

High seas adventures: ocean crossings in search of the revolutionary Atlantic



A banana ship worker's account of his work and relationships on a ship with an international crew.

Ramor Ryan

I had been at sea for only two months, and already I was sick of the sailor's life to the bottom of my heart. Not the seaman's life as such, but the seafaring environment, the regimen on board the banana boats, the slave-like labor at the ports, and the immorality of the global banana trade that is pure naked exploitation, a pillaging of the South. My daytime activities painting or chipping rust and nighttime shift on watch are populated by fantastical notions of violent mutiny, hoisting the black flag, and setting sail with my fellow newly initiated pirate crew.

Such musings fall on absolutely uninterested ears. As we share a few beers in his cabin, I ask one of the Filipino deck hands, the most disgruntled of the lot, why, if life on the ship was so fucking miserable, didn't the crew organize to change things. "You know," I suggested jokingly, "like an old-school mutiny!"

Manuel, in his early twenties like me, laughed so hard that beer foam came out his nostrils. "Why would any of us think such a thing!? In 254 days I will be finished all this hell and I will return to Manila, buy my land, and farm with my wife and children. For us Filipinos this is the best job possible. Two years' labor at sea and then we are set up almost for life. There are many who would do anything for this job." He changes the subject, pressing a photo of a young woman into my hand. "She's pretty, isn't she? That's my sister. You could marry her, take her with you to Europe. She's a good cook, tidy."

I'm not making any progress here at all, so I take my leave.

Bananas

We've been making the rounds of the Caribbean, picking up bananas at various ports.

Heading toward the Dominican Republic, our ship, the MV Suriname, a four-thousand-ton reefer vessel flying under a Panamanian flag, cuts through the breezy tropical sea at a steady eighteen knots.

Despite the infuriating working life on board this floating gulag, there is still an indescribable joy in walking the deck as we sail the gorgeous Caribbean Sea on flawless sunny days like today.

As the sun sets resplendently on the immense horizon, we pull into the small port of Manzanilla. "Half astern! Slow astern!" shouts the captain as the huge ship careens dangerously toward the short, antiquated pier. "Dead slow!" Despite the choppy sea and the difficult undercurrents, we berth gently. The mooring lines are secured to the rusty bollards and we are docked once more. Hundreds of thousands of freshly harvested green bananas are to come aboard and be put in the cavernous refrigerated hold, a job that will take a full 24 hours to complete. Most of the crew stream ashore, preparing for a night of drunkenness and revelry. I still have my 4AM-to-8AM night watch, though, even when moored, so I am spared the worst excesses of the night's revelries. From the quiet bridge I watch the longshoremen load the boxes by hand from the old banana freight train into our dark, mysterious bowels. It's tiresome work, this endless loading, and if perchance any of the workers get lazy, there are armed guards posted to watch over them.

"What's with the guns?" I ask the second mate, who, more out of habit than need, continually checks the radar and the satellite navigator despite us being at port. "There was a docker strike here last month. They fired the leaders and are now making sure that the rest don't get any stupid ideas."

The captain comes on the bridge at dawn. "Zer good!" he says, referring to the hired guns. "Finally some security measures!" For him, the problem was the pilfering by the longshoremen or the hustling of stowaways on board. More guns was good news.

And it's the same at each port we dock at: in Puerto Cortes, Honduras; Puerto Cabezas, Guatemala; Independence, Belize; in Georgetown, Guyana; or Parimaribo, Suriname, the same regime of guns and suspicion, waterfronts filled with resentment and fear. The longshoremen are badly paid, their work haphazard, and when the big ships come in, the shifts last all day and night. As the disgruntled workers load the hold through the night, you get the feeling they would like to load themselves on, too. A melancholic mood dominates the rigorous work, all in the shadow of armed guards.

A few of the ship's crew almost didn't make it back in time. They came scrambling up the gangway with five minutes to spare and were clearly the worse for wear. The nightclubs and brothels of this little port town have taken on a mythical status in the eyes of some of the sailors. I hear the captain command the chief mate to punish the latecomers. "Chipping rust with the lawnmower for three days," he says sternly. That means being dispatched to the nether regions of the vessel to dislodge rust with a heavy, lumbering, noisy machine called a deck scaler. Ten minutes pounding with that thing and you are ready to jump down the hawse pipe for good. A maritime nightmare.

