples'⁷ tanned faces in a kind of rictus of pleasure. Celebrity's brochure, in particular, is a real two-napkin drooler. It has little hypertextish offsets boxed in gold, with bites like INDULGENCE BECOMES EASY and RELAXATION BECOMES SECOND NATURE and (my favorite) STRESS BECOMES A FAINT MEMORY. The text itself is positively Prozacian: "Just standing at the ship's rail looking out to sea has a profoundly soothing effect. As you drift along like a cloud on water, the weight of everyday life is magically lifted away, and you seem to be floating on a sea of smiles. Not just among your fellow guests but on the faces of the ship's staff as well. As a steward cheerfully delivers your drinks, you mention all of the smiles among the crew. He explains that every Celebrity staff member takes pleasure in making your cruise a completely carefree experience and treating you

⁵ The *Nadir*'s got literally hundreds of cross-sectional maps of the ship on every deck, at every elevator and junction, each with a red dot and a YOU ARE HERE. It doesn't take long to figure out that these are less for orientation than for reassurance.

⁶ Constant references to "friends" in the brochure's text; part of this promise of escape from dread is that no cruiser is ever alone.

⁷ Always couples, and even in group shots it's always groups of couples. I never did get hold of a brochure for an actual Singles Cruise, but the mind reels. There was a "Singles Get Together" (sic) on the *Nadir* that first Saturday night, held in Deck 8's Scorpio Disco, which after an hour of self-hypnosis and controlled breathing I steered myself to go to, but even the Get Together was three-fourths established couples, and the few of us Singles under like seventy all looked grim and self-hypnotized, and the whole affair seemed like a true wrist-slitter, and I beat a retreat after half an hour because Jurassic Park was scheduled to run on the TV that night, and I hadn't yet looked at the whole schedule and seen that Jurassic Park would play several dozen times over the coming week.

as an honored guest.⁸ Besides, he adds, there's no place else they'd rather be. Looking back out to sea, you couldn't agree more."

This is advertising (i.e., fantasy-enablement), but with a queerly authoritarian twist. Note the imperative use of the second person and a specificity out of detail that extends even to what you will say (you *will* say "I couldn't agree more" and "Let's do it all!"). You are, here, excused from even the work of constructing the fantasy, because the ads do it for you. And this near-parental type of advertising makes a very special promise, a diabolically seductive promise that's actually kind of honest, because it's a promise that the Luxury Cruise itself is all about honoring. The promise is not that you *can* experience great pleasure but that you *will*. They'll make certain of it. They'll micromanage every iota of every pleasure-option so that not even the dreadful corrosive action of your adult consciousness and agency and dread can fuck up your fun. Your troublesome capacities for choice, error, regret, dissatisfaction, and despair will be removed from the equation. You will be able—finally, for once—to relax, the ads promise, because you will have no choice. Your pleasure will, for 7 nights and 6.5 days, be wisely and efficiently managed. Aboard the *Nadir*, as is ringingly foretold in the brochure, you will get to do "something you haven't done in a long, long time: *Absolutely Nothing.*"

How long has it been since you did *Absolutely Nothing?* I know exactly how long it's been for me. I know how long it's been since I had every need met choicelessly from someplace outside me, without my having to ask. And that time I was floating, too, and the fluid was warm and salty, and if I was in any way conscious I'm sure I was dreadless, and was having a really good time, and would have sent postcards to everyone wishing they were here.

⁸ The press liaison for Celebrity's P.R. firm (the charming and Debra Winger-voiced Ms. Wiessen) had this bold explanation for the cheery service: "The people on board—the staff—are really part of one big family. You probably noticed this when you were on the ship. They really love what they're doing and love serving people and they pay attention to what everybody wants and needs." This was not what I observed. What I observed was that the *Nadir* was one very tight ship, run by an elite cadre of very hard-assed Greek officers and supervisors, that the staff lived in mortal terror of these bosses, who watched them with enormous beadiness at all times, and that the crew worked almost Dickensian hard, too hard to feel truly cheery about it. My sense was that Cheeriness was up there with Celerity and Servility on the clipboarded evaluation sheets the Greek bosses were constantly filling out on the crew. My sense was that a crewman could get fired for a pretty small lapse, and that getting fired by these Greek officers might well involve a spotlessly shined shoe in the ass and then a really long swim.

BOARDING

A7NC's pampering is maybe a little uneven at first, but it starts right at the airport, where you don't have to go to Baggage Claim, because people from the Megaline get your suitcases for you and take them straight to the ship. A bunch of other Megalines besides Celebrity Cruises operate out of Fort Lauderdale, and the flight down from O'Hare is full of festive-looking people dressed for cruising. It turns out that the retired couple sitting next to me on the plane is booked on the *Nadir*. This is their fourth Luxury Cruise in as many years. It is they who tell me about the news reports of the kid jumping overboard. The husband wears a fishing cap with a very long bill and a T-shirt that says BIG DADDY.

7NC Luxury Cruises always start and finish on a Saturday. Imagine the day after the Berlin Wall came down if everybody in East Germany was plump and comfortable-looking and dressed in Caribbean pastels, and you'll have a pretty good idea what the Fort Lauderdale airport terminal looks like today. Near the back wall, a number of brisk-looking older ladies in vaguely naval outfits hold up printed signs—HLND, CELEB, CUND CRN. You're supposed to find your particular Megaline's brisk lady and coalesce around her as she herds a growing ectoplasm of *Nadirites* out to buses that will ferry you to the piers and what you quixotically believe will be immediate and hassle-free boarding. Apparently the airport is just your average sleepy midsize airport six days a week and then every Saturday resembles the fall of Saigon.

Now we're riding to the piers in a column of eight chartered Greyhounds. Our convoy's rate of speed and the odd deference shown by other traffic give the whole procession a vaguely funereal quality. Fort Lauderdale proper looks like one extremely large golf course, but the Megalines' piers are in something called Port Everglades, an industrial area zoned for blight, with warehouses and transformer parks and stacked boxcars and vacant lots. We pass a huge field of those hammer-shaped automatic oil derricks all bobbing fellatially, and on the horizon past them is a fingernail clipping of shiny sea. Whenever we go over bumps or train tracks, there's a huge mass clicking sound from all the cameras around everybody's neck. I haven't brought any sort of camera and feel a perverse pride about this.

On a cruise your capacities for choice, error, regret, and despair will be removed

The Nadir's traditional berth is Pier 21. "Pier," although it conjures for me images of wharfs and cleats and lapping water, turns out here to denote something like what "airport" denotes; viz., a zone and not a thing. There is no real view of the ocean, no docks, no briny smell to the air, but as we enter the pier zone there are a lot of really big white ships that blot out most of the sky.

From inside, Pier 21 seems kind of like a blimpless blimp hangar, high-ceilinged and echoey. It has walls of unclean windows on three sides, at least 2,500 orange chairs in rows of twenty-five, a kind of desultory snack bar, and rest rooms with very long lines. The acoustics are brutal and it's tremendously loud. Some of the people in the rows of chairs appear to have been here for days: they have the glazed encamped look of people at airports in blizzards. It's now 11:32 A.M., and boarding

now staring with subwayish blankness at other people. A kid whose T-shirt says SANDY DUNCAN'S EYE⁹ is carving something in the plastic of his chair. There are quite a few semi-old people traveling with really desperately old people who are clearly their parents. Men after a certain age simply should not wear shorts, I've decided; the skin seems denuded and practically crying out for hair, particularly on the calves. It's just about the only body area where you actually want *more* hair on older men. A couple of these glabrous-calved guys are field-stripping their camcorders with military expertise. There's also a fair number of couples in their twenties and thirties, with a honeymoonish aspect to the way their heads rest on each other's shoulders.

Somewhere past the big gray doors behind the rest rooms' roiling lines is a kind of umbilical passage leading to what I assume is the actual *Nadir*, which outside the hangar's windows presents as a tall wall of total white metal. The Chicago lady and BIG DADDY are playing Uno with another couple, who turn out to be friends they'd made on a Princess Alaska cruise in '93. By this time I'm down to slacks and T-shirt and tie, and the tie looks like it's been washed and hand-wrung. Perspiring has lost its novelty. Celebrity Cruises seems to be reminding us that the real world we're leaving behind includes crowded public waiting areas with no A.C. and indifferent ventilation. Now it's 12:55 P.M. Although the brochure says the *Nadir* sails at 4:30 and that you can board anytime from 2:00 P.M. until then, it looks as if all 1,374 *Nadir* passengers are already here, plus a fair number of relatives and well-wishers.

Every so often I sort of orbit the blimp hangar, eavesdropping, making small talk. The universal topic of discussion is "Why Are You Here?" Nobody uses the word "pamper" or "luxury." The word that gets used over and over is "relax." Everybody characterizes the upcoming week as either a long-put-off reward or a last-ditch effort to salvage sanity and self from some inconceivable crockpot of pressure, or both. A lot of the explanatory narratives are long and involved, and some are sort of lurid—including a couple of people who have finally buried a terminal, hideously lingering relative they'd been nursing at home for months.

Finally we are called for boarding and moved in a columnar herd toward the Passport Check and Deck 3 gangway beyond. We are greeted (each of us) and escorted to our cabins by not one but two Aryan-looking hostesses from the Hospitality Staff. We are led over plush plum

⁹ Journalistic follow-up has revealed that this is the name of a band that I feel confident betting is: Punk.



will not commence one second before 2:00 P.M.; a P.A. announcement politely but firmly declares Celebrity's seriousness about this. The P.A. lady's voice is what you imagine a British supermodel would sound like. Everyone clutches a numbered card like identity papers at Checkpoint Charlie. Pier 21's pre-boarding blimp hangar is not as bad as, say, New York City's Port Authority bus terminal at 5:00 P.M. on Friday, but it bears little resemblance to any of the stressless pamper-venues detailed in the Celebrity brochure, which I am not the only person in here thumbing through and looking at wistfully. A lot of people are also

carpet to the interior of what one presumes is the actual *Nadir*, washed now in high-oxygen A.C. that seems subtly balsam-scented, pausing, if we wish, to have our pre-cruise photo taken by the ship's photographer, apparently for some Before and After souvenir ensemble. Celebrity Cruises will try to sell us at the end of the week. My hostesses are Inga and Geli, and they carry my book bag and suit coat, respectively. I start seeing the first of more WATCH YOUR STEP signs than anyone could count—it turns out that a Megaship's flooring is totally uneven, and everywhere there are sudden little steplets up and down. It's an endless walk—up, fore, aft, serpentine through bulkheads and steel-railed corridors, with molified jazz coming out of little round speakers in a beige enamel ceiling. At intervals on every wall are the previously mentioned cross-sectioned maps and diagrams.¹⁰

The elevator is made of glass and is noiseless, and Inga and Geli smile slightly and gaze at nothing as together we ascend, and it's a very close race as to which of the two smells better in the enclosed chill. Soon we are passing little teak-lined shipboard shops with Gucci, Waterford, Wedgwood, Rolex, and there's a crackle in the jazz and an announcement in three languages about Welcome and Willkommen and how there will be a compulsory Lifeboat Drill an hour after sailing.

