

UNTIL THE SEA SHALL
FREE THEM

*Life, Death, and Survival
in the Merchant Marine*

Robert Frump



Doubleday

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SHALL FREE THEM

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the Merchant Marine*



ROBERT FRUMP



DOUBLEDAY

New York / London / Toronto / Sydney / Auckland

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for SUZANNE

Part One

AT SEA



*And Jesus was a sailor
When he walked upon the water
And he spent a long time watching
From his lonely wooden tower.
And when he knew for certain
Only drowning men could see him
He said, "All men shall be sailors then
Until the sea shall free them. . . ."*

LEONARD COHEN



CASTING OFF



Whenever I find myself growing grim about the mouth; whenever it is a damp, drizzly November in my soul; whenever I find myself involuntarily pausing before coffin warehouses, and bringing up the rear of every funeral I meet; and especially whenever . . . it requires a strong moral principle to prevent me from deliberately stepping into the street and methodically knocking people's hats off—then, I account it high time to get to sea as soon as I can.

HERMAN MELVILLE

10:00 P.M. / THURSDAY, FEB. 10, 1983 / COAL TERMINAL
NORFOLK, VIRGINIA

At the loading pier near Norfolk, Bob Cusick, the veteran chief mate, spread steam coal into the hold of the *Marine Electric* like a pastry chef layering a cake. No chunk was larger than a Ping-Pong ball, and some of the coal was just black powder. In bulk, the coal formed a huge mass, heavier than 10,000 automobiles, and it had to be loaded carefully so that the ship remained balanced.

Huge chutes passed over the ship and dumped black coal evenly at Cusick's command. Normally, it took three passes to load a ship this size, but Bob Cusick had done this more than a few times. He almost never needed the third, "finishing" pass. That was an advantage of time on the water, of time on the piers. There was a lot he knew, a lot he'd seen that the younger kids aboard ship might never see.

Still, Cusick always felt the excitement of leaving, of casting off, of starting the voyage. All of them, all thirty-four seamen and officers, felt it, even if this would be just a milk run up the coast from Virginia to Massachusetts and back, shuttling coal to the power plants of New England.

There were a number of green kids on the ship who felt the excitement more than Cusick, and they wondered what they must think he was doing now. For anyone with just a few months at sea would think Bob Cusick was cheating. Clearly, the chief mate of the *Marine Electric* was overloading her ship—she had sunk below the legal load line. You could see it, if you knew just enough about the business not to know what you didn't know. Cusick had filled the hatches with 23,000 tons of coal on top of the 1,800 tons already there. And now the ship was five inches below its legal load line.

Or so it seemed. The truth was that Marine Transport Lines, the owner, never asked Cusick to overload a ship. That was one thing he liked about this job.

Another truth was that Cusick had checked the salinity of the harbor water carefully. It measured 1.013 on his hydrometer. That meant the harbor water was far less salty than ocean water. So when the *Marine Electric* sailed into the ocean, she would rise magically, like some huge high school science

fair display, leaving her load line comfortably above the waterline.

Only there was nothing magic about it. It was professional procedure. And it was how Cusick got and kept a job that paid him well at a time when American maritime work was scarce.

He liked this job, and he liked the men he worked with. Most all of them, with their different ranks and duties, had drifted back to the ship as he was loading it.

They were members of diverse tribes with diverse skills, and on some ships, the tribes never got along. There were the officers, of course. Deck officers, like the third mate, navigated and steered the ship. Engineers, like the first assistant engineer, kept the turbines humming and the power up. Ordinary seamen fell near the bottom of the organizational chart, just learning the business. Able-bodied seamen, or ABs, were veteran, skilled seamen. Oilers and wipers worked the engine room down below, assisting the engineers. At the bottom of the officer social order were the cadets—the men and women still in a maritime academy who shipped out for the first time on an American merchant vessel.

Fissures would form along these differences in rank and mission on many ships. The deck officers and engineers grumbled at each other and did not fraternize. Deck crews and the engine room workers followed the lead of the officers. They blamed each other for problems and held grudges.

But Cusick, the chief mate and second in command of the *Marine Electric*, mingled with all the men and set the tone for the ship. They had their differences, as men do, but they all pretty much got along.

Certainly all classes and ranks on the *Marine Electric* joined together to poke gentle fun at George Wickboldt, the cadet. The cadet was in love, they said. It seemed a real romance. Cusick's friend Mike Price, the first assistant engineer, had taken the cadet under his wing and treated him like family, even took him home to Massachusetts. There Wickboldt met a pretty young girl named Cathy. They had hooked it off, became an item, and the whole ship kidded George about his love life. Price even speculated that the two kids might get married some day.

But the crew, all of them, made certain the ribbing never turned nasty. This was so because all of them knew the Wickboldt story, and there was an unspoken agreement among them to watch out for the kid.

The cadet's family lived on Long Island near the Sound, and the four sons of the Wickboldt family had been called to sea. The family dream was to restore a large wooded property they owned on a lake in New Hampshire. There, no matter how far the seafaring sons roamed, they could have places near their parents. A year earlier, they'd begun planning to renovate the old house there.

