

*A Life Unsteady*

Roughly eighteen hundred nautical miles east of St. John's, Newfoundland, and slightly less of the same west of Galway, Ireland, Tom General clung to his raft in the cold Atlantic. Five days previous, a surprise squall had taken his boat and it was only by luck that he'd bumped into the raft while he and his dog scrambled away from the sudden suction of the water's black maw. The violent overthrow that left Tom with cuts to his face and Scamper with a broken hind leg came fast and departed just as quickly, but the damage was done. They'd set off from Maine for an adventure; that was the only thing Tom was absolutely sure of. Now, with his skin scabbing and raw bird meat souring his stomach, floating only God knew where, Tom was on his knees, making his peace. Trembling, retching, Tom made the sign of the cross first on Scamper, then on himself. He had just closed his eyes when Scamper whimpered and Tom told the dog that he was a good boy and that God would soon take his suffering away. Again Scamper whined and Tom put his hand on the dog's head when a rumbling came up through his fingers, his palm, all the way up his shoulder, rattling his teeth. Tom drew his hand back, but then the rattling shook his stomach until the ill-settled bird meat rose up his throat and forced his head over the side of the raft.

This is how, bug-eyed and sunburnt, with his lips cracked and his nose crusted and his tongue bloody from a too-eager bite of the bird's leg, Tom saw it come. The thunder beneath the surface could have been a whale, could have been a shark, could have been a submarine come to inspect him. But it was none of those things. The afternoon light that broke through the surface instead fell upon the rising mast of an old ship. Tom blinked. Scamper barked. But like a great tide, the mast rose higher, wider, faster, until it was joined by another mast, and yet one more. A multitude of sails unfurled from the water, dripping torrents into Tom's raft. "Hey!" he cried weakly. "Hey! Hey!" Scamper yowled as best he could but their calls could not stop the filling. With a fresh surge of energy, Tom bailed. His tired arms thrashed water out, his exhausted legs kicked water out, and even Scamper dug with his front paws at the rising water until a shadow dropped over them and the torrent suddenly stopped. Shin-deep in water, Tom stood and looked at the monstrosity beside him. There, one-hundred feet above him, rested the scarred remains of the *Cinque Ports*. The name, fading on the starboard bow, caused Tom to believe he was already dead.

The raft bumped against the ship's hull. "Hello?" Tom called upward.

"Hello," called back a voice, and then a ladder unrolled over the ship's side.

For a time, nothing happened. No person came down to get Tom, nor did Tom take to the ladder. At last, a mustached man in a brown suit jacket peered down. "Adapt or perish, friend. What'll it be?" His voice was unusually high and friendly.

Tom, though, believed he'd already suffered the latter, so he stuttered, "Adapt. I'll adapt. We'll—my dog and I—will adapt."

"Good choice, dog man," the man responded, and double-tapped the top of the ladder to indicate to Tom that he should climb up. With a last look at his raft, Tom took Scamper into his arms and began awkwardly climbing.

At the top, the man in the brown suit clapped Tom's back. "You made it. Selkirk will be pleased. He likes new company. Say's we're all a bit boring for him, if you can believe it." He stuck out his hand. "Herbert George Wells, but you can call me H.G."

"The author?" Tom's eyes flexed so wide the corner crusts broke and fell away onto his cheeks. He wiped them away and set Scamper down, where the dog looked curiously around at his feet.

H.G. said, "Of course. Unless there's another one of me out there, but you never know, now, do you? I suppose there's a machine out there somewhere. Maybe Asimov's actually built one after I left, a robot with my likeness." He waited for Tom to say something but Tom suddenly found his voice had abandoned him.

"Now why would anyone want another one of *you*?" cajoled a woman's voice, more gravelly than H.G.'s. There was a shock of pink feathers in her hair and as she bent to pet Scamper, one fell away from her head and drifted onto the dog's nose. Scamper sneezed. "Cat got his tongue?" she said to the dog, of Tom.

"I—"

"Please don't ask me to sing for you," Janis Joplin said. "The guys get in a tizzy when I do and become absolutely useless for the rest of the day. Rock's on latrine duty and there's no way I'm taking that job after last night's burritos." She made a face to show her disgust.

"Am I dreaming or dead?" Tom asked them. "I mean, I must be dead if you two are here. Or maybe it was the bird meat? Is this Heaven? Tell me this is Heaven." He pinched his bottom lip but did not wake up.

"For the ladies, it certainly is," another man said, swaggering over to them with a plate of cannoli in his hands. "Some men, too, depending on your preference."

"You'd think that after all this time, his ego would fade, but nope," Janis shook her head.

"Why should it? Look at me," Rock Hudson demanded, waving a hand down the length of his body. Janis rolled her eyes.

The ship rocked slightly and Tom lost his footing until a hand held him up. "Just a spark of madness unsettling you, not to worry. You'll get your after-sea legs in no time."

Tom did not need an introduction to Robin Williams, for he had seen his movies and attended not one, but two of his comedy shows when he was alive. He should have said as much to Mr. Williams, but Tom was instead stuck on the other man's words. "After-sea legs?" he asked.

"Of course!" Robin smiled and led Tom and Scamper to a bench where they were immediately attended to by white-gloved women and tuxedoed men and a number of others in uniforms of the *Titanic*. "No one ever feels quite right while their ashes or bones are disbursing across the continents. How could you, when your head is in the Mediterranean and your ass is in the Beaufort Sea? It muddles a person up, being all disconnected like that." He nodded to an attendant who presented Tom with a ruffled shirt, which he hastily put on.

"You're all dead, then? Am I dead?" Tom said a bit timidly, tying his new collar closed.