By 3:15 P.M. I am installed in *Nadir* Cabin 1009 and immediately eat almost a whole basket of free fruit and lie on a really nice bed and drum my fingers on my swollen tummy.

UNDER SAIL

Our horn is genuinely planet-shattering. Departure at 4:30 turns out to be a not untasteful affair of crepe and horns. Each deck has walkways outside, with railings made of really good wood. It's now overcast, and the ocean way below is dull and frothy. Docking and un-

¹⁰ Like all Megaships, the *Nadir* has given each deck some 7NC-related name rather than a number, and already I am forgetting whether the Fantasy Deck is Deck 7 or 8. Deck 12 is called the Sun Deck; 11 is the Marina Deck and has the pool and café; 10 I forget; 9 is the Bahamas Deck; 8 is Fantasy and 7 is Galaxy (or vice versa), and they contain all the venues for serious eating and dancing and casinoing and Headline Entertainment; 6 I never did get straight; 5 is the Europa Deck and comprises the *Nadir*'s corporate nerve center—a huge high-ceilinged bank-looking lobby with everything done in lemon and salmon and brass plating around the Guest Relations Desk and the Purser's Desk and the Hotel Manager's Desk, with water running down massive pillars with a sound that all but drives you to the nearest urinal; 4 is cabins; everything below is all business and off-limits.

docking are the two times the Megacruiser's captain actually steers the ship; Captain G. Panagiotakis has now wheeled us around and pointed our snout at the open sea, and we—large and white and clean—are under sail.

The whole first two days and nights are bad weather, with high-pitched winds, heaving seas, spume lashing the portholes' glass. For forty-plus hours it's more like a North Sea Cruise, and the Celebrity staff goes around looking regretful but not apologetic, and in all fairness it's hard to find a way to blame Celebrity Cruises, Inc. for the weather. The staff keeps urging us to enjoy the view from the railings on the lee side of the *Nadir*. The one other guy who joins me in trying out the non-lee side has his glasses blown off by the gale.

I keep waiting to see somebody from the crew wearing the traditional yellow slicker, but no luck. The railing I do most of my contemplative gazing from is on Deck 10, so the sea is way below, slopping and heaving around, so it's a little like looking down into a briskly flushing toilet. No fins in view.

In heavy seas, hypochondriacs are kept busy taking their gastric pulse every couple of seconds and wondering whether what they're feeling is maybe the onset of seasickness. Seasickness-wise, though, it turns out that bad weather is sort of like battle: there's no way to know ahead of time how you'll react. A test of the deep and involuntary stuff of a man. I myself turn out not to get seasick. For the whole first rough-sea day, I puzzle over the fact that every other passenger on the m.v. *Nadir* looks to have received identical little weird shaving-cuts below his or her left ear—which in the case of female passengers seems especially strange—until I learn that these little round Band-Aidish things on everybody's neck are special new super-powered transdermal motion-sickness patches, which apparently nobody with any kind of clue about 7NC Luxury Cruising now leaves home without. A lot of the passengers get seasick anyway, these first two howling days. It turns out that a seasick person really does look green, though it's an odd and ghostly green, pasty and toadish, and more than a little corpselike when the seasick person is dressed in formal dinner wear.

For the first two nights, who's feeling seasick and who's not and who's not now but was a little while ago or isn't feeling it yet but thinks it's maybe coming on, etc., is a big topic of

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conversation at Table 64 in the Five-Star Caravelle Restaurant.¹¹ Discussing nausea and vomiting while eating intricately prepared gourmet foods doesn't seem to bother anybody. Common suffering and fear of suffering turn out to be a terrific ice-breaker, and ice-breaking is pretty important, because on a 7NC you eat at the same designated table with the same companions all week.

There are seven other people with me at good old Table 64, all from south Florida. Four know one another in private landlocked life and have requested to be at the same table. The other three people are an old couple and their granddaughter, whose name is Mona. I am the only first-time Luxury Cruiser at Table 64. With the conspicuous exception of Mona, I like all my tablemates a lot, and I want to get a description of supper out of the way fast and avoid saying much about them for fear of hurting their feelings by noting any character defects or eccentricities that might seem potentially mean. Besides me, there are five women and two men, and both men are completely silent except on the subjects of golf, business, transdermal motion-sickness prophylaxis, and the legalities of getting stuff through customs. The women carry Table 64's conversational ball. One of the reasons I like all these women (except Mona) so much is that they laugh really hard at my jokes, even lame or very obscure jokes, although they all have this curious way of laughing where they sort of *scream* before they laugh, so that for one excruciating second you can't tell whether they're getting ready to laugh or whether they're seeing something hideous and screamworthy over your shoulder.

My favorite tablemate is Trudy, whose husband is back home managing some sudden crisis at the couple's cellular-phone business and has given his ticket to Alice, their heavy and extremely well-dressed daughter, who is on spring break from Miami U. and who is for some reason very anxious to communicate to me that she has a Serious Boyfriend, whose name is apparently Patrick. Alice's continual assertion of her relationship-status may be a defensive tactic against Trudy, who keeps pulling professionally retouched 4 x 5 glossies of Alice out of her purse and showing them to me with Alice sitting right there, and who, every time Alice mentions Patrick, suffers some sort of weird facial tic or grimace where the canine tooth on one side of her face shows but the other side's doesn't. Trudy is fifty-six and looks—and I mean this in the nicest possible way—rather

like Jackie Gleason in drag, and has a particularly loud pre-laugh scream that is a real arrhythmia-producer, and is the one who coerces me into Wednesday night's conga line, and gets me strung out on Snowball Jackpot Bingo. Trudy is also an incredible lay authority on 7NC Luxury Cruises, this being her sixth in a decade; she and her best friend, Esther (thin-faced, subtly ravaged-looking, the distaff part of the couple from Miami), have tales to tell about Carnival, Princess, Crystal, and Cunard too fraught with libel potential to reproduce here.

By midweek it starts to strike me that I have never before been party to such a minute and exacting analysis of the food and service of a meal I am just at that moment eating. Nothing escapes the attention of T and E: the symmetry of the parsley sprigs atop the boiled baby carrots, the consistency of the bread, the flavor and mastication-friendliness of various cuts of meat, the celerity and flambé technique of the various pastry guys in tall white hats who appear tableside when items have to be set on fire (a major percentage of the desserts in the Five-Star Caravelle Restaurant have to be set on fire), and so on. The waiter and busboy keep circling the table, going "Finish? Finish?" while Esther and Trudy have exchanges like:

"Honey you don't look happy with the potatoes. What's the problem."

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

"Don't lie. Honey with that face who could lie? Frank, am I right? This is a person with a face incapable of lying."

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

"You're not happy with the conch."

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

"Did I tell you? Frank, did I tell her? [Frank silently probes his ear with pinkie.] Was I right? Trudy I could tell just by looking you weren't happy."

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

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

"The potatoes are good."

Mona is eighteen. Her grandparents have been taking her on a Luxury Cruise every spring since she was five. Mona always sleeps through both breakfast and lunch and spends all night at the Scorpio Disco and in the Mayfair Casino playing the slots. She is six two if she's an inch. She's going to attend Penn State next fall, because the agreement is that she'll receive a four-wheel-drive vehicle if she goes someplace where there might be snow. She is unabashed in recounting this college-selection criterion. She is an incredibly demanding passenger and diner,

¹¹ This is on Deck 7, the serious dining room, and it's never called just "the Caravelle Restaurant" (and never just "the Restaurant")—it's always "the Five-Star Caravelle Restaurant."

but her complaints about slight aesthetic and gustatory imperfections at table lack Trudy and Esther's discernment and come off as simply churlish. Mona is also kind of strange-looking: a body like Brigitte Nielsen or some centerfold on steroids, and above it, framed in resplendent blond hair, the tiny unhappy face of a kind of corrupt doll. Her grandparents, who retire every night right after supper, always make a small ceremony after dessert of handing Mona \$100 to "go have some fun" with. This \$100 bill is always in one of those little ceremonial bank envelopes that has Franklin's face staring out of a porthole-like window in the front, and written on the envelope in red Magic Marker is always "We Love You, Honey." Mona never once says thank you. She also rolls her eyes at just about everything her grandparents say, a habit that very quickly drives me up the wall.

Mona's special customary gig on 7NC Luxury Cruises is to lie to the waiter and maître d' and say that Thursday is her birthday, so that at the Formal supper on Thursday she gets bunting and a heart-shaped helium balloon tied to her chair, and her own cake, and pretty much the whole restaurant staff comes out and forms a circle around her and sings to her. Her real birthday, she informs me on Monday, is July 29, and when I quietly observe that July 29 is also the birthday of Benito Mussolini, Mona's grandmother shoots me kind of a death-look, although Mona herself is excited at the coincidence, apparently confusing the names Mussolini and Maserati.

The weather in no way compromised the refinement of meals at Table 64. Even in heavy seas, 7NC Megaships don't yaw or throw you around or send bowls of soup sliding across tables. Only a certain slight unreality to your footing lets you know you're not on land. At sea, a room's floor feels somehow 3-D, and your footing demands a slight attention that good old static land never needs. You don't ever quite hear the ship's big engines, but when your feet are planted you can feel them—a kind of spinal throb, oddly soothing.

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

"Rolling," on the other hand, is when waves hit the ship from the side and make it go up and down along its crosswise axis. When the Nadir rolls, what you feel is a very slight increase in the demands placed on the muscles of your left leg, then a strange absence of all demand, then extra demands on the right leg.

We never pitch badly, but every once in a while some really big, Poseidon Adventure-grade wave must have come and hit the Nadir's side, because the asymmetric leg-demands sometimes won't stop or reverse and you keep having to put more and more weight on one leg until you're exquisitely close to tipping over. The cruise's first night, steaming southeast for Jamaica, features some really big waves from starboard, and in the casino after supper it's hard to tell who's had too much of the '71 Richebourg and who's just doing a roll-related stagger. Add in the fact that most of the women are wearing high heels, and you can imagine some of the vertiginous staggering-flailing-clutching that goes on. Almost everyone on the Nadir has come in couples, and when they walk during heavy seas they tend to hang on each other like freshman steadies. You can tell they like it: the women have this trick of sort of folding themselves into the men and snuggling as they walk, and the men's postures improve and their faces firm up and they seem to feel unusually solid and protective. It's easy to see why older couples like to cruise.