The great engines hidden deep inside the belly of the vessel rumble to life, the hefty mooring lines are taken off the bollards and gathered on board, men scurry around frantically on the dilapidated pier, and we are off, setting sail once more across the Atlantic Ocean.

Into the Deep Blue Sea

It is almost dusk, and the sun is setting dramatically on the lush banana plantations surrounding the docks. From high up on the ship's bridge deck I can see far and wide. The tropical vegetation shimmers in a thousand shades of green, its pungent aroma mixing deliciously with the powerful fragrance of the fresh Caribbean Sea. The old rustic railway line runs out of the plantation and all the way up the pier. The decrepit train stands there almost derelict, its wagons bereft of their cargo. Dozens of workers stand around, exhausted after their grueling shift, relieved to see the bananas off. I spot the unctuous local banana agent, the only man in Manzanilla who wears a suit, waving us off overenthusiastically. Young couples gather to watch the huge ship slide out to sea—not much happens in these small port towns. Parents have brought their children, who wave sadly at our departure. Everyone is silent, dreaming of other lands, of migration, exodus, or desertion.

The great hulking ship turns 180 degrees in a wide lumbering arc. Now the bow faces the vast infinite ocean, and the quaint little Caribbean port town is left behind, becoming smaller and smaller as the horizon encloses it. The sea ahead is perfectly calm, a ravishing sapphire blue, sparkling and inviting, and dolphins have appeared, leaping joyously about the hull. We have two weeks of open sea before us, as we sail from the mesmerizing translucent beauty of the Caribbean to the choppy grey European north Atlantic. We also have two weeks of monotonous factory work ahead of us, painting and chipping rust, doing watch, cleaning, and gazing out to sea, haunted and melancholic.

We are 18 men of diverse nationalities trapped within the steel confines of this floating prison, encumbered with an archaic maritime hierarchy, teeming with resentments and the petty everyday hassles of living in close quarters with a group of people not of your choosing. We may have rough weather, or engine difficulties, people will fall ill, and others will become overwrought by homesickness or lovesickness, a year away from their families and homes. The sailors will cling to the fond memories of a couple of days onshore, the bustle of the port, the good people of Manzanilla, the late-night beer and revelry, and, for some, the delirious dawn shared with the industrious women of the Caribbean night.

“Yah, Irishman, move your fucking ass, do some work.” This from the great German wit—unfortunately, our captain. He is a big man with great ruddy cheeks and a thick beard. He has been a sailor all his adult life and is, as they say in the trade, confident of the sea. Typical of his class of European officer, his political persuasion lies somewhere to the far right of Le Pen. The captain, the chief engineer, the first mate, and perhaps the second engineer on any cargo ship of this line will be European—German, Dutch, or English—while the crew is generally from the global south—Filipino, Chinese, or Indonesian. The mid-ranking class will be Indian, Pakistani, or maybe unambitious hands of European nationalities.

I had the misfortune of spending a lot of time around the officer class on a variety of banana boats. Most of these guys had been at sea twenty years or so; they are frightening specimens of stunted humanity. “It would be better if I could flog them,” remarked a Dutch captain, referring to the recalcitrant crew. An English captain insisted on referring to the Irish, Indian, and Pakistani crewmembers as “Us Brits.” (Strangely, the Indian bosun, Raj, loved this; he even hung a portrait of Queen Elizabeth in the radio room to appease the captain). But this current captain, the bulbous German, was easily the most obnoxious of them all. “One time we sailed from Madagascar,” he boasted while knocking back a brandy, “with ten stowaways in the hold. I ordered all the hatches locked shut and turned up the refrigeration. Those blacks froze to death!” His fellow officers chuckled in obedient chorus. It was unclear whether this was his idea of humor or multiple homicide.

These merchant vessels seem at times like theatres for simmering class war—class and race war. The European officer class, who all joined the merchant navy when these shipping lines

were entirely white and European, resented the Asian employees because they were cheap labor: the maquiladorization of the fleets. The Asians in turn hated the Europeans because they were racist and unjust bosses. Language came between the two classes—how can an English captain order around a Chinese crew, demean them, whip them in line, and teach them obedience and the traditions of the sea if they can't understand one word he says? There was no common ground between the two.