“Do I look dead to you?” Robin Williams, who didn’t look dead at all, asked.

Tom shook his head. “But—”

“But we’re *supposed* to be dead,” H.G. cut in. “Ahh, the limits of the imagination. A terrible affliction.”

Robin thumbed toward H.G. “After a few years with this guy, *life* looks so much better. Know what I mean?” H.G. elbowed him.

“Where am I?” Tom finally asked. “What is this?”

There was a knocking from the quarter deck and everyone quieted at once. Their heads swung down the length of the ship and upward, to where a bearded man in wide grey trousers and a blue jacket stood over them. “Throw him overboard!” Alexander Selkirk ordered, pointing out over the water. Tom gasped, then Selkirk let out a booming laugh, bending over his knees with amusement. “Sorry, sorry. I’ve always wanted to say that. Come, come, new recruit. Join us for dinner below and we’ll tell you everything you want to know.”

And this is how Tom and Scamper found themselves below deck of the *Cinque Ports*, dining with H.G. Wells, Janis Joplin, Rock Hudson, Robin Williams, seventeen former passengers of the *Titanic*, a number of WWI and WWII veterans, three Brits, five Argentines, and the first Countess Mountbatten of Burma herself. Alexander Selkirk presided over the gathering and after stomachs were full and coffee was poured, Selkirk began his explanation. “We are directly in the nautical center of The Black Pit, or what I believe they nowadays call the Mid-Atlantic Gap. You remember anything about Word War II, Mr. General?”

Tom nodded. “I learned about it in school, but that was years ago.”

“School!” the Countess cried. “The only good schools are in London. Anything learned elsewhere is irrelevant, really.”

“Edwina,” Selkirk cautioned with a sigh. “We’ve discussed this, haven’t we?”

She delicately sipped at her coffee, unperturbed. “There are educational advantages in India, too, I suppose.”

“*Advantages.*” Robin’s fingers hooked and bobbed into air quotes. “Otherwise known as—”

“Don’t say it, Robin!” Selkirk’s voice rolled over the collective chuckling. “Anyway, Tom, as I was saying. In WWII, during the Battle of the Atlantic, this was the area undefended by aircraft. Somehow—now I don’t know why—maybe it was the gathering of death or the suction of souls into this very spot, but it somehow made the area the reverse of its origin once the War ended. We’re *reborn* here, if you will. The dissolved cells of our ashes may be off the coast of Hawaii or under the coral in Australia, our toe bone may be in a shark’s stomach and our ribs might be at the bottom of the Mariana Trench, but if even part of our remains touch the Pit, we’re gathered up from wherever we are and spit onto this deck.”

“I’m alive, then,” Tom reasoned aloud, for he hadn’t been spit onto the deck of the *Cinque Ports*.

“Are you?” H.G. asked, smoking a cigar.

"I must be."

"Explain," insisted H.G. while the others looked on. And then Tom told them that he hadn't remembered dying, so he couldn't possibly be dead. Scamper, he explained, still had a broken hind leg, so he couldn't be dead either. He intentionally swept his eyes around each and every face at the table, where there were rosy cheeks, and bright white eyes, and no signs of injury or death at all. Tom and Scamper still resembled emaciated drifters and he said as much, but H.G. dismissed Tom's observations with the flick of his cigar. "That doesn't mean anything at all, dear Tom. That doesn't mean you're *living*, now does it?"

"I think it does," Tom insisted reasonably.

"Good Lord, Tom, what H.G. *means* is were you ever alive, really? Did you climb a mountain or battle a snake or stick your head into the mouth of a giant?" Selkirk explained. "Forgive me if I'm not putting it as eloquently as H.G. would; I'm paraphrasing."

"Well done," H.G. said admiringly.

Now all eyes went to Tom as they waited for his answer. Tom shrunk a little under their collective stare and when he finally began to prove his existence, his words were tentative and quiet. "I sail a bit. Sometimes on weekends, more on vacations. That's a few times a year, you know."

"And what do you do for work, Mr. General?" the Countess asked.

"I'm an accountant," Tom said respectably. Everyone groaned.

Quickly, Tom said, "I get benefits and a decent pension. It's a good job."

"And when you're not working or sailing, what do you do?" Hudson pressed.

"Well...I...let's see," Tom thought aloud. "I listen to music; there's some great stuff out there." And then Tom told them about autotune and cellphones and Google and the word *bae*. He told them about Facebook and Twitter and Instagram, about not even having to visit a person to see them, about the slackening of global attire and the comfort of sweatpants. He told them about automation and the replacement of people, about how easy it was to see the world without actually leaving the house. He regaled them with the unpronounceable ingredients in most of his food and about the many options there were for lonely people who wanted a partner. He'd done so much, seen so much, and it was incredibly easy to do all he did, Tom explained. Never before had life been so easy and Tom prided himself on taking advantage of every single bit of it.

There were groans and gasps. The Countess fanned herself. The comedian's mirth disappeared. Someone in the back was crying. Patting Tom's shoulder, Selkirk said, "Poor Tom. You don't even know that you haven't been born yet. Such a pity. Team, let's share with our new companion what it's like to really live." And for the next sixteen hours, Tom was told of explorations and adventures, of conquests, of brother and sisterhood, of connection, of loss, of glory, of nothing that was easy, but everything that was worthy. When they were done, Tom sat back with a sigh and realized that the dead people around him were more alive than he ever was. Days later, with Scamper healing and Tom mostly recovered, they set him back on his raft with a supply of food and water and released Tom happily back into the water.

Six weeks passed before Tom was spotted by a cargo ship. When he finally returned to shore, he quit his job for a life unsteady.