And while George Wickboldt was quiet about the story, the crew all knew what happened to the dream. All of them heard what had happened only a year before to George's older brother Steven. And all of them knew it could as easily happen to them.

Take the wrong turn. Stop for a moment. Do some inconsequential thing you would not even think about. Go left instead of right. On board a ship you could be dead or maimed in an instant.

Twenty-four-year-old Steven Wickboldt sailed on the *Golden Dolphin*, a modern oil tanker. He was a conscientious man who took pride in his work. It was a Wickboldt family tradition.

But his ship had two routine maintenance problems in March 1982 as she sailed from Louisiana to Dubai on the Persian Gulf. The first problem was common to all tankers. Sludge had accumulated in the cargo tanks. It had to be removed. The only way to do it was the old-fashioned way: sending men down in the tanks with shovels to muck it out manually.

The other problem was more technical and required skilled labor. The steam lines that ran into the cargo tanks were so corroded that they did not work. These lines were important because they sometimes had to be warmed to make it portable and pumpable. And the sludge now lining the cargo tanks of the *Golden Dolphin* would be much easier to remove if the steam lines and heating coils in the tank were activated. The heat turned the oil from a hard, unyielding solid to a more liquid, movable muck.

On the *Golden Dolphin*, the steam lines connecting the engine room to the cargo holds snaked along the deck and had succumbed to the corrosive powers of saltwater. The crew had tried to seal the leaks with fiberglass and epoxy patches, but to no avail. Steam leaked so badly that the pipes no longer did their job. It was clear the steam lines on deck had to be replaced, and the only way to do that was to break out the welding equipment and put in new lines.

Steve Wickboldt was safe in the engine room when the welding started on deck. At the same time, about 3:20 P.M. on March 6, Seamen Roy Leonard, Martin Wright, and Manuel Rodriguez ended their coffee break and entered the number-four cargo hatch to begin mucking out the sludge. Seaman Zemlock went to the mucking winch—a hoist that would carry the sludge up and out of the tank below. Norman Beavers, who as bosun supervised the deck crew, popped down below to join the men.

At 3:45, the welding crew continued to fit new steam pipes. This was “hot work” on a tanker, not to be taken lightly. But the crew was some distance from the number-four hatch, fifty feet or more away from any combustible fumes coming from the oil.

Paul Rippee, the chief engineer, was supervising the welding. He asked the chief mate to tell the third assistant engineer, a man named Fitzpatrick, to pick up a 11/8th inch impact wrench and bring it to the worksite. The chief mate, heading for his stint at the wheel, saw Fitzpatrick and relayed the message. Fitzpatrick fetched the wrench and was walking forward to the welding site. Just ten seconds more and he'd be there.

In the engine room, men were changing shifts. First Assistant Engineer Cronin showed up early, at 3:45, to stand his watch. Steve Wickboldt could now take a break. It wasn't common to see hot work on board a tanker, and Steve wanted to see how it was done. He jogged forward to lend a hand.

Then, as always in such times, events happened both quickly and slowly, as if caught by a slow motion camera. Fitzpatrick, walking with the wrench, could see the welding team. Wickboldt was about to join them; the kid had slowed to a walk. The chief engineer, wearing his blue jumpsuit, was looking off the port side of the ship. Fitzpatrick raised the wrench as if to say, “*Hey, Chief, I’ve got what you wanted.*” But he did not catch the chief’s eye. Fitzpatrick saw a metal strip on the deck and looked down, afraid he might trip. He heard a long whooshing sound, then a noise like a firecracker inside a barrel. A wall of fire rose straight up. Pieces of metal started flying and landing around him.

One piece looked like the steam pipe. Fitzpatrick did not stop to examine it. He ran aft for his life to the rear of the ship. A thirty-eight-knot wind was blowing over the *Golden Dolphin*, whipping the flames like a blowtorch. He found shelter from the falling debris behind the deckhouse, then peeked around a corner to survey the starboard side of the ship. The cargo tanks from below had been blown out and up, so that now their bottoms were above the deckline, pointing jagged steel toward the sky. The whole huge midsection of the ship was aflame.

The general alarm was sounding. Smoke and fire engulfed the deck. There was no sign of the small group of men who had been huddling over the hot work. Friends and colleagues—Paul Rippe, Wickboldt, all of them—were simply gone.

Zemlock, operating the winch when it happened, by all rights should have been killed instantly. As he was hauling out buckets of sludge and dumping them into fifty-five-gallon drums, he felt and heard a vibration directly beneath him. He was looking down into the tank, but instead of being burned, he was hurled away from the opening. He heard one explosion. He was in the air, floating, when the second one came. Fate had it that he was blown aft forty feet, away from the inferno forward. He did not remember landing, only that when he did, he was sitting.

He looked forward. The force of one explosion had blown up part of the cargo hold bulkhead straight in front of the spot where he landed. The shattered bulkhead had shielded him from the flames. Yet another explosion had blown the deck out directly behind him. He sat, stunned, protected by jagged metal armor on both sides. He waited a moment, then picked his way toward the stern.

