

Century to Starboard

By Liz Williams, illustration by Ursula Freer

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Vittoria Pellini, Diary entry, 12 August 2008

Julio and I went down to the port today, to see the Ship for the first time. It's truly amazing -- I had no idea how big it would be. The hull, if that's what you call it, must have been hundreds of feet up from the water, and I couldn't see the other end at all. Not surprising, since it's supposed to be a mile long, but even so. . . .

We flew into Singapore from Rome this morning -- Julio had to see some people, so we thought we'd combine his business, whatever that is, with a visit to the Ship. After all, in only a few months, it's going to be our home. Rome's so hot these days, with all these climate changes, and the villa in St. Barthelemy's been simply *unlivable* in. So, as I said to Julio, it really does make sense to go and live on something that can move around all over the place. I know it's costing a few million, but it isn't as though we can't afford it -- and there's the whole tax avoidance issue, of course. And if the brochure's anything to go by, the shopping will be *wonderful* -- the latest seasons will be showing, and as I told him, I'll really be saving on all the airfares, because it costs so much to go to New York these days, now that they've brought in the flight restrictions. So the Ship definitely makes sense. Julio muttered something about people saying the same thing about the *Titanic*, but he just likes to grumble. It's his ulcer.

Diary entry, 14 November 2008

Back in Singapore again, and this time we've actually been on board. I'm just so thrilled. We've seen our apartment, and it's a dream, it really is. It's twice the size of our place in Monaco, and the furnishings are beautiful -- exactly as I told the design consultant, and you know how hard it is for these people to get things right. It's high up, too -- right on the uppermost deck, just as we wanted. There are gardens below, and swimming pools, and full satellite links so Julio can work. I can't wait, but I'll have to, because the Ship doesn't set out until May. That's nearly six months away, and I'm going to go crazy in Italy.

Diary entry, 3 May 2009

Our first night on the Ship -- we're sailing tomorrow. Julio and I have been getting to know our new neighbours, the Seckers -- really, really lovely people, even if they are Americans. But not ostentatious -- old money, you see. Well, old money for the States, anyway. Originally from Seattle, but they got out before the quake (obviously!) and since then they've been living in Houston. Said it was horribly hot. Commiserated.

Diary entry, 4 May 2009

Sailed today. Just fabulous, seeing all those thousands of people lined up on the dock to see us off. I didn't even realize we were moving, and neither did Lydia Secker, though she says that she's always been as sick as a dog on every boat she's ever been on and she's told her husband that if the Ship starts making her throw up, she's going right back home to Houston, firestorms or no firestorms. . . .

Diary entry, 16th August 2009

Can't believe it's been a year since we first saw the Ship. I was a tiny bit worried that I might get bored here, but what with all the traveling I've just been so busy. And there's the salon, and then the shops -- and I'm learning Japanese! Made quite sure that Julio was listening when I told him this as I'm getting just a little tired of that "you're hardly an intellectual, darling" line of his.

We're out into the Pacific now. The sea looks just like my Versace silk camisole, but apparently we're expecting a storm later on. We've been through a typhoon already, off Manila. I thought I'd be terrified, but actually it was quite exciting, and we couldn't feel it at all -- the Ship's big enough to ride out even huge hurricanes.

(Later) They were right. We're in the middle of the storm now, and I'm looking down on these enormous waves. Feels safe in here, though. It's very quiet -- we're totally soundproofed. I just went out on deck -- couldn't resist -- and the funny thing is that it's quiet out there, too. I thought there'd be howling winds and everything, but it was really silent. I suppose we must be in the eye of the storm or something.

Diary entry, 17th August 2009

Storm's still raging outside. I got up this morning when the alarm went off, because I'd booked in for a facial with Sylvie, and even though it was half past ten it was dark as pitch outside. Julio's been up since eight, trying to get through to the Network, but he says it's down.

(Later) Went out on deck again a few minutes ago and I was wrong -- it isn't entirely dark. There's a kind of pale green light along the horizon, like a neon strip. Maybe we're coming out of the storm.

Diary entry, 18th August 2009

Storm's finally over, thank God. Not that I was scared, exactly, but it was so weird, seeing that faint light and then nothing else. Now, the sea's calm as a pond again, lovely blue sky. Apparently we're not far off Honolulu now, so they're going to put into port later today. Ship's communications are still down.