Sailing with a Chinese crew one time, I tried to befriend them in the spirit of worker solidarity. I entered their dining quarters, bedecked with red flags and a portrait of Chairman Mao, and attempted to bridge the gap between English and Mandarin. My efforts came to a zero. They suspected a spy, an infiltrator who would only harm them in the end. They wanted nothing to do with me. I was white, so I was ejected, quite politely.

The Filipinos were different. They were more westernized. Many were born-again fundamentalist Christians, Bible-thumping sailors. This didn't stop them from filling the boredom of off-duty hours with some hardcore lesbian porn movie. Others tried to set me up with their sister, proffering photos of pretty young girls and claiming they would do whatever I desired—if I married them. It was a liability being white below deck. I worked alongside them all day, chipping rust or painting, we shared surreptitious beers in their cabins (drinking was outlawed on the ship), we discussed the Bible, we shared watch, and yet they always considered me other. Maybe because I was invited to eat at the officers' table.

The European officers took me under their wing as a cadet, as a young man who obviously needed guidance. Also, I was white. I was invited to dine with them, always a traumatic occasion. These old fascist codgers would try to plant the old salty sea dog number on me, as if they were wise old men who knew the ropes. As sailors, as workingmen, they did—they knew the boat, they knew the sea, they knew how it all worked, and they got the goods there on time. This was understood, and this was why they were paid a fair wage for a job well done.

The problem arose when we ventured beyond the old salty sea dog paradigm. We sat around a table three times a day for two weeks at a time, and if any other subject arose—politics, culture, sports—we had stormy waters. If it wasn't their desire for more immigration laws, it was their admiration of Margaret Thatcher; if it wasn't their desire to see all Arabs wiped off the face of the earth, it was their support for the loyalist Rangers football club, and me a Celtic supporter. Even though they were Europeans, white men like me, I felt extraordinarily ill at ease in their company. To complicate things further, I was a "man of letters," an intellectual in their eyes (I read books). They hated intellectuals, the liberal media, people of color, and, most of all, feminists. They were angry and cynical men filled with hubris.

One night I got drunk in the lavish cabins of the German chief engineer. At 60, he was older than most of the other officers I had encountered, and a certain weariness informed his discourse, which made him more tolerable than the more arrogant types. As the night wore on, and his more outlandish fascist statements were tempered by sentimentality and melancholy, he became maudlin and honed in on one overwhelming theme. "I want to be free!" he said. "I want to be free from this shitty ship and this shitty job, and the fucking engine room and this shipping company. I want to be free of my boring wife and my damned family and my suburban home; I want to be free to take off around the world and just to be free. I want to be free!" The tiresome old bore went on like this for a long time, and finally we had found some common ground. Not much, just a desire for freedom, to roam, to be unrestricted. We clinked our glasses in grim complicity.

The Dawn Watch

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Afterwards I went up to the bridge for my 4AM-to-8AM watch. The kindly Filipino second mate intimated that I should drink lots of coffee to sober up. I explained to him what happened, how I ended up drinking all night with the chief engineer. I told him how I found the chief engineer, in the end, a decent enough man, even if he was a bit of a nazi. The second mate smiled and uncharacteristically revealed a gem of gossip. “They say he has fallen in with a Brazilian mulatto in Suriname. He wants to marry her and live on the coast of Bahia with her. He is a new man now, repenting his dark past, his bad treatment of the Filipinos. The crew has grown fond of him.”

The second mate, a soft-spoken grey-haired man in his 50s, abruptly returned to business, as if he had let down his guard by speaking so openly with me. He turned to the radar, wrote briefly in the logbook, and then retired to the chartroom.

I was left alone on the bridge in the darkness, the ship plunging through the deep night and the coffee percolating on the desk. The ship was rolling gently as we steamed full-ahead at a steady 20 knots and not a blip on the radar.

The 4AM-to-8AM watch shift is the romantic shift—you get to watch dawn rising across the vast horizon, and it is a magnificent vista, changing subtly every morning as we traverse the Caribbean to the Atlantic or vice versa. Every hour we would note our position and the sailing conditions in the logbook—and I would attempt to induce the second mate into conversation. But he was a wary man, and I got the feeling he didn’t feel he had much to say about himself. He was at sea eight years and did not express any great love for the sailor’s life, although he considered himself privileged to have a well-paid job. His sole wish was to return to the Philippines, his family, the plot of land he had managed to buy, and farm away the rest of his life. I got the distinct feeling that the sailor’s life for him was one step up from a chain gang. Strangely, I never did get his name the whole voyage; everybody simply referred to him as “the second mate.” On the door to my cabin was the title “Spare Officer.” Did they refer to me colloquially on board as “the spare officer”?!

