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Bonet Anderson

JOURNEY TO DEATH

Donald E. Westlake

AND MANY OTHER STORIES



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THE CLINGING VINE

by JON A. TETA

Mystery Digest

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JOURNEY TO DEATH

by

DONALD E. WESTLAKE



MAN'S WORST ENEMY IS MAN

ALTHOUGH ocean voyages are not new to me, I have never grown accustomed to the sway and roll of ships, especially at night. For that reason, I normally get very little sleep while crossing the Atlantic, not being able to close my eyes until I have reached such a point of exhaustion that it is no longer possible for me to keep them open. Since business often makes it necessary for me to journey to America, my wife has urged me, from time to time, to go by air, but I'm afraid I'm much too cowardly for that. The rolling of a ship at sea causes uneasiness in both my stomach and mind, but the mere thought of traveling through the air terrifies me. A sea voyage, then, is the lesser of two evils, and I face my insomnia, after all these years, with the calm of old resignation.

And yet, it is impossible to merely lie in bed awake, eyes staring at the ceiling, through all the long rolling nights between Dover and New York, and even reading begins, at last, to pall. On so many voyages, I have been reduced to aimless pacing of the deck, watching the million moons reflected in the waves surrounding me.

I was delighted, therefore, on this last and latest crossing, to discover, the third night out, a fellow-sufferer, an insomniac like myself, named Cowley. Cowley was an American, a businessman, younger than me, perhaps forty five or fifty. A direct and sensible man I found him, and enjoyed his company, late at night, when all the other passengers slept and we were alone in an empty and silent sea. I found no fault in him at all, save for an occasional example of rather grim and tasteless humor, a reference to the decaying bodies in Davy Jones's locker, or some such thing.

The nights were spent in conversation, in strolls about the decks, or in billiards, a game which we both loved but which neither had ever mastered. Being of equal incompetence in the sport, we contentedly whiled away many hours in the large billiard room located on the same deck as my cabin.

The eighth night of the voyage was spent in this room, where we puffed happily at cigars, played with our normal lack of skill, and waited patiently for dawn. It was a brisk and chilly night, with a cold wet wind scampering across the waves like a chilled and lonely ghost searching for land, and we had closed every door and window

in the room, preferring an atmosphere polluted by cigar smoke to being chilled to the bone.

It was only fifteen minutes after thus sealing ourselves into the room that the catastrophe struck. I don't know what it could have been, an explosion in the huge and mysterious engines somewhere in the bowels of the ship, perhaps unexpected contact with a mine still unreclaimed from the Second World War. Whatever it was, the silence of the night was suddenly torn apart by a tremendous and powerful sound, a roar, a crash that dulled the senses and paralyzed the body, and the whole ship, the *Aragon*, shuddered and trembled with a violent jerking spasm. Cowley and I were both thrown to the floor, and on all the tables, the billiard balls clacked and rolled, as though their hysteria and fear were equal to our own.

And then the ship seemed to pause, to stop and hold itself immobile while time flashed by, and I struggled to my feet, bearing the hum of absolute silence, of a broken world suddenly without time or movement.

I turned toward the main door, leading out to the deck, and saw there, staring in, a wild and terrified face, a woman, still in her nightgown, whose mouth was open and who was screaming. I started toward her, staring at her through the glass in the door, and time began again. The ship lurched, bent, and as I struggled to keep my balance, I saw her torn away, out to the emptiness, and eager waves dashed against the window panes.

It was like an elevator gone mad, hurtling down from the uppermost story. The water boiled and fumed outside the window, and I clung to the wall, sick and terrified, knowing that we were sinking, we were sinking, and in a matter of seconds I would surely be dead.

A final jolt, and all movement stopped. The ship lay at a slight angle, the floor was at a slant, and we were at the bottom of the sea.

A part of my mind screamed in horror and fear, but another part of me was calm, as though outside myself, separate, a brain not dependent upon this frail and doomed body. It—this part of my mind that I had never known before—it thought, it conjectured, it reasoned. The ship was lying on the sea floor, that much was obvious. But how far down, how far from the surface? Not too far, surely, or the pressure of the water would have burst the glass of the windows. Was the surface close enough for me to dare to leave the ship, this room, this pocket of trapped air? Could I hope to fight my way to the surface before my lungs burst, before my need for air drove open my mouth and let the water in to kill me?

I couldn't take the chance. We had fallen for so long, and I was

not a young man. I couldn't take the chance.

A groan reminded me of Cowley. I turned and saw him lying on the floor against one wall, apparently rolled there when the ship sank. He moved now, feebly, and touched his hand to his head.

I hurried to him and helped him to his feet. At first, he had no idea what had happened. He had heard the explosion, had stumbled, his head had hit the edge of a billiard table, that was all he knew. I told him of our situation, and he stared at me, unbelieveing.