(Later) Well, we're in Honolulu, but I think something's wrong. Lydia and I called the purser and asked if we could hire a cab to go into the city, but they're not letting anyone off the Ship. They won't say why. And we can see the city from the deck, but it doesn't look right. It looks almost as though part of it has been bombed. Some of the apartment blocks are like ruins and I can't help thinking of terrorists. There's been so much of that lately. Just horrible. I ran back inside and asked Julio if he could find out what was up, but the Network won't come on.

Diary entry, 19th August

Ship left Honolulu last night, when everyone was asleep. Woke to find that we were back out at sea, and still no computer. Julio went down to complain to the communications people, and I went with him. Asked what had happened in Honolulu, but they wouldn't tell us. Julio thinks they didn't actually know, but they must do, mustn't they? We think we've figured it out, though -- it must have been a volcano. That's why the city looked such a mess, and why the storm lasted so long. Must have been ash. Bit worrying, though -- do volcanoes affect the sea bed? And I was looking forward to Hawaii, too. The communications guy says we're heading up to Tokyo.

Julio went quiet in the elevator and I finally winkled it out of him -- he's wondering how long we've got provisions for. Told him not to be totally ridiculous; the Ship's massive, we must have food for years. Julio said not so sure -- the whole point about luxury accommodation like this is that the food's freshly flown in; we've seen the helicopter landing every day, and now it's not coming, for some reason. Never mind, I said, there's a helicopter on board, isn't there? And if that doesn't work we'll just have to catch lobsters. Anyway, I'm sure they've got stuff on ice.

Diary entry, 23rd August

Never fully realised before now how dependent Julio's business is on the damn Network. The system's still down. Says he's losing millions by the day. He can't even check the stock market, because we haven't got television, either. Really is a bit of a bore. No one's got DTV, and we're running out of things to talk about. Thank God for disc-clips, but I've already watched most of it and have fallen back on old Audrey Hepburn movies.

Earlier, a whole bunch of us went down to talk to the Captain, but all he says is that we'll be in Tokyo later today and he'll answer our questions then.

(Later) Well, so much for Tokyo. We couldn't even dock. Half of it looks as though it's slid into the sea, just like poor old Seattle two years ago. Must have been an earthquake right across the Pacific. Julio thinks maybe some kind of giant tidal wave. When he said that, I had to sit down. Asked him why we didn't feel it -- surely a wave that ruins half a city would affect even this big boat? But Julio didn't know, and neither do I. We ate in the restaurant tonight. Quality of entrees definitely gone downhill.

Diary entry, 25th August

Talk about insult to injury. Got the most awful cold. Had it for days; we've even had the doctor up here. Said it was just a cold, though. Julio says it comes from prancing about on deck in middle of monsoon. Probably right. We're sailing to Hong Kong, now. Wondered aloud

to doctor if we couldn't put in somewhere a bit closer, but he says there aren't that many harbors deep enough to contain the Ship, and Hong Kong's the nearest.

(Later) It just gets worse and worse. Julio says he's been talking to the purser and there's another storm on the way. I'm sitting this one out in bed.

(Later) Storm has hit. Like the last one. Quiet, and with the light, like morning on the horizon, all the time.

Diary entry, 28th August

At last, Hong Kong. Pulled in very early in the morning -- storm didn't last as long as one before. Made me feel better, though I've still got this horrible cold. Went out on deck with Julio. When we last went to HK, about 10 years ago now, someone (think Angelo's sister) said when I next came back I wouldn't recognise it -- constant rebuilding and renovation. Well, Angelo's sister certainly hit the nail on the head! I mean, HK always had huge tower blocks, but these ones are *colossal*, and they've built all these little transparent bridges between them, like shutes. Also they've moved the airport again -- saw huge plane coming in over other side of the Peak, and I'm sure the airport used to be out near Lantau.

As we were coming into port Lydia came marching up and said, "Vittoria, nothing is going to stop us going shopping!" Few people are brave enough to stand between Lydia and Miucci Belloni's shoes, and I read (*Vogue*, of course) that the RetroPrada's really good here, too, so I agreed. Anyway, though I love the Ship, it'll be good to get off it for a bit.