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

You don't ever hear the ship's big engines, but you can feel an oddly soothing spinal throb

THE FOUR-COLOR BROCHURE, PART II

If I mention that famous writer and Iowa Writers' Workshop Chairperson Frank Conroy has his own experiential essay about

cruising right there in Celebrity's 7NC brochure? Well he does, and the thing starts out on the Pier 21 gangway that first Saturday with his family.¹²

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

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

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

This is pretty much what Conroy's whole "My Celebrity Cruise or 'All This and a Tan, Too'" is like. Its full implications don't hit me until I reread it supine on Deck 12 the first sunny day. Conroy's essay is graceful and lapidary and persuasive. I submit that it is also completely insidious and bad.

Its badness does not consist so much in its constant and mesmeric references to fantasy and alternate realities and the palliative powers of professional pampering—

I'd come on board after two months of intense and moderately stressful work, but now it seemed a distant memory. . . . I realized it had been a week since I'd washed a dish, cooked a meal, gone to the market, done an errand or, in fact, anything at all requiring a minimum of thought and effort. My toughest decisions had been whether to catch the afternoon showing of *Mrs. Doubtfire* or play bingo.

—nor in the surfeit of happy adjectives and the tone of breathless approval throughout—

Bright sun, warm still air, the brilliant blue-green of the Caribbean under the vast lapis lazuli dome of the sky . . . For all of us, our fantasies and expectations were to be exceeded, to say the least. . . . When it comes to service, Celebrity Cruises seems ready and able to deal with anything.

¹² Conroy took the same Celebrity cruise as I, the Seven-Night Western Caribbean on the good old Nadir, in May 1994. He and his family cruised for free. I know details like this because Conroy talked to me on the phone, and answered nosy questions, and was frank and forthcoming and in general just totally decent about the whole thing.

Rather, part of the essay's real badness can be found in the way it reveals once again the Megaline's sale-to-sail agenda of micro-managing not only one's perceptions of a 7NC but even one's own interpretation and articulation of those perceptions. In other words, Celebrity's P.R. people go and get a respected writer to pre-articulate and -endorse the 7NC experience, and to do it with a professional eloquence and authority that few lay perceivers and articulators could hope to equal.¹³ But the really major badness is that the project and placement of "My Celebrity Cruise . . ." are sneaky and duplicitous and well beyond whatever eroded pales still exist in terms of literary ethics. Conroy's "essay" appears as an inset, on skinnier pages and with different margins than the rest of the brochure, creating the impression that it has been excerpted from some large and objective thing Conroy wrote. But it hasn't been. The truth is that Celebrity Cruises paid Frank Conroy up-front to write it,¹⁴ even though nowhere in or around the essay is there anything acknowledging that it's a paid endorsement, not even one of the little "So-and-so has been compensated for his services" that flashes at your TV screen's lower right during celebrity-hosted infomercials. Instead, inset on this weird essaymercial's first page is a photo of Conroy brooding in a black turtleneck, and below the photo an author bio with a list of Conroy's books that includes the 1967 classic *Stop-Time*, which is arguably the best literary memoir of the twentieth century and is one of the books that first made poor old humble yours truly want to try to be a writer.

In the case of Frank Conroy's "essay," Celebrity Cruises is trying to position an ad in

¹³ E.g., after reading Conroy's essay on board, whenever I'd look up at the sky, it wouldn't be the sky I was seeing, it was the vast lapis lazuli dome of the sky.

¹⁴ Phone inquiries about the origins of Professor Conroy's essaymercial yielded two separate explanations: (1) From Celebrity Cruises' P.R. liaison Ms. Wiessen (after a two-day silence that I've come to understand as the P.R. equivalent of covering the microphone with your hand and leaning over to confer with counsel): "Celebrity saw an article he wrote in Travel and Leisure magazine, and they were really impressed with how he could create these mental postcards, so they went to ask him to write about his cruise experience for people who'd never been on a cruise before, and they did pay him to write the article, and they really took a gamble, really, because they had to pay him whether he liked it or not, and whether they liked the article or not, but . . . [dry little chuckle] obviously they liked the article, and he did a good job, so that's the Mr. Conroy story, and those are his perspectives on his experience." (2) From Frank Conroy (with the small sigh that precedes a certain kind of weary candor): "I prostituted myself."

The atmosphere on-board the ship is sybaritic and nearly insanity-producing

such a way that we come to it with the lowered guard and leading chin we reserve for coming to an essay, for something that is art (or that is at least trying to be art). An ad that pretends to be art is—at absolute best—like somebody who smiles at you only because he wants something from you. This is dishonest, but what's insidious is the cumulative effect that such dishonesty has on us: since it offers a perfect simulacrum of goodwill without goodwill's real substance, it messes with our heads and eventually starts upping our defenses even in cases of genuine smiles and real art and true goodwill. It makes us feel confused and lonely and impotent and angry and scared. It causes despair.¹⁵

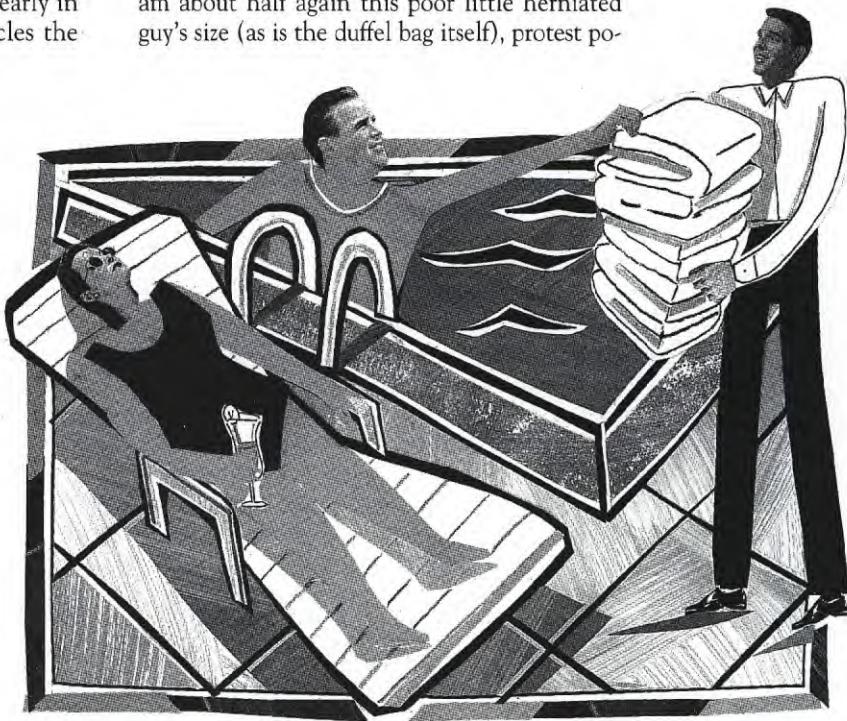
But for this particular 7NC consumer, Conroy's ad-as-essay ends up having a truthfulness about it that I'm sure is unintentional. As my week on the *Nadir* wears on, I begin to see this essaymercial as a perfectly ironic reflection of the mass-market cruise experience itself. The essay is polished, powerful,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

¹⁵ This is related to the phenomenon of the Professional Smile, a pandemic in the service industry, and no place in my experience have I been on the receiving end of as many Professional Smiles as I was on the *Nadir*: maître d's, chief stewards, hotel managers' minions, cruise director—their P.S.'s all come on like switches at my approach. But also back on land: at banks, restaurants, airline ticket counters, and on and on. You know this smile—the one that doesn't quite reach the smiler's eyes and signifies nothing more than a calculated attempt to advance the smiler's own interests by pretending to like the smilee. Why do employers and supervisors force professional service people to broadcast the Professional Smile? Am I the only person who's sure that the growing number of cases in which normal-looking people open up with automatic weapons in shopping malls and insurance offices and medical complexes is somehow causally related to the fact that these venues are well-known dissemination-loci of the Professional Smile?

PAMPERED TO DEATH, PART II

Celebrity's brochure does not lie or exaggerate, however, in the luxury department, and I now confront the journalistic problem of not being sure how many examples I need to list in order to communicate the atmosphere of sybaritic and nearly insanity-producing pampering on board the m.v. *Nadir*. Take, as one example, the moment right after sailing when I want to go out to Deck 10's port rail for some introductory vista-gazing and thus decide I need some zinc oxide for my peel-prone nose. My zinc oxide's still in my big duffel bag, which at that point is piled with all of Deck 10's other luggage in the little area between the 10-Fore elevator and the 10-Fore staircase while little guys in cadet-blue Celebrity jumpsuits, porters (entirely Lebanese, it seems), are cross-checking the luggage tags with the *Nadir*'s passenger list and lugging everything to people's cabins.

So I come out and spot my duffel among the luggage, and I start to grab and haul it out of the towering pile of leather and nylon, thinking I'll just whisk the bag back to Cabin 1009 myself and root through it and find my zinc oxide. One of the porters sees me starting to grab the bag, though, and he dumps all four of the massive pieces of luggage he's staggering with and leaps to intercept me. At first I'm afraid he thinks I'm some kind of baggage thief and wants to see my claim check or something. But it turns out that what he wants is my duffel: he wants to carry it to 1009 for me. And I, who am about half again this poor little herniated guy's size (as is the duffel bag itself), protest po-



lately, trying to be considerate, saying Don't Fret, Not a Big Deal, Just Need My Good Old Zinc Oxide, I'll Just Get the Big Old Heavy Weather-Stained Sucker Out of Here Myself.