Steven Wickboldt, the men on the welding crew, and the men in the tanks, all nine of them, died instantly. What had happened was dreadfully simple. The heat from the welding torch had entered the steam line that still ran into the cargo holds. Although the tank in which the men were working was gas-free, the other holds were in that most perilous of tanker conditions—empty of oil, but not empty of vapors. The steam coils lining these tanks were connected to the steam line the men were welding. The cargo coils were corroded. Thus, vapor from the tanks wafted up through the steam line, venting to the deck where the men were welding. A spark or flame or heat from the acetylene torch in effect lit a fuse running from one part of the ship dozens of yards to the explosive vapors of the empty oil tanks forward.

Which explains the “whoosh” sound many of the survivors heard. It was the gaseous fuse linking the torch to tank.

On the bridge, the captain ordered hard left rudder. This turned the ship sharply and cut down the fierceness of the wind blowing the fire forward to aft. Then he hit the abandon ship button. The

remaining men found lifeboats. They were rescued a few hours later by a passing merchant vessel and sat there on the deck and watched as the hull of their tanker burned and glowed cherry red.

Nearly a year later, the men of the *Marine Electric* knew the lesson. Even good men, even smart men, even men who thought they had things under control, could die in a thousand different ways. The flames did not care. The steel did not care. Most particularly, the ocean did not care.

But the men of the *Marine Electric* cared. They watched out for Cadet George Wickboldt. Like all the cadets, he needed to prove himself. And he took some hazing about his love life. But in many ways they figured, he had already paid his dues. Anyone whose brother could die like that, and who then went to sea, anyway, well . . . the men did not talk about it much. Such things did not need to be said.

Philip Corl, the master of the *Marine Electric*, Cusick's boss, could look down from the bridge on a day like this and figure he was a lucky man. Captains in the American Merchant Marine could make annual incomes equal to those of many doctors and lawyers but usually paid a price. They spent months at sea.

The *Marine Electric* run was an easy one. She ferried coal from Virginia to an electric utility at Brayton Point, Massachusetts, near Boston. It was about thirty-two hours each way, and the earlier trip had been down just a few days before had been glass-smooth, unusual for the North Atlantic in winter.

Corl, like Cusick, was an old hand, in his late fifties. He had signed on two days earlier as the relief master—the captain who took over when the regular captain was on vacation—and did so quite eagerly. Hour for hour, captains made a nice living, but only when they worked. More and more, there were fewer and fewer jobs in the American Merchant Marine. For years, Corl had stayed clear of such unemployment. He'd put behind him the memories of service in World War II and the sparse jobs of peacetime and moved west to deal cards at a friend's casino. That work in the desert had dried up, though, and Corl, himself a cardplayer, knew he had beaten the odds when he signed on with Marine Transport Lines a few months back. Corl had a plum. Hundreds of officers were without work. He was lucky, and he was grateful.

They were all lucky. There was none of the discomfort of long trips to Somalia or Egypt, carrying government grain. The *Marine Electric* carried coal in the coastal trade. Miners pulled it from the ground in Virginia and West Virginia and Kentucky and Illinois. It came east to Norfolk by train, but it was cheaper from there to ship north by water. And so the coal was dumped into the holds of the *Marine Electric*, which carried it up the coast to the Boston area.

There, they burned it to heat the water that created the steam that turned the turbines that generated

the electricity to light and heat homes and workplaces and to power toasters, televisions, stereos, vacuum cleaners, ovens, coffeepots, and hair dryers. The *Marine Electric* and the coal she carried helped make New England twinkle. At night, as the men out at sea stared at the land, they could watch the lights and understand that the cities were glowing because of them and the coal they carried. It gave them meaning. A connection.

For his part, Cusick did not need to philosophize. He had always been connected to the sea. He had always loved the life at sea. And he loved the job he had on the *Marine Electric*. He had been at sea since age eighteen and with the *Marine Electric* for five years. He was second in command, a year older than Corl, and he knew his ship inside out.

With Corl looking on from above, Cusick computed the load factors again. There were nuances. Important ones. There always were in large ships, particularly the old ones like the *Marine Electric*. The ship had been built during World War II as a T-2 type tanker—state of the art at the time—and then modified and extended in 1961 for dry cargo bulk duty with a new midsection.

There was nothing new about her now, though. The bow and stern were almost forty years old, and the “new” midsection was officially “overage” by insurance standards. If you were in charge of loading cargo, as Cusick was, you had to be careful how you distributed the weight in any ship and particularly in an old girl like this.

Earlier, the hatches for the five cargo holds had been rolled back like huge horizontal garage doors. The rail cars had dumped their coal onto conveyor belts. The belts then carried the coal to chutes. The chutes hosed the coal down the hatches and into the holds. This could not be done sloppily. Dump the coal too densely into the middle hatches, leave the fore and aft light, and the ship sagged. Dump it too heavily into the fore and aft, with the center light, and it “hogged”—rose up like a hog’s back. Either way was dangerous. The *Marine Electric* was a small ship by the standards of the new supertankers but immense by human scale. Stretch two football fields end to end, and you had her. Hogging or sagging meant a ship of that size could fracture and founder at sea, if she hit the waves wrong.