(Later) Well, we got into HK. And this is hard to write, because I don't understand what's happened, not really. Lydia and I had to force our way past the purser, but nothing can stop Lydia when she's hell-bent on shopping -- she nearly knocked him into the dock. There were cabs waiting on the quay, and we got into one, but there was no driver. A voice kept asking us for our slots (what does that mean?), and eventually we just got out and walked. Took a long time, too, and it was so hot. Remember HK as muggy, but this was boiling. Could see cars going along the road and they were very quiet, and small -- one person only. Cute. Finally broke a heel -- my best lime Manolos -- and I couldn't stop sneezing. People kept looking at me as though I was mad. Can't think why.

Then Lydia and I got lost. Ended up in some back alley somewhere, and all these people started staring at us. Lydia asked where the nearest metro was, because I was still sniffing. And they answered, but we couldn't understand them. Definitely speaking English, I think, and they were obviously trying to be helpful -- anyway, we staggered about and eventually we came out onto the quay. I said we ought to go back, because by that time I was starting to worry that the Ship might leave without us. So we did. And by that time we were both really hot -- it was just too much. I mean, Rome was a furnace, and Lydia's from Texas, for God's sake, but this was like nothing else. Just shows this climate thing is getting way out of hand.

As we were trudging back to the Ship, something flew overhead, like a great big wing. There were lights along both sides. After that we saw a lot of little, quick objects darting through

the air, towards the Ship. And I couldn't help wondering -- I know it sounds crazy -- but things seemed so different here. I asked Lydia if she'd seen a place that sold newspapers, but there didn't seem to be anywhere at all.

Eventually we got back to the Ship. I've never been so glad to be anywhere in my whole life, even if the Captain did yell at us. I suppose he had a point. Anyway, I cried. Couldn't help it. My feet hurt so much, and I spent the rest of the day on the sofa. When I got up again, we'd already left port. But Julio said that there were lots of little boats around the Ship, and he'd never seen anything like them -- it was as though they were flying just above the water. He'd seen the big thing, too -- he said it looked like a *Time* report of a suborbital aeroplane he'd seen, but he hadn't known they'd actually built it. I suppose we were concentrating on the Ship, and I'm not really interested in that kind of thing, anyway.

Diary entry, 18th September

More storms. We've been at sea for days. And Julio thinks they're rationing the food, because the choice in the big deli on Deck 3 is really terribly limited now. When we were a day out of HK, before the storms really hit, we saw more of the flying things, and we were all asked to stay inside our apartments. Julio thinks the Captain had some sort of warning. I finally got my head together and told Julio what I thought -- that maybe, just maybe, we've gone through some kind of slip in time, like the Bermuda Triangle, only in the Pacific. I know other people sometimes say -- just to be spiteful -- that I'm maybe a little bit of a bimbo, and Julio tends to laugh at me sometimes. Affectionately, of course. But this time I really thought he'd laugh, and he didn't. He said other people were saying the same. I didn't feel so stupid, then. But what if we have? How will we know? I know there's been all the climate stuff, but the world you understand, that you were born in, is just -- there, isn't it? You don't expect it to change, not really. Not when you're as rich as we are -- I mean, Julio and I have always said that we're international citizens, we can live anywhere. And it seems that now, we are.

Diary entry, 19th September

Captain called everyone together this morning in the banqueting hall and told us that we were going back to Singapore. Finally admitted that our rations were running low. He didn't say what was going on. Said that the crew didn't exactly know, but they were working on it. I could see from his face, though, that he did know, or at least suspect. I know it's awful, but I am actually quite proud of myself for figuring things out even if I might be wrong, and I wanted to say so, ask the crew something about where, or when, we might be. But then I looked at the people around me, and they all looked scared, and worried. And thinner, though I suppose that's not a bad thing in most cases.

I thought, if I say something, the crew probably won't be able to do anything about it and anyway, people won't have any hope then, will they? They'll just be more afraid. So I didn't say anything.

I went out onto deck later, even though the captain had told us not to. I looked up at the sky, and it had changed. It was a deeper blue than I've ever seen it before, almost green, and the sun burned like a big star on the horizon. And I thought, perhaps the future isn't so bad after all. At least it's beautiful.