How calm was the bridge in the depth of night! I would check the various instruments and stare into the darkness, peering for whatever obstacle might lie in our path—fishing boats, meandering whales, or North Atlantic wanderlust-stricken icebergs. I never saw anything. I would listen to the BBC World Service, sip coffee, and, rocked by the gentle pitch and the somnolent ocean air, fall into a calm reverie thinking about my favorite maritime topic—pirates.

Passing a Pirate Enclave

“During the Golden Age of piracy in the 17th and 18th centuries, crews of early proletarian rebels, dropouts from civilization, plundered the lucrative shipping lanes between Europe and America. They operated from land enclaves, free ports; “pirate utopias,” located on islands and coastlines as yet beyond the reach of civilization. From these mini-anarchies—“temporary autonomous zones”—they launched raiding parties so successful that they created an imperial crisis, attacking English trade with the colonies, and crippling the emerging system of global exploitation, slavery and colonialism....”

—Pirate Utopias, Do or Die, No. 14

The Caribbean teems with the ghosts of the pirate world, and the pirate utopias once dotted around the region remain part of the cherished folklore. There is still a tangible sense of piracy in the air, provoked by the great extremes of wealth and poverty starkly coexisting in the Caribbean. Haiti, the poorest country in the western hemisphere, is a short boat ride from

the Virgin Islands, playground of the rich and famous. And it was here that I got my first taste of the “threat” of latter-day pirates.

We had been delayed loading bananas at the Honduran port of Puerto Cortes, and the captain was acting edgy all morning. His task now was to make up time on the crossing. He could cut through the infamous Tortuga Channel, a narrow slipstream between the Haitian coast and the small island of Tortuga. The danger was that the channel was less than a kilometer wide and populated by a lively band of latter-day pirates in rubber dinghies equipped with powerful outboard engines and AK-47s. They would speed out in groups and seize a passing ship by throwing ropes up over the side and clambering aboard. The size of the ship makes it difficult to guard the whole length of the vessel; pirates can climb aboard, break into the metal containers, and steal anything that can be dropped into the rubber dinghies below. Or they can simply hold the crew at gunpoint and do exactly as they please.

After much contemplation, the captain decides to go the Tortuga Channel route. “We’ll save four hours,” he says to the first mate. “It must be done.”

The crew, some armed with handguns, is dispersed along both sides of the deck to ward off the potential robbers. We enter the narrow channel. Small settlements are visible on both coastlines—multitudes of little huts with not a large building in sight. The channel is a few kilometers long. Dozens of little boats crisscross it—battered old fishing boats, rustic ferries packed with people, and the “suspicious” little inflatable dinghies. The captain could go full speed, ensuring that we pass too quickly for any pirate to catch up, but also creating havoc for the locals due to the violent wake of the passing ship. Little boats might overturn, or we might simply run over slow vessels. Basically, by going a reckless 20 knots, we would be crashing through, causing untold damage—drownings even—just to stave off the pirates. The captain, a real bastard, is tempted.

He discusses the dilemma with his German buddy, the chief engineer. I don’t understand German, but it is clear that the chief engineer is talking the captain down from his reckless path. Almost begrudgingly, the captain orders a reduction in speed.

By this stage I am positively pissing myself with excitement. I would present any potential pirates clambering aboard with my assistance. This is the historical Tortuga, one of the earliest pirate republics! This little island off Hispaniola was once the scourge of the Caribbean. C.L.R. James writes in *The Black Jacobins*, “In 1629 some wandering Frenchmen settled.... To Tortuga came fugitives from justice, escaped galley slaves, debtors unable to pay debts, adventurers, men of all crimes and nationalities. Slaughter, internecine [warfare] followed for 30 years....” James, no friend of the pirates and buccaneers, saw them as dropouts and criminals. Other historians frame the Caribbean pirate enclaves in more favorable and revolutionary terms: these “pirate utopias” were rebellious settlements premised on radical democracy and multiracial equality, oases of freedom in an increasingly brutal “civilized” world founded upon slavery and exploitation of the “New World.” While a good portion of the pirate community was comprised of mutinous sailors from the merchant privateers or the imperial navies, many others were “a melting pot of rebellious and pauperized immigrants from across the world—thousands of deported Irish...., Royalist prisoners from Scotland, Huguenots, outlawed religious dissenters...., captured prisoners of various uprisings, Diggers and Ranters, runaway slaves and rebellious proles....” (Do or Die). The original buccaneers got their name from boucan, the practice of the Arawak Indians of smoking beef. The Atlantic rebels “went native” and made common cause with the indigenous groups. The self-organization of these pirate communities, not just in Tortuga, but in Honduras, the Bay of Campeche, and all over the Caribbean, represented a genuine alternative society in the 17th century. These were the autonomous municipalities of their day.