These things Cusick knew automatically and did automatically. Up to Somerset, Massachusetts. Down to Norfolk. Load the coal. Two passes and he was done, really. Same old same old, and fine by him. Just to make sure on this trip, he put in a few more dollops of coal on that third trimming pass. In hatch number five, he added 400 more tons. In hatch number one, he placed 700 more tons. The light touches were the equivalent of a pastry chef’s signature touches. A few hundred tons here, a few there. Then, no more. It was finished.

He then went over his loading log and measurements with William H. Long, a good friend and old salt, retired from his days at sea as an officer with the *Marine Electric* but still working dockside. Bill Long copied Cusick’s loading measurements as the chief mate read them off. The copy was just that, a sort of working checklist. Long always threw his paper away, and Cusick carried the formal record of the board the ship.

Cusick could think of all the good things about the crew and ship and be grateful. But there were also certain things Cusick tried not to think about. Because these kinds of thoughts worked against all the good things, all the right things about the *Marine Electric*. These thoughts conflicted with the what-great-deal-we-got-here version of the ship.

Cusick knew better than anyone that the ship was falling apart. The owners were good owners, these things went. Marine Transport Lines, Inc. was a big, modern corporation that was now in the middle of some big deal on Wall Street. The company was a joint owner in a new project, building a new ship, the *Energy Independence*, one of the few new ones built in U.S. yards. In that, the company was among the best of shipping lines.

But every trip, Cusick would sketch on his clipboard one more crack in the hatch covers. There were more than ninety now. He had the crew slop Red Hand over the cracks—marine-strength epoxy patching. They welded “doublers” over them—big sheets of quarter-inch steel. The company sometimes put the ship in for repairs, but she never came out right. Some mariners called ships like the *Marine Electric* “tired iron.” They were like used cars. Even if you treated them like classics, you never knew what would break next.

Cusick worried enough that when the *Marine Electric* was taken off the coal route a few months before to carry grain to Haifa, Israel, he had opted out. He knew the shape of the *Marine Electric* better than anyone. Would he ride her up and down the coast of the North Atlantic? You bet. The U.S. Coast Guard could always come out and get them. They were only thirty miles from shore.

But cross the North Atlantic and go through the Mediterranean all the way to Israel? Cusick had always taken risks. Not this one, though. He passed. He remembered that just two years earlier another old ship, the *SS Poet*, had gone down in the Atlantic carrying government grain. No one was found. No one survived.

Cusick was not alone in his concern. The *Marine Electric*'s first mate, Clayton Babineau, also passed on the transatlantic voyage. He took the summer off and worked on the roof of his house while the *Marine Electric* delivered grain to Israel. “*When are they going to cut that tub into razor blades?*” his friends would ask Babineau. Babineau would grin back and say, “*You can't cut rust into razor blades.*”

But Babineau was unamused by much of what he saw on the old ship. He was a methodical, serious man, whose absorption in detail drove his wife to distraction. Mary Babineau loved him dearly but hated his endless lists. He even had a packet marked for her if he was ever lost at sea, detailing what she should do—lists of assets, lists of lawyers, who to call, bills to be paid, union officers to contact.

“Don't worry,” he would tell Mary. “It's never going to happen. The thought of you as a rich widow is enough to keep me safe.”

Very funny, she would say, and Mary, a devout Catholic, would pray harder, hope that Clayt would loosen up on the lists, and pray she never would have to reach for the packet she knew was in that desk drawer.

But Babineau found he could not loosen up on the condition of the ship. Clayt liked the job, but hated the ship. He liked the job because the home front had been tumultuous recently. He was needed there, and the coastal run let him spend a lot of time at home. He had two teenagers and a daughter in her twenties, now out of the nest. Teenagers always are a challenge, but it was the older girl's actions that bothered him and Mary. She wanted to marry a guy who was not in any way, shape, or form included on his lists. Mary agreed.

The parents weren't winning this debate, but they weren't giving up on it, either. Their oldest daughter was nearly estranged. Home time was important until this thing was seen through one way or the other.

Clayt also liked his position in the company. He'd just gotten word that he would be the new relief chief mate, filling in when Cusick took vacations. And that would mean, in a few months, he would be the relief mate on a brand-new ship—the *Energy Independence*. When she came in service, he would have a scarce position on one of the safest ships imaginable.

If Babineau could hold on a little longer, keep his nose clean with the company, and keep the *Marine Electric* on the water instead of under it, he'd be set.

So it had been no small thing several weeks back when he had called the Coast Guard about the *Marine Electric*. Mary was in Clayt's study when he phoned. The ship was in a Rhode Island repair yard in the winter of 1982 when he dialed up the local Coast Guard inspectors.

"Listen," he said, "here's what's wrong with the ship. Go on board and just take a look. You'll see the cracks in the deck. You can't miss them. Check the hatches."

"Will do," said the Coast Guard guy.

But the *Marine Electric* sailed a short time later, and the complaint made in Rhode Island was never forwarded to other ports where she put in. Babineau never got any response, never saw any results from his call, and watched in fact as inspectors of the American Bureau of Shipping and the Coast Guard stepped over obvious safety violations. The crew had circled cracks in the deck with chalk, then spraypainted circles around them. The inspectors were careful both not to trip over the deficiencies and to ignore them in their inspection reports. Clayt's list of what was wrong with the ship grew longer as the condition of the ship became uglier.