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

Only later do I understand what I've done. Only later do I learn that that little Lebanese Deck-10 porter had his head just about chewed off by the (also Lebanese) Deck-10 Head Porter, who had his own head chewed off by the Austrian Chief Steward, who received confirmed reports that a passenger had been seen carrying his own bag up the port hallway of Deck 10 and now demanded a rolling Lebanese head for this clear indication of portly dereliction, and the Austrian Chief Steward had reported the incident to a ship's officer in the Guest Relations Department, a Greek guy with Revo shades and a walkie-talkie and epaulets so complex I never did figure out what his rank was; and this high-ranking Greek guy actually came around to 1009 after Saturday's supper to apologize on behalf of practically the entire Chandris shipping line and to assure me that ragged-necked Lebanese heads were even at that moment rolling down various corridors in piacular recompense for my having had to carry my own bag. And even though this Greek officer's English was in lots of ways better than mine, it took me no less than ten minutes to detail the double bind I'd put the porter in—brandishing at relevant moments the actual tube of zinc oxide that had caused the whole snafu—ten or more minutes before I could get enough of a promise from the Greek officer that various chewed-off heads would be reattached and employee records unbesmirched to feel comfortable enough to allow the officer to leave;¹⁶ and the whole incident was incredibly frazzling and despair-fraught, and filled almost

half a spiral notebook, and is here recounted in only its barest psychoskeletal outline.

This grim determination to indulge the passenger in ways that go far beyond any halfway-sane passenger's own expectations is everywhere on the *Nadir*. Some wholly random examples: My cabin bathroom has plenty of thick fluffy towels, but when I go up to lie in the sun I don't have to take any of my cabin's towels, because the two upper decks' sun areas have big carts loaded with even thicker and fluffier towels. These carts are stationed at convenient intervals along endless rows of gymnastically adjustable deck chairs that are themselves phenomenally fine deck chairs, sturdy enough for even the portliest sunbather but also narcoleptically comfortable, with heavy-alloy frames over which is stretched some mysterious material that combines canvas's quick-drying durability with cotton's absorbency and comfort—certainly a welcome step up from public pools' deck-chair material of Kmartish plastic that sticks to your skin and produces farty suction-noises whenever you shift your sweaty weight on it. And each of the sun decks is manned by a special squad of full-time Towel Guys, so that when you're well-done on both sides and ready to quit and you spring easily out of the deck chair you don't have to pick up your towel and take it with you or even bus it into the cart's Used Towel slot, because a Towel Guy materializes the minute your fanny leaves the chair and removes your towel for you and deposits it in the slot. (Actually, the Towel Guys are such overachievers that even if you get up for just a second to reapply zinc oxide or gaze contemplatively out over the railing at the sea, when you turn back around your towel's often gone and your deck chair has been refolded to its uniform 45-degree at-rest angle, and you have to readjust your chair all over again and go to the cart to get a fresh fluffy towel, of which there is admittedly not a short supply.)

Down in the Five-Star Caravelle Restaurant, the waiter¹⁷ will not only bring you a lobster—as well as a second and even a third lobster¹⁸—with methamphetaminic speed but will also incline over you with gleaming claw-cracker and surgical fork and dismantle it for you, sparing you the green goopy work that's the only remotely rigorous thing about lobster. And at the Windsurf Café, up on Deck 11 by the pools,

¹⁶ In further retrospect, I think the only thing I really persuaded this Greek officer of was that I was very weird, and possibly unstable, which impression I'm sure was shared with Mr. Dermatitis and combined with that same first night's au-jus-as-shark-bait request to destroy my credibility with Dermatitis before I even got in to see him.

¹⁷ Table 64's waiter is Tibor, a Hungarian and a truly exceptional person, about whom if there's any editorial justice you will learn a lot more someplace below.

¹⁸ Not until Tuesday's Lobster Night at the 5★ C.R. did I really empathetically understand the Roman phenomenon of the vomitorium.

where there's always an informal buffet lunch, there's never that bovine line that makes most cafeterias such a downer, and there are about seventy-three varieties of entrée alone, and the sort of coffee you marry somebody for being able to make; and if you have too many things on your tray, a waiter will materialize as you peel away from the buffet and will carry your tray (even though it's a cafeteria, there are all these waiters standing around with Nehru jackets and white towels draped over left arms watching you, not quite making eye contact but scanning for any little way to be of service, plus plump-jacketed sommeliers walking around to see if you need a non-buffet libation, plus a whole other crew of maître d's and supervisors watching the waiters and sommeliers and tall-hatted buffet servers to make sure you don't do something for yourself that could be done for you).

Every public surface on the m.v. *Nadir* that isn't stainless steel or glass or varnished parquet or dense and good-smelling sauna-type wood is plush blue carpet that never has a chance to accumulate even one flecklet of lint because jumpsuited Third World guys are always at it with Siemens A.G.® vacuums. The elevators are Euroglass and yellow steel and stainless steel and a kind of wood-grain material that looks too shiny to be real wood but makes a sound when you thump it that's an awful lot like real wood.¹⁹ The elevators and stairways between decks seem to be the particular objects of the anal retention of a whole special Elevator and Staircase custodial crew. During the first two days of rough seas, when people vomited a lot (especially after supper and apparently extra—especially on the elevators and stairways), these puddles of vomit inspired a veritable feeding-frenzy of wet/dry vacs and spot remover and all-trace-of-odor-eradicator chemicals applied by this elite Special Forces-type crew.

And don't let me forget room service, which on a 7NC Luxury Cruise is called "cabin service." Cabin service is in addition to the eleven scheduled daily opportunities for public eating, and it's available twenty-four hours a day and is free: all you have to do is hit x72 on the bedside phone, and ten or fifteen minutes later a guy who wouldn't even dream of hitting you up for a gratuity appears with: "Thinly Sliced Ham and Swiss Cheese on White Bread with Dijon Mustard" or "The Combo: Cajun Chicken with Pasta Salad, and Spicy Salsa," or

¹⁹ The many things on the *Nadir* that were wood-grain but not real wood were such wonderful and painstaking imitations of wood that a lot of times it seemed like it would have been simpler and less expensive simply to have used real wood.

a whole page of other sandwiches and platters from the Services Directory—and the stuff deserves to be capitalized, believe me. As a kind of semi-agoraphobe who spends massive amounts of time in my cabin, I come to have a really complex dependency/shame relationship with cabin service. Since finally finding out about it Monday, I've ended up availing myself of cabin service every night—more like twice a night, to be honest—even though I find it extremely embarrassing to be calling up x72 asking to have even more rich food brought to me when there have already been eleven gourmet eating-ops that day.²⁰ Usually what I do is spread my notebooks and *Fielding's Guide to Worldwide Cruises 1995* and pens and various materials out all over the bed so that when the cabin service guy appears at the door he'll see all this belletristic material and figure I'm working really hard on something belletristic right here in the cabin and have doubtless been too busy to have hit all the public meals and thus am legitimately entitled to the indulgence of even more rich food.

My experience with the cabin cleaning, though, is perhaps the ultimate example of pampering stress. The fact of the matter is that I rarely even see 1009's Cabin Steward, Petra, which is why, on the occasions when I do see her, I practically hold her prisoner and yammer at her like an idiot. But I have good reason to believe she sees me, because every time I leave 1009 for more than like half an hour, when I get back it's cleaned and dusted again and the towels replaced and the bathroom agleam. Don't get me wrong: in a way it's great. I'm in Cabin 1009 a lot, and I also come and go a lot, and when I'm in here I sit in bed and write in bed while eating fruit and generally mess up the bed. But whenever I dart out and then come back, the bed is freshly made up and

*Not until Lobster Night
did I understand the
Roman phenomenon of
the vomitorium*

²⁰ This is counting the *Midnight Buffet*, which tends to be a kind of lamey lavish costume-partyish thing with theme-related foods—Oriental, Caribbean, Tex-Mex—and which I plan to mostly skip except to say that *Tex-Mex Night out* by the pools featured what must have been a seven-foot-high ice sculpture of Pancho Villa that spent the whole party dripping steadily onto the mammoth sombrero of Tibor, whose waiter's contract forces him on *Tex-Mex Night* to wear a serape and a straw sombrero with a 17-inch radius (he let me measure it when the reptilian maître d' wasn't looking) and to dispense four-alarm chili from a steam table placed right underneath an ice sculpture, and whose face on occasions like this expresses a combination of mortification and dignity that seems somehow to sum up the whole plight of postwar Eastern Europe.

hospital-cornered and there's another mint-centered chocolate on the pillow.

I grant that mysterious invisible room cleaning is every slob's fantasy, like having a mom without the guilt. But there is also a creeping uneasiness about it that presents—at least in my own case—as a kind of paranoia. Because after a couple days of this fabulous invisible room cleaning, I start to wonder how exactly Petra knows when I'm in 1009 and when I'm not. It's now that it occurs to me that I hardly ever see her. For a while I try experiments, like all of a sudden darting out into the 10-Port hallway to see if I can catch Petra hunched somewhere keeping track of who is decabining, and I scour the whole hallway-and-ceiling area for evidence of some kind of camera monitoring movements outside the cabin



doors. Zilch on both fronts. But then I see that the mystery's even more complex and unsettling than I'd first thought, because my cabin gets cleaned always and only during intervals when I'm gone for more than half an hour. When I go out, how can Petra or her supervisors possibly know how long I'm going to be gone? I try leaving 1009 a couple of times and then dashing back after ten or fifteen minutes to see whether I can catch Petra *in delicti*, but she's never there. I try making an ungodly mess, then leaving and hiding somewhere on a lower deck, then dashing back after exactly twenty-nine minutes—again when I come bursting through the door there's no Petra and no cleaning. Then I leave the cabin with exactly the same expression and appurtenances as before and this time stay hidden for thirty-one minutes and then haul ass back—again no sighting of Petra, but now 1009 is sterilized and gleaming, and there's a mint on the pillow's new case. I scrutinize every inch of

every surface I pass as I circle the deck during these little experiments: no cameras or motion-sensors or anything in evidence anywhere that would explain how They know.²¹ So for a while I theorize that somehow a special crewman is assigned to each passenger and follows that passenger at all times, using extremely sophisticated personal-surveillance techniques and reporting back to Steward HQ my movements and activities and projected time of cabin-return. For about a day I try taking evasive actions—whirling to check behind me, popping around corners, darting in and out of gift shops via different doors, etc.—but I never see one flaming sign of anybody engaged in surveillance. By the time I quit trying, I'm feeling half-crazed, and my countersurveillance measures are drawing frightened looks and even some temple-tapping from 10-Port's other guests.