Disappointingly, we pass through the Tortuga Channel without even so much as a hint of a Jolly Roger gracing the horizon. The captain chuckles coarsely as we pull out once more into the open sea. “Yah, fucking assholes too busy screwing their mothers to take us on, ha-ha!” This captain is a real comedian; he has us in stitches all day. He’s forever shouting at the Filipino crew, “Stop staring at your shoes like Imelda Marcos, get to work, ha-ha!” The workers shuffle away without a word. I wasn’t expecting a motley crew of latter-day rebel sailors, but neither was I expecting such a browbeaten obedient lot. What of the secret history of the revolutionary Atlantic, the treasured tradition of mutiny and raising the black flag? The romantic maritime, it seems, is dead and gone; it’s with Anne Bonny in the grave.

Troubled Waters

Next afternoon, the sea was calm as I painted the starboard boat deck with a long roller. My peaceful daydreaming was disturbed by the chief steward summoning me before the captain. Of all the Filipinos, this guy, a Jehovah’s Witness, was the most dangerous. The other Filipinos distrusted him, and I had already had a bit of a run-in with him. He’s a big fan of U.S. military bases in the Philippines. His ambition is to open a McDonalds franchise in his home town, Malabang on Mindanao. I earned his displeasure by laughing as he waxed lyrical on the wholesomeness of the McDonalds menu.

The captain is seated behind his desk in his office with impressive nautical charts rolled out in front of him. He is grunting to himself somewhat boorishly. Over his shoulder hovers the twitching chief steward, and through the portholes I can see the cargo stacked on the expansive deck tilting gently with the pitch of the ship.

I may be in trouble.

“Are you writing some kind of investigation about this shipping company?” the captain asked directly, fondling his beard and looking like the meanest bastard you could possibly imagine. He continues that the chief steward, “while changing the cabin linen,” found some written notes I had carelessly left on the desk. I glance at the sycophantic steward with a burning stare.

“I like to keep a journal, Captain, but it definitely isn’t written for the eyes of the chief steward.”

The captain was clearly reveling in the whole situation. He could be his very own Gestapo!

“Ve are concerned that the confidentiality of the shipping line has been violated.”

A company man, he went on to outline how I had been taken on in good faith by the director, and I was abusing that trust by intending to publish an account unhelpful to the shipping line.

“Are you a journalist?” he asked directly, his eyes burning into me nastily.

And this is the thing: I was doing a little research with the aim of exposing some trade injustices, but nothing about the shipping line or this man’s sacred fucking shipping company. I was looking into the bananas. My concern was bananas.

But I had an alibi. “Captain, I’m writing a short eclectic piece for the seaman’s union magazine about life on board a modern vessel, comparing it to the old romantic idea of life at sea during the so-called Golden Age of shipping. I am writing an article that merely expresses the discontent of the crew, their lack of interest in the sailor’s life, and how big ships are more like floating factories, but nothing damaging to the shipping company.”

The captain looked at me crookedly. His eyes narrowed and he pulled at his beard. I have drunk with this man, he has told me his stories, I have shared his space, and I suspect he might actually have a soft spot for me. “You ask a lot of questions,” he said. “You are a good

listener. You are young and idealistic. I believe you.” He broke into a cunning smile. “I will help you with your article, and we will print it in the company bulletin, too.”

“That’s great,” I mumble feebly. I cast a nasty glance at the chief steward. Fucking scumbag rat. I will have a word with the other Filipinos about this—they don’t like him either.