Still, the men took pride in their work and in the *Marine Electric*. They kept her painted, and the rust didn't show from a distance. Cusick kept the deck crew busy on that, though when they scraped the rust off the hatch covers, sometimes daylight would show through.

Eugene F. Kelly, Jr., had caught that spirit of pride, even though he was only the relief third mate—a part-timer. He liked the ship and liked the crew and hoped the *Marine Electric* would become a permanent hitch.

He had a wife and seven-month-old daughter at home, and this was, as the third mate often said, "milquetoast run." He thought every once in a while it would be nice to work on the new big tanker, use his head a little more, run the modern inert gas systems that kept the supertankers from exploding.

Or maybe work on one of the military sealift ships, oversee refueling in mid-ocean. That would be a challenge. ~~He was only thirty-one and needed challenges, he thought. A little more danger could be good for him.~~

But life on the *Marine Electric* was perfect in so many ways. He was a sportsman, and the winter waterfowl season was open. When he was landlocked, he could hunt and be with his family.

The old salts could have the transatlantic runs, two weeks each way, with just the ocean to stare at. Most of the men on the *Marine Electric* parked their cars at the power plant in Massachusetts. When Kelly and the crew came in, they zipped home. “Like we were shore workers,” an officer once remarked.

Besides, the *Energy Independence* would be finished soon. Six months, Kelly figured, and all of them would have the same cushy job on a brand-new ship.

There is a saying among the families of seamen, among wives, lovers, mothers.

Some men go to sea to get away. Some men go to sea to get home.

The *Marine Electric* had its share of the former, men who knew no other life and were more comfortable at sea. Like the men of the old clipper ships or the fictional whaler Ishmael, they needed the sea to get away from land and all its social complexities.

But most of the *Marine Electric* crewmen were “home ported”—with a regular departure port close to their homes. They went to sea so they could get home to land. The sea provided for their land life and they were grateful. They didn’t want to worry about the age of the ship. They thought themselves blessed.

Besides, new ship, old ship, always there was risk. A state-of-the-art West German ship, the *Munchen*, had gone down in the mid-Atlantic a few years earlier. A brand-new British ship, the *Derbyshire*, sank in the Pacific in 1980. All hands perished, including some women on the *Derby*.

It was a global story, a global worry, that stretched back to the first man who floated atop a log in saltwater. Those who went to sea faced peril, period. Worrying too much was a waste.

Perhaps it was the knowledge that he captained a rust bucket that made Corl do what he did. Or perhaps a premonition. Cusick couldn’t figure it out. Not on the face of it, at least. Was the old man superstitious? They were both old-timers and seasoned professionals. So Cusick was surprised by Corl’s decision about his wife, Alice. It was more and more common these days for officers’ wives to accompany their husbands on trips, particularly milk runs like this one. So the plan had been for Alice Corl to board in Massachusetts, take the trip to Norfolk, see a bit of Virginia while the ship loaded, and scoot back up the coast with her husband.

But Corl hemmed and hawed about her coming. Finally, he declared that the quarters weren't large enough. "Alice," he said, "skip this trip. Stay in a hotel in Boston, Alice. I'll see you on the flip-flop on the return trip. Have fun in the city."

His decision made no sense to Cusick. Or to anyone. The quarters weren't huge, but they were big enough for a couple. People ate in shifts anyway. Of course, men in the maritime trades often talked around things. It was rare that a softness of heart would surface. Premonitions were not part of the science of navigation and engine room maintenance.

What else could Corl have said? That the trip didn't feel right? That the ship was unsafe? The mate would have muttered all thirty-two hours south and thirty-two hours north about that one. About how the old man felt that the ship was jinxed.

And in that sense, it made perfect sense to Cusick and everyone else on the crew. They just didn't want to talk about it.

They didn't have to talk about it. If the officers felt concern about the ship, they could go to the bridge and watch the radar. Etched in green flows on the scope was their salvation. Off there on the left going up. Down there on the right coming down. The continental shelf. Land. The Coast Guard was only thirty miles away. Jobs were scarce. They didn't get any better than this. Who wanted to complain? Who wanted to lose this good thing?

The crew had all signed on over the last few days as the ship loaded, and there were the usual manner mix-ups, misunderstandings, and last-minute quirks.

Jose O. Quinones had just made chief cook, and there was no way he would miss his first voyage with that title. He was making certain his galley was well-stocked with comfort food. He wanted to keep the *Marine Electric's* reputation as a "good feeder."

Others were more casual about the trip.

Walter Parkhurst was a relief able-bodied seaman, an "AB," and had sailed down from Massachusetts. Edward W. Matthews, a Baltimore man, had been on leave. But there was a misunderstanding, and now both men showed up on the pier in Norfolk. Men on the ship took sides. Some, mostly friends of Matthews, told Matthews he should demand his berth, that it was his by rights. Matthews wanted the ride.

Cusick knew his union rules, though, and took Parkhurst aside.

"Parkie, you have a right to sail now," Cusick told him. "I'll back you with the union. The rules are the rules, and you can sail if you want. You're cleared to get on the ship. Just give me the word."

Parkie gave it some thought and a few minutes later found the chief mate.