MY CABIN

I who am not a true agoraphobe but am what might be called a "borderline agoraphobe" or "semi-agoraphobe," come therefore understandably to love very deeply "Cabin 1009/Exterior Port."²² It is made of a fawn-colored enamelish polymer and its walls are extremely thick and solid: I can drum annoyingly on the wall above my bed for up to five minutes before my aft neighbors pound (very faintly) back. My cabin is thirteen size-eleven Keds long by twelve Keds wide. The cabin door has three separate locking technologies and trilingual lifeboat and -jacket instructions bolted to its wall and a whole deck of multilingual DO NOT DISTURB cards hanging from the inside knob. Right by the door is the Wondercloset, a complicated honeycomb of shelves and drawers and hangers and cubbyholes and a Personal Fireproof Safe. The Wondercloset is so intricate in its utilization of every available cubic centimeter that all I can say is it must have been designed by a very

²¹ The answer to why I don't just ask Petra how she does it is that Petra's English is extremely limited and primitive, and in sad fact I'm afraid my whole deep feeling of attraction to Petra the Slavonian Steward has been erected on the flimsy foundation of the only two English clauses she seems to know, one or the other of which she uses in response to every question, joke, or protestation of undying love: "Is no problem" and "You are a funny thing."

²² "1009" indicates that it's the ninth cabin on Deck 10, "Port" refers to the side of the ship it's on, and "Exterior" means that I have a window. There are also "Interior" cabins off the inner sides of the decks' halls, but I hereby advise any prospective 7NC passenger with claustrophobic tendencies to make sure and specify "Exterior" when making cabin reservations.

organized person indeed. Inside are extra chamois blankets and hypoallergenic pillows and plastic Celebrity Cruises bags of all different sizes and configurations for your laundry, optional dry cleaning, etc.

The cabin's porthole is indeed round, but it is not small, and in terms of its importance to the room's mood and *raison* it resembles a cathedral's rose window. It's made of that kind of very thick glass that tellers at drive-up banks stand behind. You can thump the glass with your fist and it won't even vibrate. Every morning at exactly 8:34 A.M. a Filipino guy in a blue jumpsuit stands on one of the lifeboats that hang in rows between Decks 9 and 10 and sprays my porthole with a hose, to get the salt off, which is always fun to watch.

Cabin 1009's dimensions are just barely on the good side of the line between very very snug and cramped. Packed into its near-square are a big good bed and two bedside tables with lamps and an 18-inch TV with five At-Sea Cable® options. There's also a white enamel desk that doubles as a vanity, and a round glass table on which sits a basket that's alternately filled with fresh fruit and husks and rinds of same. Every time I leave the cabin for more than the requisite half-hour I come back to find a new basket of fruit, covered in snug blue-tinted plastic wrap, on the glass table. It's good fresh fruit and it's always there. I've never eaten so much fruit in my life.

MY BATHROOM

Cabin 1009's bathroom deserves extravagant praise. I've seen more than my share of bathrooms, and this is one bitchingly nice bathroom. It is five and a half Keds to the edge of the shower's step up and sign to WATCH YOUR STEP. The room is done in white enamel and gleaming stylized brushed and stainless steel. Its overhead lighting is some kind of blue-intensive Eurofluorescence that's run through a diffusion filter so that it's diagnostically acute without being brutal. Next to the light switch is an Alisco Scirocco® hair dryer that's brazed right onto the wall and comes on automatically when you take it out of the mount; the Scirocco's HIGH setting just about takes your head off. The sink is huge, and its bowl is deep without seeming precipitous or ungentle of grade. Good plate mirror covers the whole wall over the sink. The steel soap dish is striated to let sog-water out and minimize that annoying underside-of-the-bar slime. The ingenious consideration of the anti-slime soap dish is particularly affecting. Keep in mind that 1009 is a mid-price single cabin. The mind

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

Merely enter 1009's bathroom and hit the overhead lights and on comes an automatic exhaust fan whose force and aerodynamism give steam or offensive odors just no quarter at all.²³ The fan's suction is such that if you stand right underneath its louvered vent it makes your hair stand straight up on your head, which together with the abundantly rippling action of the Scirocco hair dryer makes for hours of fun in the lavishly lit mirror.

The shower itself overachieves in a very big way. The HOT setting's water is exfoliatingly hot, but it takes only one preset manipulation of the shower knob to get perfect 98.6-degree water. My own personal home should have such water pressure: the showerhead's force pins you helplessly to the stall's opposite wall, and the head's MASSAGE setting makes your eyes roll up and your sphincter just about give.²⁴ The showerhead and its flexible steel line are also detachable, so you can hold the head and direct its punishing stream just at your particularly dirty right knee or something.

But all this is still small potatoes compared with 1009's fascinating and potentially malevolent toilet. A harmonious concordance of elegant form and vigorous function, flanked by rolls of tissue so soft as to be without perforates for tearing, my toilet has above it this sign:

THIS TOILET IS CONNECTED TO A VACUUM
SEWAGE SYSTEM. PLEASE DO NOT THROW INTO
THE TOILET ANYTHING [SIC] THAN ORDINARY
TOILET WASTE AND TOILET PAPER

The toilet's flush produces a brief but traumatizing sound, a kind of held high-B gargle, as

²³ 1009's bathroom always smells of a strange but not unice Norwegian disinfectant. The cabin itself, on the other hand, after it's been cleaned, has no odor. None. Not in the carpets, the bedding, the insides of the desk drawers, the wood of the Wondercloset's doors: nothing. This, too, eventually starts giving me the creeps.

²⁴ This detachable and concussive showerhead can allegedly also be employed for non-hygienic and even prurient purposes. I overheard guys from a small University of Texas vacation contingent (the only college group on the whole Nadir) regale one another with tales of their ingenuity with the showerhead. One guy in particular was fixated on the idea that somehow the shower's technology could be rigged to administer fellatio if he could just get access to a "metric ratchet set." Your guess here is as good as mine.

*How does Petra, my
cabin steward, know
when I'm in my room
and when I'm not?*

of some gastric disturbance on a cosmic scale. Along with this sound comes a suction so awesomely powerful that it's both scary and strangely comforting: your waste seems less removed than hurled from you, and with a velocity that lets you feel as though the waste is going to end up someplace so far away that it will have become an abstraction, a kind of existential sewage-treatment system.²⁵

THE OCEAN

Traveling at sea for the first time is a chance to realize that the ocean is not one ocean. The water changes. The Atlantic that seethes off the eastern United States is glaucous and lightless and looks mean. Around Jamaica, though, it's more like a milky aquamarine. Off the Cayman Islands it's an electric blue, and off Cozumel it's almost purple. Same deal with the beaches. You can tell right away that south Florida's sand comes from rocks: it hurts your bare feet and has that sort of mineralish glitter

²⁵ *The Nadir's Vacuum Sewage System begins after a while to hold such a fascination for me that I end up going hat in hand back to Hotel Manager Dermatitis to ask once again for access to the ship's nether parts. But once again I pull a boner with Dermatitis: I innocently mention my specific fascination with the ship's Vacuum Sewage System—which boner is consequent to another and prior boner by which I'd failed to discover in my pre-boarding research that there'd been, just a few months before this, a tremendous scandal in which a Megaship had been discovered dumping waste over the side in mid-voyage, in violation of numerous national and maritime codes, and had been videotaped doing this by a couple of passengers who subsequently apparently sold the videotape to some network newsmagazine, and so the whole Megacruise industry was in a state of almost Nixonian paranoia about unscrupulous journalists trying to manufacture scandals about Megaships' handling of waste. Even behind his mirrored sunglasses I can tell that Mr. Dermatitis is severely upset about my interest in sewage, and he denies my request to eyeball the V.S.S. with a complex defensiveness that I can't even begin to chart out here. It is only later that night at supper, at good old Table 64 in the 5★ C.R., that my cruise-savvy tablemates fill me in on the waste scandal, and they scream with mirth at the clay-footed naïveté with which I'd gone to Dermatitis with what was in fact an innocent if puerile fascination with hermetically evacuated waste; and such is my own embarrassment and hatred of Mr. Dermatitis by this time that I begin to feel that if the Hotel Manager really does think I'm some kind of investigative journalist with a hard-on for shark dangers and sewage scandals, then he might think it would be worth the risk to have me harmed in some way. And, through a set of neurotic connections I won't even try to defend, I, for about a day and a half, begin to fear that the Nadir's Greek episcopate will somehow contrive to use the incredibly potent and forceful 1009 toilet itself for the assassination—that they'll, I don't know, like somehow lubricate the bowl and up the suction to where not just my waste but I myself will be sucked down through the seat's opening and hurled into some kind of abstract septic exile.*

to it. But Ocho Rios's beach is more like dirty sugar, and Cozumel's is like clean sugar, and at places along the coast of Grand Cayman the sand's texture is more like flour, silicate, its white as dreamy and vaporous as clouds' white. The only real constant to the nautical topography of the Nadir's Caribbean is its unreal and almost retouched-looking prettiness. It's impossible to describe right; the closest I can come is to say that it all looks: expensive.

TABLE 64'S WAITER

Our waiter's name is, as previously mentioned, Tibor. Mentally I refer to him as "the Tibster," but never out loud. Tibor has dismantled my artichokes and my lobsters and taught me that extra-well-done is not the only way meat can be palatable. We have sort of bonded, I feel. He is thirty-five and about five four and plump, and his movements have the birdlike economy characteristic of small plump graceful men. His face is at once round and pointy, and rosy. His tux never wrinkles. His hands are soft and pink. Menu-wise, Tibor advises and recommends, but without the hauteur that has always made me hate the gastropedantic waiters in classy restaurants. He is omnipresent without being unctuous or oppressive; he is kind and warm and fun. He is the Head Waiter for Tables 64–67 at all three meals. He can carry three trays without precariousness and never looks harried or on the edge the way most multitable waiters look. He seems like he cares.

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

Mornings, the Tibster wears a red bow tie and smells faintly of sandalwood. Early Seating Breakfast is the best time to be with Tibor, because he's not very busy and can be initiated into chitchat without looking pained at neglecting his duties. He doesn't know I'm on the *Nadir* as a pseudojournalist. I'm not sure why I haven't told him—somehow I think it might make things hard for him. During E.S.B. chitchat I never ask him anything about the *Nadir* (except for precise descriptions of whatever dorsal fins he's seen), not out of deference to Mr. Dermatitis's injunctions but because I'd just about die if Tibor got into any trouble on my account.

Tibor's ambition is someday to return to his native Budapest for good and with his *Nadir*-savings open a sort of newspaper-and-beret-type sidewalk café that specializes in something called cherry soup. With this in mind, two days from now in Fort Lauderdale I'm going to tip the Tibster way more than the suggested \$3 U.S. per diem, balancing out my total expenses by radically undertipping both our liplessly sinister maître d' and our sommelier, an unctuously creepy Ceylonese guy the whole table has christened the Velvet Vulture.