A Motley Crew

But they weren’t interested. I told my mate Manuel, the young disgruntled Filipino deckhand, what had happened, how the chief steward had ratted on me to the captain.

“The steward is a dog,” laughed Manuel, “we expect that from him.” He changed the topic to the nocturnal delights in some seedy Manzanilla brothel. Another crew member enters, a guy even younger than Manuel, and his line was that the chief steward did no wrong. “He was only doing his duty.”

Later that night on watch, the second mate chided me. “Don’t worry about these things. You should keep your head down and do your work.” That is what he says about every problem. It drives me crazy. Why don’t these people stand up for themselves?

I found an excuse to leave and made my way to the very bow of the ship, as far from the bridge and the rumbling engines as possible, past the lines of freight containers, past the stored mooring lines and various accoutrements, down to the end of the forward deck. Like a world apart, here at the very tip of the ship is a little platform that hangs over the water. The hull drops at a sharp angle below, so when you sit perilously on the edge, grasping the metal bars, dangling your legs, it is as exhilarating as a fairground ride. The ship pitches more dramatically at the bow, and the tumultuous sea churns about ten meters below. The spray of surf wets your face, and the delicious aroma of the salty sea overwhelms the senses.

Sometimes dolphins chase the ship here, leaping delightfully about the hull. I’m sure this place has a name—everything has a nautical term—but I don’t know what they call it. For me, it was my place of wild solace, alone as you can be on a ship, plunging through the dark sea in the deep of night.

A Valediction to Imperial Hydrarchy

I’m chipping away at rust with a handheld jackhammer on the portside bridge wing. The work is monotonous, and the scraping noise is driving me nuts. I’ve been at this all afternoon. I suspect this is part of the captain’s punishment for my misdemeanors.

Suddenly the whole horizon becomes filled with a great wall of water, hundreds of meters tall, as an extreme storm wave sweeps in from the winter north Atlantic.

The captain’s guffaw interrupts my dreamtime flights of fancy. “Yah come on Irish scholar, let’s see if you can write even with all those blisters, ha-ha!” He beckons me into the chartroom, where a computer lay idle. “Use this to write your fantastic article!” he said, rubbing his hands together merrily, maybe expecting some whimpered excuses. “Now!” he added, as if cracking a whip.

But (cunningly) I had thought about this the previous night, whiling away the hours on watch, and had prepared a potential article to humor the stupid bastard.

I began banging on the keyboard, pandering to the captain by beginning with a quote from an old traditional Irish sailor’s song The Sea Rover, one of his favorites when maudlin and drunk.

I am an old sea rover and the blood through my veins,
Is fresh and salty as the sea....

I went on to describe the attributes of the crew of the MV Suriname, how they were “confident of the sea,” and other clichés, but that the romantic age was over, and the salty sea did not flow through these people’s blood, only the necessity to work for a living, a shitty living at that, locked up on a ship for months on end. I lament the loss of the albatross as a symbol of the sailor—a creature who only lands to mate—and suggested that a more appropriate symbol for the modern worker on board would be a caged parrot. Maybe some of the old traditions were gallantly carried forth by the superannuated licensed officer class (I have in mind the preposterous rank system and the tendency to resort to juvenile punishments for crew “misbehavior,” but that remains unstated), but theirs is a leviathan task to revive archaic practices. I entitled the piece A Valediction to Imperial Hydrarchy.

The captain looked a mite confused and then chuckled approvingly. “Yes you can write! This is ok! Mourning the lost traditions, yes” And he left me there, not mentioning the remaining rusting to be done, so I took the opportunity to write about bananas for the rest of the afternoon.

I brought the writing up for the second mate to peruse during the 4AM-to-8AM watch. He read it and laughed sardonically. “It is good,” he said, “but it is naive. There is no mystery to the sea, it is simply the ocean and we are a metal box floating on top of it, and it is dangerous, stupid even. We are all fools, and we do it only because we have to. It is about money, that’s all.”

The Inefficiency of Capitalist Globalization

The captain invited me up to his quarters the following night and opened a bottle of Scotch whiskey. “Let me tell you a story,” he began, “to explain what this business is all about.”

It was like he was dictating his memoirs. It was like he was preparing his confession. I fumbled for my pencil, excited.