“Oh, what the hell, Mate,” he told Cusick. “I’ll get off here.” Matthews got his berth.

Davy Wright, a steady AB, was coming back to the ship, too, but was careful to follow the rules. He had been on vacation. The union had strict rules about time off and time on and rigorously enforced vacations. Because jobs were scarce, the union spread the jobs out by demanding mandatory times on the beach. Now Wright had been on the beach long enough to go back to sea. He stopped by the union hall to make sure all was in order.

He was out the door with his ticket punched when the union man ran out after him. “Hey, son, Davy. There’s a mistake here. You’re one day short. You need one day more on land. You’re going to have to catch the ship up north.”

So Davy joined Parkie on the beach.

And then there was the Gashounder. He was a good guy when you could catch him sober, but Kelly remembered giving him a ride one night and how the liquor fumes from the guy filled the cab of his truck. The Gashounder would go to sleep and snore, slip a little on the seat, then slide over and slump against Kelly, drooling on him. It got to the point where Kelly had to shove the guy hard over to the door. There he drooled against the window, emitting fumes of vomit and booze.

“Thank Christ!” Kelly said, when he learned that Cusick had fired the Gashounder. It was something the chief mate had hated to do. Drinking was a problem on board ships, and not just among the seamen. Cusick had a good friend, an officer, who was a bad drinker, so bad that the story of the guy was a legend in the fleet.

In Da Nang, South Vietnam, in the old days, the friend once took the ship’s small motor launch to a bar across the bay. When the Viet Cong mortared the area after a few hours, the launch came hurtling full speed back to the ship. The Marine guard on the ship watched as a man stood in the bow of the launch, stripped off all his clothes, and dove into the water.

The launch swerved out to sea, and the naked man swam madly to the ship. He ran up the ladder yelling that people were shooting at him, waved his arms wildly, then disappeared down below. The young Marine ran to the officer on the bridge and said, “We just had a crazy guy run stark naked onto the ship. We better tell the captain.”

“Good luck,” the officer on watch said laconically. “That was the captain.”

In the rough culture of the Merchant Marine, stories like that were numerous and—too often perhaps—accepted as part of life at sea.

But no one accepted the Gashounder. Just a few days earlier, in Massachusetts, as they were getting ready to leave for Norfolk, he was drunk again in his cabin, and this time he would not get up. He told Charlie Johnson, the bosun, that he just wanted to sleep. When he was told of the problem, Cusick sighed and went down to the man’s berth.

“Come on, fella, time to go to work,” Cusick said.

“I ain’ta gonna,” the Gashounder said.

“You gotta,” Cusick said twice. The man lay still, in a stupor.

Then Cusick said, “Listen, you’re a good man when you’re sober, but this can’t go on like this. Get your O.T. sheet and your gear and get off.”

A few minutes later, the Gashounder was back, a supplicant. He wasn’t a mean drunk. “Look, Mat, you’ve been fair with me all along and I’ve been an asshole. I know that. Can I ask you one favor though? Can I keep my gear on the ship and pick it up in Brayton?”

“Sure,” Cusick said. And then the Gashounder left for the bars, and a young seaman named Paul Dewey signed on.

For Cusick’s part, there were no ominous premonitions on this trip. Just common sense. Accuracy and precision.

This night, he took additional precautions. There was a very bad storm bearing down on the East Coast, and the Virginians, not used to driving in ice and snow, would soon be skidding into one another left and right. Already it was cold and rainy. Gale warnings were out. They could expect winds of twenty-five to thirty-five knots.

The *Marine Electric* and Cusick had seen dozens of storms like this one. It would be a bad one, but nothing to write home about. Not “the perfect storm.” It had formed over the Gulf of Mexico and was headed north. The *Marine Electric* would plow through as she had for nearly forty years. The bow would plunge. The waves would pump high. There would be a whoosh and bang of water hitting steel and a ka-thump as if someone had whacked a very big washtub with a board. Sometimes green water would bury the frontmost part of the ship, actually submerge the bow and much of the deck beneath a big wave. Then the buoyancy of the bow would assert itself, and she would clear the wave to meet the next one.

Cusick instructed the crew members to pay special attention to the huge hatches. The covers were very heavy affairs and normally needed only a few fasteners—or dogs, as they were called—to secure the hatches, one dog at each corner, one or two per side. With heavy weather coming, Cusick ordered them all dogged down to the maximum. The hatch covers weighed tons. The water in the waves could weigh tons more. If water crashed through the hatches? Many a ship had sunk precisely because that had happened. So in the cold and the rain, the crew put down every dog they could. Not all of the fasteners worked. Many of the hatches had holes in them and gaskets that did not fit well.

Still, it seemed good enough. She had seen worse, the old girl. She was good enough. In as good a shape as ever she was these past several years.

There were 745 tons of fuel, food, and fresh water on board, about 24,800 tons of coal, and thirty-four men. The bow drew thirty-four feet of water on the button. The stern, thirty-four feet, eight inches. The center, thirty-four feet, four inches. No hogging or sagging here. Over the course of two full football fields, only an eight-inch difference, stern to bow. Cusick was a pro.