PORT CALL

Mornings in port are a special time for the semi-agoraphobe, because just about everybody else gets off the ship and goes ashore for Organized Shore Excursions or for unstructured peripatetic tourist stuff, and the m.v. *Nadir*'s upper decks have the eerily delicious deserted quality of your folks' house when you're home sick as a kid and everybody else is gone. We're docked off Cozumel, Mexico. I'm on Deck 12. A couple of guys in software-company T-shirts jog fragrantly by every couple of minutes, but other than that it's just me and the zinc oxide and hat and about a thousand empty and identically folded deck chairs. The 12-Aft Towel Guy has almost nobody to exercise his zeal on, and by 10:00 A.M. I'm on my fifth new towel.

Here the semi-agoraphobe can stand alone at the ship's highest port rail and look pensively out to sea, which off Cozumel is a kind of watery indigo through which you can see the powdery white of the bottom. In the middle distance, underwater coral formations are big cloud-shapes of deeper purple. Out past the coral, the water gets progressively darker in orderly stripes, a phenomenon that I think has to do with perspective. It's all extremely pretty and peaceful. Besides me and the Towel Guy and the orbiting joggers, there's only a supine

older lady reading *Codependent No More* and a man standing way up at the fore part of the starboard rail videotaping the sea. This sad and cadaverous guy, who by the second day I'd christened Captain Video, has tall hard gray hair and Birkenstocks and very thin hairless calves, and he's one of the cruise's more prominent eccentrics.²⁶ Pretty much everybody on the *Nadir* qualifies as camera-crazy, but Captain Video camcords absolutely everything, including meals, empty hallways, endless games of geriatric bridge—even leaping onto Deck 11's raised stage during Tuesday's Pool Party to get the crowd from the musicians' angle. He is the only passenger besides me who I know for a fact is cruising without a relative or companion, and certain additional similarities between him and me tend to make me uncomfortable, and I try to avoid him.

From Deck 12's starboard rail you can look down at the army of *Nadir* passengers being disgorged by the Deck 3 gangway. They keep pouring out of the door and down the narrow gangway. As each person's sandal hits the pier a sociolinguistic transformation from Cruiser to Tourist is effected. A serpentine line of 1,300-plus upscale tourists with currency to unload and experiences to experience stretches all the way down the Cozumel pier, which leads to a kind of megaquonset structure where Organized Shore Excursions and T-shirts and cabs or mopeds into San Miguel are available. The word around good old Table 64 last night was that in primitive and incredibly poor Cozumel the U.S. dollar is treated like a U.F.O.: "They worship it when it lands."

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

²⁶ Other eccentrics include: the bloated and dead-eyed guy who sits in the same chair at the same 21 table in the casino every day from noon to 3:00 A.M., drinking Long Island iced tea and playing 21 at a narcotized underwater pace; the hairy-stomached guy of maybe fifty who sleeps by the pool every minute, even in the rain, a copy of *Megatrends* open on his chest; and the two old couples who sit in upright chairs just inside the clear plastic walls that enclose Deck 11, never moving, watching the ocean and ports like they're something on TV.

*The vacuum toilet
seems to hurl your
waste into some kind of
abstract septic exile*

Off to the southeast, now, another Megacruiser is moving in to dock. It moves like a force of nature and resists the idea that so much mass is being steered by anything like a hand on a tiller. I can't imagine what trying to maneuver one of these puppies into the pier is like. Parallel parking a semi into a spot the same size as the semi with a blindfold on and four tabs of LSD in you might come close. Our docking this morning at sunrise involved an antlike frenzy of crewmen and shore personnel and an anchor that spilled from the ship's navel and upward of a dozen ropes, which the crew insists on calling



"lines," even though each one is at least the same diameter as a tourist's head.

I cannot convey to you the sheer and surreal scale of everything: the towering ship, the ropes, the anchor, the pier, the vast *lapis lazuli* dome of the sky. Looking down from a great height at your countrymen waddling into poverty-stricken ports in expensive sandals is not one of the funner moments of a 7NC Luxury Cruise, however. There is something inescapably bovine about a herd of American tourists in motion, a certain greedy placidity. I feel guilty by perceived association. I've barely been out of the U.S.A. before, and never as part of a high-income herd, and in port—even up here above it all on Deck 12, watching—I'm newly and unpleasantly conscious of being an

American, the same way I'm always suddenly conscious of being white every time I'm around a lot of non-white people. I cannot help imagining us as we appear to them, the bored Jamaicans and Mexicans, or especially to the non-Aryan and hard-driven crew of the *Nadir*. All week I've found myself doing everything I can to distance myself in the crew's eyes from the bovine herd I'm part of: I eschew cameras and sunglasses and pastel Caribbeanwear; I make a big deal of carrying my own luggage and my own cafeteria tray and am effusive in my thanks for the slightest service. Since so many of my shipmates shout, I make it a point of special pride to speak extra-quietly to crewmen whose English is poor. But, of course, part of the overall despair of this Luxury Cruise is that whatever I do I cannot escape my own essential and newly unpleasant Americanness. Whether up here or down there, I am an American tourist, and am thus *ex officio* large, fleshy, red, loud, coarse, condescending, self-absorbed, spoiled, appearance-conscious, greedy, ashamed, and despairing.

Up on 12-Aft, Captain Video isn't filming now but is looking at the harbor through a square he's made of his hands. He's the type where you can tell without even looking closely that he's talking to himself. This other white cruise ship is docking right next to us, a procedure that apparently demands a lot of coded blasts on its world-ending horn. But maybe the single best visual in the harbor is the group of *Nadirites* learning to snorkel in the lagoonish waters just offshore; off the port bow I can see a good 150 solid citizens floating face-down, motionless, looking like the massed and bloated victims of some hideous mishap—from this height it's a macabre and riveting sight. I have given up looking for dorsal fins in port. It turns out that sharks are never seen in pretty Caribbean ports, though a couple of Jamaicans had lurid if dubious stories of barracudas that could take off a limb in one surgical drive-by.

Now right up alongside the *Nadir*, on the other side of the pier, is finally docked and secured the m.v. *Dreamward*, with the peach-on-white color scheme that I think means it's owned by Norwegian Cruise Line.²⁷ Its Deck 3 gangway now protrudes and almost touches our Deck 3 gangway—sort of obscenely—and the *Dreamward*'s passengers, identical in all important respects to the *Nadir*'s passengers, are now streaming down the gangway and massing and moving down the pier in a kind of canyon of

²⁷ The *Nadir* itself is navy trim on a white field. All the Megalines have their own trademark color schemes—lime green on white, aqua on white, robin's egg on white, barn red on white, white being an invariable constant.

shadow made by the tall walls of our two ships' hulls. A lot of the *Dreamward*'s passengers turn and crane to marvel at the size of what's just disgorged them. Captain Video, inclined now way over the starboard rail so that only the toes of his sandals are still touching deck, is filming them as they look up at us; and more than a few of the *Dreamward*ites way below lift their own camcorders and point them up our way in a kind of retaliatory gesture, and for just a moment they and Captain Video compose a tableau that looks almost classically post-modern.

Because the *Dreamward* is lined up right next to us, almost porthole to porthole, with its Deck 12's port rail right up flush against our Deck 12's starboard rail, the *Dreamward*'s shore-shunners and I can stand at the rails and check each other out like muscle cars lined up at a stoplight. I can see the *Dreamward*'s rail-leaners looking the *Nadir* up and down, their faces shiny with high-SPF sunblock. The *Dreamward* is blindingly white, white to a degree that seems somehow aggressive and makes the *Nadir*'s white look more like buff or cream. Its snout is a little more tapered and aerodynamic-looking than our snout, and its trim is a kind of fluorescent peach, and the beach umbrellas around its Deck 11 pools are also peach, whereas our beach umbrellas are salmon, which has always seemed odd, given the white-and-navy motif of the *Nadir*, and now seems to me ad hoc and shabby. The *Dreamward* has more pools on Deck 11 than we do, and what looks like a whole other additional pool behind clear glass on Deck 6; and its pools' blue is that distinctive chlorine-blue, whereas the *Nadir*'s two small pools are both seawater and kind of icky.

On all its decks, all the way down, the *Dreamward*'s cabins have little white balconies for private open-air sea gazing. Its Deck 12 has a full-court basketball setup with peach-colored nets and backboards as white as Communion wafers. I notice that each of the little towel carts on the *Dreamward*'s Deck 12 is manned by its very own Towel Guy, and that their Towel Guys are ruddily Nordic and wear neither sunglasses nor a look of Dickensian oppression.

The point is that, standing here next to Captain Video, looking, I start to feel an almost prurient envy of the *Dreamward*. I imagine its interior to be cleaner than ours, larger, more lavishly appointed. I imagine the *Dreamward*'s food being even more varied and punctiliously prepared, its casino less depressing, its stage entertainment less cheesy, its toilets less menacing, its pillow mints bigger. The little private balconies outside the *Dream-*

ward's cabins, in particular, seem far superior to a porthole of bank-teller glass, which now seems suddenly chintzy and sad.

I am suffering here from a delusion, and I know it's a delusion, this envy of another ship, but still it's painful. It's also representative of a psychological syndrome that I notice has gotten steadily worse as my Luxury Cruise wears on, a mental list of dissatisfactions that started off picayune but has quickly become despair-grade. I know that the syndrome's cause is not simply the contempt bred of a week's familiarity with the poor old *Nadir*, and that the source of all the dissatisfactions isn't the *Nadir* at all but rather that ur-American part of me that craves pampering and passive pleasure: the dissatisfied-infant part of me, the part that always and indiscriminately WANTS. Hence this syndrome by which, for

example, just four days ago I experienced such embarrassment over the perceived self-indulgence of ordering even more gratis food from cabin service that I littered the bed with fake evidence of hard work and missed meals, whereas by last night I find myself looking at my watch in real annoyance after fifteen minutes and wondering where the fuck is that cabin service guy with the tray already. And by now I notice how the tray's sandwiches are kind of small, and how the wedge of dill pickle always soaks into the starboard crust of the bread, and how the port hallway is too narrow to really let me put the used cabin service tray outside 1009's door at night when I'm done eating, so that the tray sits in the cabin all night and in the morning adulterates the olfactory sterility of 1009 with a smell of rancid horseradish, and how this seems, by the Luxury Cruise's fifth day, deeply dissatisfying.

Death and Conroy notwithstanding, we're maybe now in a position to appreciate the falsehood at the dark heart of Celebrity's brochure. For this—the promise to sate the part of me that always and only WANTS—is the central fantasy the brochure is selling. The thing to notice is that the real fantasy here isn't that this promise will be kept but that such a promise is keepable at all. This is a big one, this lie.²⁸ And of course I want to believe it; I want to believe that maybe this ultimate fantasy vacation will be enough pampering, that this time the luxury and pleasure will be so completely and faultlessly administered

I feel an almost prurient envy of the other ship and imagine that its pillow mints are bigger

²⁸ It might well be *The Big One*, come to think of it.