Diary entry, 24th September

I suppose in a way it's easier for women than for men. Not eating, that is. After all, I've always dieted. Well, you have to, don't you, and none of these new metabolic pills really seem to work properly -- and I'm used to it, but men get so *grumpy*. The crew have taken one of the hydrofoil launches out, and started fishing. I don't even know what sort of fish you get here. Another day and we'll be back in Singapore.

Diary entry, 25th September

Came into harbor this morning, and it really is different. The whole city's changed. The tower blocks have all fallen down, and the jungle's grown over them, but there are new houses along the water's edge -- they look as though they've been built from scraps and waste. But there were people lining up along the dock, just as there were when we left. I saw the crew go down the gangplank, and everyone crowded on the lower deck. I thought I'd avoid the mob, so I went around the other side of the deck. And a boat drew up -- a long, thin boat with a girl in it.

She climbed up the side of the Ship, quick as anything. I didn't stop to think. I grabbed her arm. "Listen," I said. "Please, can you tell me? What's the date?" She just stared. Her arm felt like wire in my fingers, and her face was thin, too, and all eaten away. It was horrible. I let her go. "The date!" I said, "Please?" She touched a little box on a thong around her throat, and spoke. I didn't understand the language -- I don't speak Malaysian or whatever it is. But the box said, a moment afterwards, "What did you say?" So I repeated it, and she stared at me. "You are from the past, aren't you? The legends are true, about the spirit ship." "The past?" "It is 2863," the girl said, wonderingly. "There have been stories in these seas for nearly a thousand years, about the great boat, how it comes, and brings the storms with it, and disappears." I just gaped at her. I couldn't say anything at all. She clasped my hand. "Have you come with a cure?" "A cure? For what?" "For the sickness, the skin-rot." The box buzzed and hummed, distorting her voice. "My *voice* is very old," she said. "They don't make them any more." She tapped the box. I must have looked blank, because she went on impatiently, "Two hundred years ago, the world was without illness. Little machines had solved sickness. The blood-takers have told me this. Everyone was well; we were about to fly to the stars. But then a new plague came, no one knows how. It started in a great city in the north. Within twenty years, millions were dead, and the starships left with the refugees, the ones who could pay. People died in the streets, with blood coming from their noses. And this city fell down and was never properly built again."

I looked at her, helplessly. "I'm sorry," I said. "I haven't got a cure. I don't think I can help you. But there's a doctor on board. Perhaps he can do something." I led her down to the medical bay, but the doctor made me go back upstairs. I argued and argued, but he and the nurses pushed me out and locked the door. An hour after that, the Ship pulled out of port and the green city was left behind.

I didn't see the girl again. But when I saw that we were leaving, I went back down to the medical bay and demanded that the doctor tell me what was wrong with her. He said that he didn't really know, that it was a disease he'd never seen before, but when the computer analysed it, the closest match was just to an ordinary cold, like the one I'd had in Hong Kong. I told the doctor what the girl had said, about a plague. "How could a cold kill so many people?" I asked. "If the virus had time to mutate, or if it was introduced to a group of people who had no immunity to it," he said. He sounded tired. "The Spanish settlers brought all sorts of things with them, when they reached the New World. Thousands of the Aztecs died from ordinary diseases -- measles and the flu. After all, the cold virus is linked to some terrible diseases, like Ebola. It wouldn't take much for it to do serious damage, in the right circumstances." "Why wouldn't people have natural immunity to it?" I asked. But I knew the

answer as soon as the words were out of my mouth, and so did he. I could see it in his face. It was because we were no longer in our own time, not where we belonged. We were lost, and wandering, and dangerous to those we moved among. I went slowly back upstairs. I felt suddenly, strangely old. When I looked out of the arching window of the apartment, I could see a line of light on the horizon, faint and green.

Diary entry, 29th October

I suppose it's stupid now to label these entries with the date, since we don't even know when we are any more, but it makes me feel as though I've got something to hang onto. The last storm was a bad one, lasting for over a week. Julio and I didn't talk much, just shuffled between the banqueting hall and the apartment like two old people. We're going to have to start planning what to do, how we're going to live. The captain called us all together last night and finally admitted that we'd become time travelers -- a sort of Flying Dutchman, luxury class. They don't know how it happened, and they don't think we'll be able to get back again. They've tried contacting a whole lot of places by radio, but if there's anyone out there with the technology to hear us, they don't seem to be listening.