They had only one small problem as they left. Steve Browning was not there.

Corl and Kelly thought it odd that Browning was a no-show. The guy was a responsible assistant engineer and serious about his work. The storm must have delayed him.

Well, they could make it without him. They had enough engineers. This was just a little coastal run.

And then she was set to go. Shortly before midnight, in the last hour of February 10, a Thursday, the propeller of the ship surged. Tugs pushed and pulled the old collier away from the dock. The thick mooring lines were heaved on board and stored. And she was off, the crew and officers feeling the little thrill that accompanies any voyage. They were casting off. They were en route.

The tickle of excitement soon settled into cozy routine.

It would be many hours before the ship's officers heard the radio crackle news about a fishing boat in trouble.

Theodora was her name, and she would change everything.

THE RESCUE OF THE THEODORA



Does anyone know

Where the love of God goes,

When the waves

Turn the minutes

To hours?

GORDON LIGHTFOOT
The Wreck of
the Edmund Fitzgerald

2:00 A.M. / FRIDAY, FEB. 11, 1983 / ON BOARD THE *MARINE ELECTRIC*
MOUTH OF THE CHESAPEAKE BAY

As the ship cut across the Chesapeake Bay toward open sea, Bob Cusick roamed the deck, more than a little worried. He paid special attention to securing the bow area. There was no doubt it would be pounded by waves. He even ordered the anchors secured earlier than usual in anticipation of the storm to come. Normally, they kept the anchors ready until they got past the long Chesapeake Bay Bridge-Tunnel that spanned the mouth of the bay. But not this time. Cusick wanted the work done before they hit open sea. The waves were already rough.

In fact, the water was rough enough that the harbor pilot was considering staying on board the big ship. Pilots supervise navigation in shallow local waters, then hop off onto small pilot boats once the local hazards are cleared. It would be a tough hop for the pilot on this night. He would have to climb down a ladder and then, as the ship and the boat both pitched, jump to the pilot boat.

On this day, he was scheduled to transfer at two in the morning. Cusick made sure the ladder was secured for the pilot. Ladders, anchors, hatches. They could come loose in a big blow. He made sure they all were dogged, tied down and secured. All the anchor systems were in place. The anchor windlass was secure. The stopper—a chisel-like piece of steel—was secure in a link of the big anchor chain. And the devil's claw, a device that snagged the chain if it started to fall, was snugged in nice and tight, held by its own smaller chain and a turnbuckle-type tightener.

On the bridge, Kelly had been listening to the harbor pilot debate with himself. The seas were high. The pilot pickup boat was small. Would it be easier to ride the *Marine Electric* to Massachusetts this storm? Or should he risk going down the fragile pilot's ladder to the wave-tossed harbor craft?

The pilot boat was alongside the *Marine Electric*, and now it was time for a decision. Ride the ship? Take the boat?

“I’m getting off,” the pilot said, and a few moments later, he descended the ladder, sprayed by the waves. He timed his jump correctly and soon was safe on the deck of the boat below.

Almost instantly, another figure mounted the ladder, and this one made his way *up*, hand over hand.

Steve Browning’s head popped above the rail of the *Marine Electric*, and he smiled sheepishly. Kelly ribbed him. He had been late at the dock, but he ran to the pilot boat and hitched a ride out. They could kid him all they wanted. The weather was bad. The ship was bad. Losing a good job was worse.

And now they were under way in the open sea, cutting handily through four-foot waves, which blew with the wind north northeast on a course of 38 1/2 degrees true from Chesapeake Light to Narragansett Bay up north, a distance of 322 nautical miles.

One officer, two able-bodied seamen, and an ordinary seaman manned the ship in shifts of four hours each. It is a quiet and warm routine on the bridge, much like being secure in a comfortable cabin. They were making eight knots. The head wind caused the ship to pitch and roll some. And soon as Cusick thought she would, the *Marine Electric* was shipping water over her main deck and hatches. Each time this happened, the ship responded well.

During the night, the waves reached ten to fifteen feet, with Force 8 conditions with winds at thirty to forty knots—about thirty-five to forty-five miles per hour.

By dawn, the blow was a Force 10 storm from the northeast, with winds of sixty miles per hour and seas between twenty and forty feet—nothing to laugh about.

Still, there was no need to panic. The *Marine Electric* took it well, shipping seas and bouncing back with no sign of sluggishness. By afternoon, green seas were boarding the ship’s bow area, hammering the hatches and pouring across the forward area.

Par for the course. The *Marine Electric* took it all with the serenity of a forty-year-old veteran on the sea.

Secure, the officers and engineers settled into their social shipboard routines. There was a howling gale outside, but inside, the ship served up a constant buffet of food and warm drink. Most ships have reputations as good feeders. Few ships had bad cooks, because they did not last. The word got out. No one wanted to put up with a bad cook, because food was central to the rhythms and morale of a vessel. Quinones’s skill in the kitchen was one reason many of the men were, if not portly, *ample*. Food was not just sustenance. In a routine that infrequently varied, on a sea that looked the same, often, one day to the next, food was the one changing item. In a closed, self-sealed environment, food was recreation.