*The ship has Dr. Pepper
but not Mr. Pibb;
it's an absolute god-
damned travesty*

that my infantile part will be sated at last. But the infantile part of me is, by its very nature and essence, insatiable. In fact, its whole *raison* consists of its insatiability. In response to any environment of extraordinary gratification and pampering, the insatiable-infant part of me will simply adjust its desires upward until it once again levels out at its homeostasis of terrible dissatisfaction. And sure enough, after a few days of delight and then adjustment on the *Nadir*, the Pamper-swaddled part of me that WANTS is now back, and with a vengeance. By Wednesday, I'm acutely conscious of the fact that the A.C. vent in my cabin hisses (loudly), and that although I can turn off the reggae Muzak coming out of the speaker in the cabin I cannot turn off the even louder ceiling-speaker out in the 10-Port hall. Now I notice that when Table 64's towering busboy uses his crumb-scoop to clear off the tablecloth between

courses he never seems to get quite all the crumbs. When Petra makes my bed, not all the hospital corners are at exactly the same angle. Most of the nightly stage entertainment in the Celebrity Show Lounge is so bad it's embarrassing, and the ice sculptures at the Midnight Buffet often look hurriedly carved, and the vegetable that comes with my entrée is continually overcooked, and it's impossible to get really numbingly cold water out of 1009's bathroom tap.

I'm standing here on Deck 12 looking at the *Dreamward*, which I bet has cold water that'd turn your knuckles blue, and, like Frank Conroy, part of me realizes that I haven't washed a dish or tapped my foot in line behind somebody with multiple coupons at a supermarket checkout in a week; and yet instead of feeling refreshed and renewed I'm anticipating how totally stressful and demanding and unpleasurable a return to regular landlocked adult life is going to be now that even just the premature removal of a towel by a sepulchral crewman seems like an assault on my basic rights, and the sluggishness of the Aft elevator is an outrage. And as I'm getting ready to go down to lunch I'm mentally drafting a really mordant footnote on my single biggest peeve about the *Nadir*: they don't even have Mr. Pibb; they foist Dr. Pepper on you with a maddeningly unapologetic shrug when any fool knows that Dr. Pepper is no substitute for Mr. Pibb, and it's an absolute goddamned travesty, or—at best—extremely dissatisfying indeed.

SOME ORGANIZED FUN

Every night, Cabin Steward Petra, when she turns down the bed, leaves on your pillow—along with the day's last mint and Celebrity's printed card wishing you sweet dreams in six languages—the next day's *Nadir Daily*, a little four-page ersatz newspaper printed on white in a royal-blue font. The *ND* has historical nuggets on upcoming ports, pitches for Organized Shore Excursions and specials in the Gift Shop, and stern stuff in boxes with malaprop headlines like QUARANTINES ON TRANSIT OF FOOD and MISUSE OF DRUG ACTS 1972.

We've rounded the final turn and are steaming on our return vector from Cozumel toward Key West, and today is one of the week's two "At-Sea" days, when shipboard activities are at their densest and most organized. This is the day I've picked to use the *ND* as a Baedeker as I leave Cabin 1009 for a period well in excess of half an hour and plunge headfirst into the experiential fray and keep a precise and detailed log of some really representative activities:

10:00 A.M.: Three simultaneous venues of Managed Fun, all aft on Deck 9: *Darts Tournament, take aim and hit the bull's eye! Shuffleboard Shuffle, join your fellow guests for a morning game. Ping-Pong Tournament, meet the Cruise Staff at the tables, Prizes to the Winners!* Organized shuffleboard has always filled me with dread. Everything about it suggests infirm senescence and death: it's a game played on the skin of a void, and the rasp of the sliding puck is the sound of that skin getting abraded away bit by bit. I also have a morbid but wholly justified fear of darts stemming from a childhood trauma too hair-raising to discuss here. I play Ping-Pong for an hour.

11:00 A.M.: *Navigation Lecture. Join Captain Nico and learn about the ship's Engine Room, the Bridge, and the basic "nuts and bolts" of the ship's operation.* I am there. The m.v. *Nadir* can carry 460,000 gallons of nautical-grade diesel fuel. It burns between 40 and 70 tons of this fuel a day, depending on how hard it's traveling. The ship has two turbine engines on each side, one big "Papa" and one (comparatively) little "Son." Each engine has a propeller that is 17 feet in diameter and is adjustable through a lateral rotation of 23.5 degrees for maximum torque. It takes the *Nadir* .9 nautical miles to come to a complete stop from a speed of 18 knots. The *Nadir* can go slightly faster in certain kinds of rough seas than it can go in calm seas (this is for technical reasons that won't fit on the napkin I'm taking notes on). Captain Nico's English is not going to win any elocution ribbons, but he is a veritable blowhole of hard data.

He's about my age and height and is just ridiculously good-looking.²⁹ Captain Nico wears Ray-Bans, but without a touristic fluorescent cord. This is also the day my paranoia about Mr. Dermatitis contriving somehow to jettison me from the *Nadir* via Cabin 1009's Vacuum-Suction Toilet is at its emotional zenith, and I've decided in advance to keep a real low journalistic profile at this event. I ask a total of one little innocuous question, right at the start, and Captain Nico responds with a witticism—"How we start engines? Not with the key of ignition, I can tell you!"—that gets a large and rather unkind laugh from the crowd.

It turns out that the long-mysterious "m.v." in "m.v. *Nadir*" stands for "motorized vessel." The m.v. *Nadir* cost \$250,310,000 U.S. to build. It was christened in Papenburg, West Germany, in 1992 with a bottle of ouzo instead of champagne. The *Nadir*'s three onboard generators produce 9 megawatts of power. The ship's bridge turns out to be what lies behind the very intriguing triple-locked bulkhead near the aft Towel Cart on Deck 10. The bridge is "where the equipments are—radars, indication of weathers and all these things." Two years of postgraduate study is required of officer wannabes just to get a handle

on the navigational math involved; "also there is much learning for the computers." Captain Nico explains that the *Nadir* subscribes to something called GPS: "This Global Positioning System is using the satellites above to know the position at all times, which gives this data to the computer." It emerges that when we're not negotiating ports and piers, a kind of computerized Autocaptain pilots the ship.³⁰

The all-male audience here consists of bald solid thick-wristed fiftyish men who all look like the kind of guy who rises to CEO a company out of its engineering department instead of some MBA program. A number of them are

²⁹ Something else I've learned on this Luxury Cruise is that no man can ever look any better than he looks in the white full-dress uniform of a naval officer. Women of all ages and estrogen levels swooned, sighed, wobbled, lashed, batted, growled, and hubba'd when one of these navally resplendent Greek officers went by, a phenomenon that I don't imagine helped the Greeks' humility one bit.

³⁰ This helps explain why *Nadir* Captain G. Panagiotakis usually seems so phenomenally unbusy, why his real job seems to be to stand in various parts of the *Nadir* and try to look vaguely presidential, which he would except for his habit of wearing sunglasses inside, which makes him look more like a Third World strongman.

clearly Navy veterans or yachtsmen or something. They compose a very knowledgeable audience and ask involved questions about the "bore" and "stroke" of the engines, the management of "multi-radial torque," and the hydrodynamics of "midship stabilizers." They're all the kinds of men who look like they're smoking cigars even when they're not. Everybody's complexion is hectic from sun and salt spray and a surfeit of Slippery Nipples. A 7NC Megaship's maximum possible cruising speed is 21.4 knots. No way I'm going to raise my hand in this kind of crowd and ask what a knot is.

12:40 P.M.: I seem to be out on 9-Aft hitting golf balls off an Astroturf square into a dense-mesh nylon net that balloons impressively out

toward the sea when a golf ball hits it. Thanatopic shuffleboard continues over to starboard; ominous little holes in the deck, bulkhead, railing, and even my little Astroturf square testify to my wisdom in having steered clear of the A.M. Darts Tourney.

2:00 P.M.: Now I'm in Deck 12's Olympic Health Club, in the back area, in the part that's owned by Steiner of London®, a kind of floating spa, and I'm asking to be allowed to watch one of the "Phytomer/Ionithermie Combination

Treatment De-Toxifying Inch Loss Treatments" that some of the heftier ladies onboard have been raving about, and I am being told that it's not really a spectator-type thing, that there's nakedness involved, and that if I want to see it I'm going to have to be the subject of one. Between the quoted price of the treatment and some pretty troubling references in the Steiner of London brochure to "electrodes using faradism and galvanism," I opt to forfeit this bit of managed pampering. If you back off from something really big, the creamy-faced staffers then try to sell you on a facial, which they say "a number" of male Nadirites have pampered themselves with this week, but I decline this as well, figuring that at this point in the week the procedure would consist mostly in exfoliating half-peeled skin.

2:30 P.M.: Now I'm down in Deck 8's Rainbow Room for "Behind the Scenes." Meet your Cruise Director Scott Peterson and find out what it's really like to work on a cruise ship! Scott Peterson is a tan guy with tall rigid hair, a high-watt smile, an escargot mustache, and a gleaming Rolex—basically the sort of guy who looks entirely at home in sockless white loafers and a



My error with the shotgun makes the sailor do a rather neat drop-and-roll

mint-green golf shirt—and is one of my very least favorite Celebrity Cruises employees, though with Scott Peterson it's a case of mildly enjoyable annoyance rather than the terrified loathing I feel for Mr. Dermatitis. The very best way to describe Scott Peterson's demeanor is that it looks like he's constantly posing for a photograph nobody is taking. He mounts the Rainbow Room's low brass dais, reverses his chair, sits like a cabaret singer, and holds forth. There are maybe fifty people attending, and I have to admit that some of them seem to like Scott Peterson a lot, and to enjoy his talk, a talk that, not surprisingly, turns out to be more

about what it's like to be Scott Peterson than about what it's like to work on the good old Nadir. Topics covered include where and under what circumstances Scott Peterson grew up, how Scott Peterson got interested in cruise ships, how Scott Peterson and his college roommate

got their first jobs together on a cruise ship, some hilarious boobooos in Scott Peterson's first months on the job, every celebrity Scott Peterson has personally met and shaken the hand of, how much Scott Peterson loves the people he gets to meet working on a cruise ship, how much Scott Peterson loves just working on a cruise ship in general, how Scott Peterson met the future Mrs. Scott Peterson working on a cruise ship, and how Mrs. Scott Peterson now works on a different cruise ship and how challenging it is to sustain an intimate relationship as warm and in all respects wonderful as that of Mr. and Mrs. Scott Peterson when you work on different cruise ships and lay eyes on each other only about every sixth week, except that now Scott Peterson's grateful to be able to announce that Mrs. Scott Peterson happens to be on a well-earned vacation and is as a rare treat here this week cruising on the m.v. Nadir with him and is, as a matter of fact, right here with us in the audience today, and wouldn't Mrs. S. P. like to stand up and take a bow.