"Underwater?" His face was pale with shock, pale and stiff as dry clay. He turned and hurried to the nearest window. Outside, the feeble light from our prison faintly illuminated the swirling waters around us. Cowley faced me again. "The lights—" he said.

I shrugged. "Perhaps there are other rooms still sealed off," I said, and as I finished speaking, the lights flickered and grew dim.

I had expected Cowley to panic, as I had done, but he smiled instead, sardonically, and said, "What a way to die."

"We may not die," I told him. "If there were survivors—"

"Survivors? What if there were? We aren't among them."

"They'll be rescued," I said, suddenly full of hope. "They'll know where the ship went down. And divers will come."

"Divers? Why?"

"They always do. At once. To salvage what they can, to determine the cause of the sinking. They'll send divers. We may yet be saved."

"If there were survivors," said Crowley. "And, if not?"

I sat down, heavily. "Then we are dead men."

"You suggest we wait, is that it?"

I looked at him, surprised. "What else can we do?"

"We can get it over with. We can open the door."

I stared at him. He seemed calm, the faint smile was still on his lips. "Can you give up so easily?"

The smile broadened. "I suppose not," he said, and once more the lights flickered. We looked up, staring at the dimming bulbs. Yet a third time they flickered, and all at once they went out. We were in the dark, in pitch blackness, alone beneath the sea.

In the blackness, Crowley said, "I suppose you're right. There's nothing to lose but our sanity. We'll wait."

I didn't answer him. I was lost in my own thoughts, of my wife, of my children and their families, of my friends on both continents, of land and air and life. We were both silent. Unable to see one another, unable to see anything at all, it seemed impossible to converse.

How long we sat there I don't know, but suddenly I realized that

It was not quite so dark any more. Vaguely, I could make out shapes within the room, I could see the form of Cowley sitting in another chair.

He stirred. "It must be daylight," he said. "A sunny day. On the surface."

"How long," I asked him, "how long do you suppose the air will last?"

"I don't know. It's a large room, there's only two of us. Long enough for us to starve to death, I suppose."

"Starve?" I realized, all at once, just how hungry I was. This was a danger I hadn't thought about. Keeping the water out, yes. The amount of air we had, yes. But it hadn't occurred to me, until just now, that we were completely without food.

Cowley got to his feet and paced about the dim room, stretching and roaming restlessly. "Assuming survivors," he said, as though our earlier conversation were still going on, as though there had been no intervening silence, "assuming survivors, and assuming divers, how long do you suppose it will take? Perhaps the survivors will be rescued today. When will the divers come? Tomorrow? Next week? Two months from now?"

"I don't know."

Cowley laughed suddenly, a shrill and harsh sound in the closed room, and I realized that he wasn't as calm as he had seemed. "If this were fiction," he said, "they would come at the last minute. In the nick of time. Fiction is wonderful that way. It is full of last minutes. But in life there is only one last minute. The minute before death."

"Let's talk about other things," I said.

"Let's not talk at all," said Cowley. He stopped by one of the tables and picked up a billiard ball. In the gloom, I saw him toss the ball into the air, catch it, toss it and catch it, and then he said, "I could solve our problem easily. Merely throw this ball through the window there."

I jumped to my feet. "Put it down! If you care nothing for your own life, at least remember that I want to live!"

Again he laughed, and dropped the ball onto the table. He paced again for a while, then sank at last into a chair. "I'm tired," he said. "The ship is very still now. I think I could sleep."

I was afraid to go to sleep, afraid that Cowley would wait until I was dozing and would then open the door after all, or throw the billiard ball through the window. I sat and watched him for as long as I could, but my eyelids grew heavy and at last, in spite of my

fears, my eyes closed and I slept.

When I awoke, it was dark again, the dark of a clouded midnight, the dark of blindness. I stirred, stretched my cramped limbs, then subsided. I could hear Cowley's measured breathing. He slumbered on.

He woke as it was again growing light, as the absolute blackness was once again dispelled by a gray and murky gloom, the look of late evening, a frustrating half-light that made the eyes strain to see details where there were only shapes and vague forms and half-seen mounds.

Cowley grumbled and stirred and came slowly to consciousness. He got to his feet and moved his arms in undefined and meaningless arcs. "I'm hungry," he muttered. "The walls are closing in on me."

"Maybe they'll come today," I said.

"And maybe they'll never come." Once more, he paced around the room. At length, he stopped. "I once read," he said, as though to himself, "that hunger is always the greatest after the first meal missed. That after a day or two without food, the hunger pains grow less."

"I think that's right. I don't think I'm as hungry now as I was yesterday."