The rest was routine, and often the routine was boring. Officers and men served two four-hour shifts a day. Even if they slept eight hours, they had six hours to knock about the ship. Some watched video. Some read. Some studied. Some talked.

Cusick listened to music, and his tastes ranged from Mozart to a recent discovery, Stan Rogers, Canadian folk singer. He and his wife, Bea, had wandered down to a café near their home in Scituate, Massachusetts, one evening and heard an amateur group sing Rogers's sea tales and ballads. Cusick liked the singer so much, he bought a cassette player for his cabin.

There was always time for talk.

Bill Scott, one of the men in the engine room, passed the time in part by shooting the breeze about motorcycles. He had a big BMW, a road bike. Others in the crew, Cusick among them, were partial to Harleys. As the gales howled outside, hours could pass as they debated the merits of the horizontal opposed cylinders of the German bike versus the big-bore Harleys.

Cusick spent a lot of time talking to Mike Price, the thirty-five-year-old engineer who had played cupid with Cadet George Wickboldt. Normally, engineers and deck officers kept to their own kind. But Price and Cusick had grown to be close friends. Price had shared his dreams with Cusick. At sea, Price was down below in the bowels of the ship, nursing the engine, tweaking it, keeping it going. It was a good job, but his wife, Marsha, had cried when he had left two weeks before, and he missed Heather, his eight-year-old daughter.

Like Cusick, Price was married with one daughter. It was a custom, a routine, for the men to talk about those dreams of Price's when the ship was under way. How it was going to be. What Cusick had done in his youth. What Price was doing in his. The older man listened to the younger man. Encouraged him. It was almost as if they were father and son.

"The thing is," Price would say, "I can make it on land . . . if George Dolak listens to me and we both sign on the *Marine Electric* for a while, one man on, one man off."

Price and Dolak envisioned their own foreign-car repair service. Jags, BMWs, Mercedes, and other high-ticket automobiles. Some marine engine repair work, too.

One man would go to sea for a few months while the other ran the shop. Then they would rotate. If they did that for a year, they could get the business going. Then both men could stay on land. He knew Dolak could get a berth on the ship, but Price had to talk him into it. Dolak was the night engineer on the dock at Brayton Point, tending to the ship's needs but never sailing her. It wouldn't be hard for him to get on the *Marine Electric* full time.

Clayt Babineau had lists. Price had plans. In his youth, Price's family had moved from urban New Jersey to a small town in Massachusetts, and he instantly cracked the code of the small-town ethic. In high school, he was not the largest man on the football team, but he was the best defensive lineman Coach James Stehlin had ever seen. Never, in his entire career, had he seen anyone like Price. Amiable, good-natured off the field and in the locker room, Price was fierce, focused, driven, not to be denied on the field.

In 1966, Price had a big plan. Win the state championship. They were in mid-season when one of the more popular kids on the team, a good player, was caught drinking.

The team council handled such things. Thumbs up or thumbs down. On the team or off.

~~“Cut the guy a break,” one of the players said. “It was one time. Give him another chance.”~~

“Hear, hear,” someone else said, and the guy was all but back, cleared by his peers.

“Yeah, let’s give him one more chance,” Price said. “And then when I start drinking and breathing training, give me one more chance. Give the next guy a chance, and the next.

“But that’s not what we said we were going to do,” Price continued. “We said we were going all the way, no compromises this year. If that’s what we’re going to do, this guy doesn’t get another chance.

The guy was off the team. Price, as co-captain, Number 62 on the defensive line, led the school to the Eastern Massachusetts Class B Championship that year.

Nothing, his coach said, kept Mike Price from his goals. Nothing.

Still, his plans did not keep him from worrying about the ship. He told his wife, Marsha, what was wrong with the *Marine Electric*, and now she worried too. Price looked at the old tub. He looked at Heather, his beautiful daughter. He looked hard at his plans. He looked at Marsha’s tears each time he left. He figured the odds.

Nothing was without risk. No pain, no gain. He stuck to his plans and kept pitching Dolak. The goal would come around, would see the vision.

No one turned Price away from a goal, but Marsha Price had come the closest. In high school, she was the pretty girl from one high school over. She had heard about Price the football star from friends, came to see him play, and met him a few days later in the parking lot of the A&P near the field. Price asked her out, and that was it.

Even the weeks at sea were easy for the couple at first. He would send flowers, write, and call whenever he was in port. Sometimes, he was away sixty or 120 days at a time, but it worked. When Marsha and Mike decided to have a child, though, Marsha had a request. Stay on land while I’m pregnant, and he did. He worked a land job for nine months, then shipped out the tenth month.

“I’m just not built for a land job,” he said. “My place is with the ocean—I’m not the type to sit behind a desk.”

When he was home, Heather and Mike were inseparable, and they shared the same spirit. When Mike would take his daughter to the highest point in a ski resort or the deepest water in a swimming pool, Marsha would bite her nails and shout warnings. But Heather? She loved it. Wanted to be at the highest point, loved swimming to the deepest water.

But even Price’s sense of adventure had its limits, and he was not certain the limits included the *Marine Electric*. He had signed on in November 1982 and told Marsha it would be great, that he would see them every two or three days. He had just gotten his first engineer’s license, and one day he hoped to make chief engineer.

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