3:05 P.M.: I've darted for a minute into Deck 7's Celebrity Show Lounge to catch some of the rehearsals for tomorrow night's climactic Passenger Talent Show. Two crew-cut and badly burned U. Texas guys are doing a minimally choreographed dance number to a recording of "Shake Your Groove Thing." Assistant Cruise Director Dave the Bingo Boy is coordinating activities from a canvas director's chair at stage left. A septuagenarian from Halifax, Virginia, tells six jokes and sings "One Day at a Time

(Sweet Jesus)." A retired Century 21 realtor from Idaho does a long drum solo to "Caravan." The climactic Passenger Talent Show is apparently a 7NC tradition, as was Tuesday's Special Costume Party. Some of the Nadirites are deeply into this stuff and have brought their own costumes and props. A lithe Canadian couple does a tango complete with pointy black shoes and a rose in teeth. The finale is apparently going to be four consecutive stand-up comedy routines delivered by very old men. These men totter on one after the other. One has a three-footed cane, another a necktie that looks uncannily like a Denver omelette, another an excruciating stutter. What follow are four successive interchangeable routines where the manner and humor are like exhumed time capsules of the 1950s: jokes about how impossible it is to understand women, about how very much men want to play golf and how their wives try to keep them from playing golf, etc. The routines have the same kind of flamboyant unhipness that makes my own grandparents objects of my pity, awe, and embarrassment all at the same time. One of the senescent quartet refers to his appearance tomorrow night as a "gig."

3:20 P.M.: The ND neglects to mention that the trapshooting is a competitive Organized Activity. The charge is \$1 a shot, but you have to purchase your shots in sets of ten, and there's a large and vaguely gun-shaped plaque for the best score. I arrive at 8-Aft late; a male Nadirite is already shooting, and several other males have formed a line and are waiting to shoot. The Nadir's wake is a big fizzy V way below the aft rail. Two sullen Greek NCOs in earmuffs run the show. I am seventh and last in line. The other guys refer to the targets as "pigeons," but what they really look like is little discs painted the Day-Glo orange of expensive hunting wear. The orange, I posit, is for ease of visual tracking, and the color must really help, because the trim bearded guy in aviator glasses currently shooting is wreaking absolute devastation in the air over the stern.

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

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

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

All the shooters who precede me seem to fire with a kind of casual scorn, and all get eight out of ten or above. But it turns out that, of these six guys, three have military-combat backgrounds, another two are L. L. Bean-model-type brothers who spend weeks every year hunting various fast-flying species with their "Papa" in southern Canada, and the last has got not only his own earmuffs, plus his own shotgun in a special crushed-velvet-lined case, but also his own trapshooting range in his backyard³¹ in North Carolina. When it's finally my turn, the earmuffs they give me have somebody else's ear-oil on them and don't fit my head very well. The gun itself is shockingly heavy and stinks of what I'm told is cordite, small pubic spirals of which are still exiting the barrel from the Korea-vet who preceded me and is tied for first with 10/10. The two brothers are the only entrants even near my age; both got scores of 9/10 and are now appraising me coolly from identical prep-school-slouch positions against the starboard rail. The Greek NCOs seem extremely bored. I am handed the heavy gun and told to "be bracing a hip" against the aft rail and then to place the stock of the weapon against, no, not the shoulder of my hold-the-gun arm but the shoulder of my pull-the-trigger arm. (My initial error in this latter regard results in a severely distorted aim that makes the Greek by the catapult do a rather neat drop-and-roll.)

Let's not spend a lot of time drawing this whole incident out. Let me simply say that, yes, my own trapshooting score was noticeably lower than the other entrants' scores, then simply make a few disinterested observations for the benefit of any novice contemplating trapshooting from a 7NC Megaship, and then we'll move on: (1) A certain level of displayed ineptitude with a firearm will cause everyone who knows anything about firearms to converge on you all at the same time with cautions and advice and handy tips. (2) A lot of the advice in (1) boils down to exhortations to "lead" the

launched pigeon, but nobody explains whether this means that the gun's barrel should move across the sky with the pigeon or should instead sort of lie in static ambush along some point in the pigeon's projected path. (3) Whatever a "hair trigger" is, a shotgun does not have one. (4) If you've never fired a gun before, the urge to close your eyes at the precise moment of concussion is, for all practical purposes, irresistible. (5) The well-known "kick" of a fired shotgun is no misnomer; it knocks you back several steps with your arms pinwheeling wildly for balance, which when you're holding a still-loaded gun results in mass screaming and ducking and then on the next shot a conspicuous thinning of the crowd in the 9-Aft gallery above. Finally, (6), know that an unshot discus's movement against the *vast lapis lazuli dome* of the open ocean's sky is sun-like—i.e., orange and parabolic and right-to-left—and that its disappearance into the sea is edge-first and splashless and sad.

THE HEADLINE ENTERTAINMENT

Other Celebrity Showtime headline entertainments this week have included a Vietnamese comedian who juggles chain saws, a husband-and-wife team that specializes in Broadway love medleys, and, most notably, a singing impressionist named Paul Tanner, who made simply an enormous impression on Table 64's Trudy and Esther, and whose impressions of Engelbert Humperdinck, Tom Jones, and particularly Perry Como were apparently so stirring that a special Popular Demand Encore Performance by Paul Tanner has been hastily scheduled to follow tomorrow night's climactic Passenger Talent Show. For tonight, though, the *Nadir Daily* announces: CELEBRITY SHOWTIME Celebrity Cruises Proudly Presents HYPNOTIST NIGEL ELLERY.

Hypnotist Nigel Ellery is British and looks uncannily like a 1950s B-movie villain. Introducing him, Cruise Director Scott Peterson informs us that Nigel Ellery "has had the honor of hypnotizing both Queen Elizabeth II and the Dalai Lama."³² Nigel Ellery's act combines hypnotic hijinks with rather standard Borscht Belt patter and audience abuse. And it ends up being such an absurdly suitable microcosm of the week's whole 7NC Luxury Cruise experience that it's almost like a setup, some weird form of pseudojournalistic pampering.

First off, we learn that not everyone is susceptible to serious hypnosis: Nigel Ellery puts the Celebrity Show Lounge's whole 300-plus

³² Not, one would presume, at the same time.

crowd through some simple in-your-seat tests to determine who is suggestibly "gifted" enough to "participate" in the "fun" to come.³³ Second, when the six most suitable subjects—all still locked in their complex contortions from the in-your-seat tests—are assembled onstage, Nigel Ellery spends a very long time reassuring them and us that absolutely nothing will happen that they do not wish to have happen. He then persuades a young lady from Akron that a loud Hispanic voice is issuing from the left cup of her brassiere. Another lady is induced to smell something ghastly coming off the man in the chair next to her, a man who himself believes that the seat of his chair periodically heats to 100 degrees Celsius. The other three subjects, respectively, flamenco, believe they are not just nude but woefully ill-endowed, and are made to shout "Mommy, I wanna wee-wee!" when Nigel Ellery tells them good night. The audience laughs very hard at all the right times. And there is something genuinely funny (not to mention symbolic) about watching these well-dressed U.S. adult cruisers behave strangely for no reason they understand; it is as if the hypnosis enables them to construct fantasies so vivid that the subjects do not even know they are fantasies, which is of course funny.

Maybe the single most strikingly comprehensive 7NC symbol, though, is Nigel Ellery himself. The hypnotist's boredom and hostility are not only undisguised but incorporated kind of ingeniously into the entertainment itself: Ellery's boredom gives him the same air of weary expertise that makes us trust doctors and policemen, and his hostile stage-persona is what gets the biggest roars of approval and laughter from the crowd. He does unkind imitations of people's U.S. accents. He ridicules questions from the subjects and audience. He makes his eyes burn Rasputinishly and tells people they're going to wet the bed at exactly 3:00 A.M. Each moment of naked ill-will is followed by a palms-out assurance that he's just kidding and that he loves us and that we are a simply marvelous audience. The spectators—mostly middle-aged, it looks like—rock back

and forth with mirth and slap their knees and dab at their eyes with hankies.

For me, at the end of a full day of Managed Fun, Nigel Ellery's act is not particularly astounding or side-splitting or entertaining. What it is is weird. There's something crucially key about Luxury Cruises in evidence here: being entertained by someone who clearly dislikes you, and feeling that you deserve that dislike at the same time you resent it. The show's climax has the six subjects all lined up doing syncopated Rockette kicks. Because my own dangerous mesmeric susceptibility makes it important that I not follow Ellery's hypnotic suggestions too closely or get too deeply involved, I find myself, in my plush seat, going farther and farther away, sort of creatively visualizing an epiphanic Frank Conroy-type moment of my own, trying to see the hypnotist and subjects and audience and ship itself with the eyes of someone not aboard, imagining the m.v. *Nadir* right at this moment, all lit up and steaming north, in the dark, at night, with a strong west wind pulling the moon backward

through a skein of clouds—the *Nadir* a constellation, complexly aglow, angelically white, festive, imperial. Yes, this: it would look like a floating palace to any poor soul out here on the ocean at night, alone in a dinghy, or not even in a dinghy but simply and terribly floating, treading water, out of sight of land. This deep dissociative trance—Nigel Ellery's true unconscious gift to me—lasted all through the next day and night. This period I spent entirely in Cabin 1009, in bed, mostly looking out the spotless porthole, with trays and rinds all around me, feeling a little bit dulled but mostly good—good to be on the *Nadir* and good to know that soon I would get off the ship, that I had survived (in a way) being pampered to death (in a way)—and so I stayed in bed. And even though the trance made me miss the final night's Talent Show and Midnight Farewell Buffet and Saturday's docking (at which there was apparently even more crepe and waving and explosive goodwill) and a chance to have my After-photo taken with Captain G. Panagiotakis, reentry into the stresses and demands of quotidian landlocked real-world life wasn't nearly as bad as a week of absolutely nothing had led me to fear. ■



³³ I, who know from hard experience that I am hypnotizable, think about sports statistics and deliberately flunk a couple of the tests to avoid getting up there.