"I am," he said, petulantly, as though it were my fault. "I'm twice as hungry. My stomach is full of cramps. And I'm thirsty." He stood by a window, looking out. "I'm thirsty," he said again. "Why don't I open the window and let some water in?"

"Stay away from there!" I hurried across the room and pulled him away from the window. "Cowley, for God's sake get hold of yourself! If we're calm, if we're patient, if we have the self-reliance and strength to wait, we may yet be saved. Don't you want to live?"

"Live?" He laughed at me. "I died the day before yesterday." He flung away from me, hurled himself into his chair. "I'm dead," he said bitterly, "dead and my stomach doesn't know it. Oh, *damn* this pain! Martin, believe me, I could stand anything, I could be as calm and solid as a rock, except for these terrible pains in my stomach. I have to eat, Martin. If I don't get food soon, I'll go out of my mind. I know I will."

I stood watching him, helpless to say or do a thing.

His moods changed abruptly, instantaneously, without rhyme or reason. Now, he suddenly laughed again, that harsh and strident laugh that grated on my spine, that was more terrible to me than the weight of the water outside the windows. He laughed, and said, "I have read of men, isolated, without food, who finally turned to the last solution to the problem of hunger."

I didn't understand him. I said, "What is that?"
"Each other."

I stared at him, and a chill breath of terror touched my throat and dried it. I tried to speak, but my voice was hoarse, and I could only whisper, "Cannibalism? Good God, Cowley, you can't mean—"

Again, he laughed. "Don't worry, Martin. I don't think I could. If I could cook you, I might consider it. But raw? No, I don't believe I'll ever get that hungry." His mood changed again, and he cursed. "I'll be eating the rug soon, my own clothing, anything!"

He grew silent, and I sat as far from him as I could get. I meant to stay awake now, no matter how long it took, no matter what happened. This man was insane, he was capable of anything. I didn't dare sleep, and I looked forward with dread to the coming blackness of night.

The silence was broken only by an occasional muttering from Cowley across the room, unintelligible, as he mumbled to himself of horrors I tried not to imagine. Blackness came, and I waited, straining to hear a sound, waiting to hear Cowley move, for the attack I knew must come. His breathing was regular and slow, he seemed to be asleep, but I couldn't trust him. I was imprisoned with a madman, my only hope of survival was in staying awake, watching him every second until the rescuers came. And the rescuers ~~must~~ come. I couldn't have gone through all this for nothing. They would come, they ~~must~~ come.

My terror and need kept me awake all night long and all through the next day. Cowley slept much of the time, and when he was awake he contented himself with low muttering or with glowering silence.

But I couldn't stay awake forever. As darkness returned again, as the third day ended without salvation, a heavy fog seemed to lower around me, and although I fought it, although I could feel the terror in my vitals, the fog closed in and I slept.

I woke suddenly. It was day again, and I couldn't breathe. Cowley stood over me, his hands around my neck, squeezing, shutting off the air from my lungs, and I felt as though my head were about to burst. My eyes bulged, my mouth opened and closed helplessly. Cowley's face, indistinct above me, gleamed with madness, his eyes bored into me and his mouth hung open in a hideous laugh.

I pulled at his hands, but they held me tight. I couldn't move them, I couldn't get air, air, I flailed away at his face, and my heart pounded in fear as I struggled. My fingers touched his face, perspiring face, slid away, I lunged at his eyes. My finger drove into his

eye, and he screamed and released me. He fell back, his hands against his face, and I felt the warm jelly of his eye on my finger.

I stumbled out of the chair, looking madly for escape, but the room was sealed, we were prisoners together. He came at me again, his clutching hands reaching out for me, his face terrible now with the bloody wound where his left eye had been. I ran, and the breath rattled in my throat as I gulped in air. Choking, sobbing, I ran from him, my arms outstretched in the gloom, and I fell against one of the billiard tables. My hands touched a cuestick, I picked it up, turned, swung at Cowley with it. Cowley fell back, howling like an animal, but then came on again. Screaming, I jabbed the cuestick full into his open mouth.

The stick snapped in two, part of it still in my hands, part jutting out of his mouth, and he started a shriek that ended in a terrible gurgling wail. He toppled face forward to the floor, driving the piece of stick through the back of his head.

I turned away and collapsed over a table. I was violently ill, my stomach jerking spasmodically, my throat heaving and retching. But it had been so long since I had eaten that I could bring nothing up, but could only lie helplessly, coughing and shaking and terribly, terribly sick.

That was three days ago, and still they haven't come. They must come soon now. The air is growing foul in here, I can hardly breathe any more. And I find that I am talking to myself, and every once in a while I will pick up a billiard ball and look longingly at the window. I am coming to long for death, and I know that that is madness. So they must come soon.

And the worst thing is the hunger. Cowley is gone, now, all gone, and I am hungry again.