But his testimony was disappointing. It was just a straightforward story of the madness of globalization. “I was captain of a schooner taking cargo from Cork, Ireland—yes, your shitty country—to Brazil, another shitty country, and back again. We would load a cargo of livestock at Cobh and sail across the Atlantic, two weeks. There, in Brazil, the cattle would be slaughtered and made into canned meat. That’s a Brazilian specialty—slaughterhouse skills, you know. I would load up the ship again with canned meat, and sail back to Ireland. The canned meat was sold in Irish supermarkets.”

Silence.

“Is that it, Captain?”

“Yes.”

“Yes, hmmm. Quite a story.”

“Yes, appalling isn’t it?”

“Yes.”

Like Falling Off the End of the World

Day by day the ocean got darker, and the clear blue sky became dotted with clouds. The temperature dropped subtly. We found ourselves wearing more layers of clothes each night on watch. A basking whale bade us farewell from tropical waters with a spectacular fountain of water and a graceful leap, crashing dramatically back into the ocean. Right out in the middle of the Atlantic, six days from Europe, we pass bobbing fishing boats from the Spanish fleet. Fish stocks are so depleted that fishermen have to go to extraordinary lengths to fill

their quota. A day later we pass some discarded oil barrels bobbing about in the water—litter all over the world.

The excitement of heading toward the Caribbean and the exotic ports on that side of the Atlantic is directly proportional to the depression induced by heading toward cold, wintry north Atlantic waters. Rotterdam in winter never has the same alluring appeal as, say, tropical Paramaribo. Work on the deck is made more difficult by the rain and the cold and the increasingly choppy seas. Sure enough, a couple of days from port, just beyond the Azores, the ship begins rolling long and deep, ten second rolls, on big North Atlantic swells. Sleeping or eating becomes an acrobatic chore, a balancing act against the forces of gravity. Traversing the passageways becomes a clown act, or the endeavors of a punch-drunk hobo in the park. And intermittently, the contents of your stomach will take a leap. Some people's visages take on a startling shade of blue. "Everybody gets sick, don't worry," the chief engineer tells me. "I've been getting sick for 25 years. Here, hold this, you'll feel better."

He places a potato in my hand. I feel better because I laugh for the first time all day.

The captain has the deckhands out in the winter gale painting and rusting, just to spite them. There's plenty of indoor work they could be doing, but he's in a rage because he got wind of a "party" below deck the previous night. "Drinking is prohibited on the boat," he thundered. Except for the officers who drink brandy every night in their fine staterooms, the fucking hypocrites.

I bring the toiling workers coffee on the deck, spilling most in the process, slipping and sliding on the treacherous swaying surface. The six men are fuming to be out in the gale; despite oilskins and rubber boots they are soaked through and miserable, chipping at the interminable rust. Manuel thanks me for the coffee and finally exhibits some of the malevolent spirit of a seafaring motley crew. "That fucking captain better watch his step or he will have an accident," he mutters bitterly.

The 4AM-to-8AM watch is getting busy. As we approach Europe, our radar and the waters are becoming dotted with vessels—other cargo ships, fishing boats, coast guards, liners, and oil tankers. We are off autopilot and have to change course occasionally, as the second mate doesn't trust the navigation of the small fishing vessels. Nor does he trust the satellite navigator. Short of grabbing his sextant and shooting the stars, he prefers to keep a very close eye on procedures before him with his keen eyes.

"Ships go down every day and every night," he tells me. "Somewhere in the world right now a big ship is sinking. We hear SOSs all the time on the radio."

The captain comes in drinking his morning coffee and joins the conversation, uninvited.

"Like that yahoo of a yachtsman we found in the middle of the Atlantic lying half-dead in his little dinghy. We lost a whole afternoon rescuing that fool."

The captain would quite clearly have preferred to steam past the disabled vessel, but maritime etiquette requires that passing ships come to the rescue of vessels in distress.

"But the company received good press for that, Captain. We lost time, but as the company director said, it was good for public relations." This from the second mate.

"We should have left that asshole in his tub to teach the other foolish yachtsmen a lesson. They are all jackass yahoos, forever causing problems for the merchant marine!" He changes the subject. "What is the weather forecast for today, Second Mate?"

"Bad," replies the second mate warily, "Strong winds, rain, the same as yesterday."

The captain has got up on the wrong side of the bed. "A good day for chipping rust on the starboard deck," he murmurs nastily, and leaves the bridge. Even the second mate is provoked.