We're going to have to decide whether we stay on the Ship, or put into port and take our chances in this new world. And if we stay, then we can no longer be the spoon-fed idle rich any more. We're going to have to sustain ourselves, somehow. We managed in Singapore by bartering -- the crew exchanged luxury items like cutlery, along with basic medical supplies, for food. But the Ship isn't a limitless resource. The crew are talking about converting one of the garden decks into a place where we could grow food, and they've been fishing. So maybe we won't starve, but it won't be as comfortable as it used to be. I talked to a lot of people after the meeting, and they seem to want to stay. I think they're too scared of what might lie beyond the Ship. I know I am.

Diary entry, 3 January

The blisters on my hands hurt. I'm not used to gardening. We didn't have one in Rome, and at the villas there was always someone to plant seeds and prune flowers. But now I spend hours on the garden deck, patiently slipping seeds into soil.

After the last storm, we could see that the sky had changed again -- a deeper, darker blue. The Ship put in at what used to be Manila, but there wasn't anything there, just green, wild islands. We've crossed the Pacific now, and are sailing down the coast of California. The sea level's risen. San Francisco is a ruin. We've seen no people. The Ship stopped and some of the crew took the helicopter up. They have to be careful with fuel, but they said they got as far as Salt Lake City. There's no sign of anyone, just desert and scrub and forest. As though no one had ever been here.

Diary entry

Up near what was once Vancouver, we finally found someone -- an old woman, living alone on an island. The Captain spoke to her, but he couldn't understand a word she said, and she couldn't understand him, either. But she showed him a news-sheet -- just a slip of what

looked like homemade paper. The language had changed, but they figured some of it out. It was very old. It said that most people in America were dead.

We left some people there, including the Seckers. They said they knew the area, having lived in Seattle once, and they might as well stay. But some of us -- a couple of hundred people -- are remaining on the Ship. We told them we'd come back in a month or two, to see how they were getting on. No one mentioned the storms. I was tempted to stay with them, but Julio wants to stay on the boat. It's strange, he seems happier these days, and his ulcer's gone. The old woman gave me a lot of seeds: zucchini, peppers, tomato. I keep going down to the garden deck and looking at them, to see if they've come up yet.

I've given up trying to record the date. It doesn't seem important any more, and I've been too busy with the gardens to keep track, or even write very much. When we were up near Alaska, we hit another storm, and afterwards, we sailed back down the coast. Even the old woman's island was gone. There was no sign of anyone else, and the forests looked different -- plants I didn't recognize, with odd lobes and spines. The sky has changed again, too, and that evening I looked up at the clear sky and I've never been very good with stars, but they seemed different, somehow.

Julio and I went ashore in the morning, and when we walked back to the Ship we could see what a wreck it looks. Its white sides are scored and scratched, and my vines have spilled over the edge of the deck. We're wondering how much longer we'll actually stay afloat.

The crew have been thinking the same thing. Tonight, they're calling together those of us who are still here, to decide whether we're to head back to California, and try to settle, or whether we go on.

I don't know how I feel, and I thought I would. It'll be a relief in a way, not to keep traveling. When we started our voyage, I thought it would be such fun, but I never dreamed we'd sail so far. But I looked up into the unfamiliar sky last night and I wondered how it would be if we just kept on, running the time storms, until we sailed right out of the world's time and off the edge. And I wondered, too, if we were perhaps the last people living on Earth; destroyers and regenerators, like my gardens that grow and green, and fade again into the dark.



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Liz Williams is the daughter of a conjuror and a Gothic novelist, and currently lives in Brighton, England. She has a Ph.D. in philosophy of science from Cambridge and her anti-career ranges from reading tarot cards on Brighton pier to teaching in Central Asia. For more on her work, see her [website](#). To contact her, send her email at arkady@btinternet.com.

[Ursula Freer](#) lives and works in Santa Fe, NM. Her *Strange Horizons* gallery can be found in our [Archive](#)