"He should have more respect for the crew," he says adroitly.

"It's true, but they just take it," I say, "they don't complain."

"No, they don't complain," says the second mate, peering intently out the bridge window.

We are approaching Rotterdam, and the weather is wretched, but we have made good time, twelve days and 21 hours. We have crossed six time zones, sailed 4,000 kilometers, used about 30 gallons of oil per kilometer, and got hundreds of thousands of banana bunches across the vast ocean, on time. The second mate calculates that the banana company makes a good half-million dollars profit on the bananas. "What they pay for a small bunch of bananas off the shelf in Holland is about the same as a day's wages for the banana worker in Honduras."

"Second Mate!" I exclaim, shocked that the normally demure man would make such an overtly political statement. "You should keep your head down, do your work, and not consider these things that don't concern you!" I said sarcastically, mimicking his own words, his own mantra.

"Yes, you are quite right," he said, and smiled for the first time with an endearing air of complicity.

It's all over. We have docked in Rotterdam, the icy wind whips around the port and we are all wrapped tightly in many layers. The bananas are being unloaded with the latest state-of-the-art cranes; in no time at all the nicely ripened fruit will be whisking across Europe in articulated lorries. The port is cold, industrious, and sparsely populated. Europe's primary port has long been mechanized and the longshoremen downsized. It's like sailing into a cemetery, a place haunted by the ghosts of the generations of workers who have vacated the place in favor of great hulking machines and zippy conveyor belts. The luminous teeming of the Caribbean ports contrasts bleakly with this depressing vista. The only continuous element is the presence of armed guards.

I have to present myself to the captain one final time in order to sign off the ship. "Ah! The Irish scholar!" he exclaims mockingly, as I enter his cabin. "Don't desert us now! Surely there are many more stories to write here!"

And this is the thing about this stupid fuck of a captain: it's like he can see through you. He misses the essential part, but he gets most of it. I have a begrudging respect for him, his seaward ways and his blunt, overwhelming presence. Nevertheless, he has the capacity to undermine any goodwill I might feel toward him. He begins to get all maudlin and faux-philosophical.

"We are simple people, we sailors. We fight the oceans and we deliver the goods. But there is something that I want to say before you leave this ship that you should never forget."

This is interesting. There's nothing better than a good epiphany at the end of a long voyage. I'm all ears. The captain pulls at his beard and stares into space; I think I see the beginning of tears welling up in his cold eyes.

"Always remember that there is someone somewhere in the world who loves you."

I looked at him blankly, trying to comprehend his words. Was some wisdom hidden in there somewhere? The captain had a smug look on his face and held out his meaty paw to shake my hand.

What he said was completely absurd. Why would he bring up love now? Was he truly mad? Love? This hulking metal monstrosity is possibly the most loveless, unhappy place I have ever had the misfortune of occupying in my whole life. Love and the MV Suriname is an unthinkable notion. Love and the transatlantic shipping industry do not go together. Love and bananas? No!

I shook the meaty paw and smiled at him as one smiles at a cop who has handed you back your false ID.

“Yeah, thanks.”

The Ongoing Search for the Revolutionary Atlantic

I sauntered off the loveless MV Suriname a happy man, a freed man, one who would not walk up this gangway again. I thought of the captain and the European officer class and their sad superannuated ways and the antiquated maritime class structure. I thought about the endless slog of useless labor, the unromantic characters that populated the ship, the browbeaten crew, and the absence of resistance. I thought about prisons, and spaces without women, and Camus’s line: “A place without women is a place without air to breathe.”

But the last word was with the motley crew. As we shared a final beer approaching Rotterdam, my Filipino mate Manuel had told me a real secret of the deep sea. “You ask us why we don’t react to all the shit the captain gives us?” said Manuel. “I will tell you why we smile each time he orders us around. We smile because behind that bravado we know he is scared.”

Then he told me a story that represented either a powerful psychological threat against the captain or a pathetic rationalization of the crew’s acceptance of his abuse toward them.

Some time ago, on another ship of this line, there was an accident. Apparently there was a German captain like ours, a bad man, who mistreated his crew. And there was a Filipino crew, like this one, quiet, minding their own business. Far out in the Atlantic, the captain went for a stroll around the forward deck. The night was dark, and the waves were pounding the ship. Nobody heard his screams, and the body was never found.