

The Unsinkable Ship

—*Pamela Beth Mobon*

I.

SARAH AND I LAID outside on the concrete with our faces to the sun. It had been her idea that we should get a nice healthy glow, the same way that she believed in beauty rest. This was probably true in her case, though—to give her acne medication a chance to flow easily and tuck into the pockets of infection.

Today, she was wearing a new spaghetti-strap tank top, light blue with rainbow stripes across the chest. Out of the corner of her eye, she kept admiring herself in the reflection of her parent's metal trashcans. Most people knew that trashcans were insane for The Village but not Sarah's parents. Dozens of dumpsters were situated in various locations around the complex. Besides, neighboring gangs would come out after dark and demolish the playgrounds, banging anything they could dent. You stuck to plastic indoors and went without otherwise. Sarah's parents hadn't had

any nighttime visitors yet, though. They were still focused on the idea of making an apartment look and feel like a house.

"Hey, Sarah," I said as I jabbed her in the ribs.

"What?!" she answered, a bit exasperated.

"Can I come over Saturday? My sister's havin' a slumber party, and Megan N. is going to be there."

"Yuck. I can't stand her," Sarah said.

"Every time I see her, she acts like she's too good to even say 'hi,'" I said.

"I know, but I feel sorry for your sister. She snores really loud on the bus, and I heard she sleepwalks to night, and she --"

We chimed in together. "Has gas." I rolled over on my stomach and

NOTE: This story concerns the 1997-1998 school year when I was in the sixth grade at the inner-city Westport Middle School in Louisville, Kentucky. My father was working towards his Masters of Divinity at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, and our family along with the family of Sarah, my best friend/worst enemy, lived in The Village apartments, one step above the projects. The following is a condensed version of a much larger project.

laughed. Sarah started tickling me, which made it even worse. Before we knew it, we were in one big pile together, spinning and kicking and snickering massively. “BBBBuupppppp!!!” We were silent for a second listening and then resumed laughing even harder. One of us had farted. We frantically questioned each other but couldn’t decide who had done it. It was a nice moment when Sarah and I were united, even if against someone else. The great mystery was why Sarah and I were best friends when we couldn’t even stand each other.

After we had settled, I asked again. “Sarah, can I come over on Saturday?”

“I didn’t want to say anything to

you,” she said.

“What?”

“You know how you get.”

I sighed. “No. Just tell me what you’re pretending you don’t want to tell me.” I was smart enough by now to know that if Sarah could, she would try to make me jealous. I figured she was going to Katherine Mullholland’s for the weekend. Katherine was Sarah’s very best A.P. friend, a girl with short light hair and a toned tan. She liked dirt bikes and drawing. Currently, Sarah was learning anime from her and watched *Sailor Moon* at Katherine’s house. They were fast now, and Sarah was striving to be more like Katherine.

About a month ago, Andrew Rogers had asked Sarah if he could be her boyfriend. Andrew was short, round, and the epitome of middle school boy grossness. The fact that Sarah treated Andrew well at all was almost a sign of maturity in her shallow mind.

"Fine. If you really want to know," Sarah said. "A group of us from 6-1 are going out to see *Titanic*."

"Oh. Okay." My head turned away a little, and I readjusting the towel beneath me.

"You're not mad, are you? It's not many people. Just me, Heather, Bleniss, Stephanie C., her boyfriend, Ryan, Melissa, Sashlyn, her boyfriend, and Katherine. So it's all people you don't know. Just 6-1 people. I'd 've asked, but I didn't want you to be bored," she said.

"It's cool," I said, but I could feel the tension in my throat.

Then she threw the dagger. "Besides, your parents said you couldn't see it anyways."

—which was true. *Titanic*. Winner of the Best Picture Academy Award. Grossing over \$200 million at the box office from households around the nation, and exactly zero dollars and no cents from my household. My father had distantly heard one of the news shows mention two objectionable scenes, and even though he usually let PG-13 films slide, he wasn't budging this time. My parents said that I was a child, not allowed to see depictions of nudity and sex -- let alone the fact that I saw

it frequently as long as it was in a movie they were interested in. The time must have been very trying for my parents. I was a child -- but who didn't think she was a child. Sarah had lost her recollection of the word.

"Yeah. Yeah. I understand," I said, trying not to let one of Sarah's many sadistic games get to me.

Her eyes sparkled. "I forgot to tell you the best part, though. Kevin's coming!" She practically jumped out of her skin. "He's like the cutest. The most adorable. I think I like him better than Leonardo DiCaprio, and I'm being serious." She paused dramatically. "I could have sex with Kevin."

"What about Andrew?" I said.

The smile slid off Sarah's face. "Oh, yeah. He's coming, too." About a month ago, Andrew Rogers had asked Sarah if he could be her boyfriend. Andrew was short, round, and the epitome of middle school boy grossness. The fact that Sarah treated Andrew well at all was almost a sign of maturity in her shallow mind. Although Sarah had agreed to date Andrew, her real desire was Kevin -- an extremely handsome boy in the sixth grade Remedial track. She thought that by making Kevin jealous with Andrew, she could capture his attention.

My father was tired from working three part time jobs and going to graduate school. [...] Come supper time, he preferred silence. He pushed his glasses back onto the bridge of his nose and continued shoveling mashed potatoes and green beans into his mouth.

“I thought you said the movie was only for 6-1 people,” I continued.

“It is. Andrew’s from 6-1,” Sarah said.

“No, Kevin. Kevin is from 6-2.”

She paused again, trying to think out of her hole. For a long time, I had suspected that she was hiding me from her friends. Likely, she thought I was too dorky, and they would reject her because of me. “But Andrea is in 6-1. Since they’re step-brother and sister, everyone knows him.”

II.

The biggest movie of the year, and my best friend was going with a boy and the popular people over me. I

couldn’t go at all. After I left Sarah that afternoon, I cried into my pillow. Even if I could stop myself from crying in front of her, the tears would always come eventually. “Stupid pillow. White. Lumpy,” I said aloud and punched it. Sarah got everything that she wanted.

“Beth!” my mom called. “Supper time. Get your sister.”

My sister and I went from our bedroom into the living room corner where my parents had managed to shove the kitchen table. The cushions on the chairs were more tattered than ever. My mother had never had good dining room chairs. She kept these same chairs for several years, even after that time -- forcing them together with duct tape and covering

them over again to the best of her ability. The four of us sat down on the cushions.

“Let us pray,” my father said. “Dear Lord, please bless this food to the strength and nourishment of our bodies. In Jesus’ name, Amen.” Like my mother’s chairs, my father’s supper prayer hasn’t deviated in several years, only being patched and re-sown by illness, major holidays, and the rare praise.

“Hey, baby, pass the salt,” my mother said to my father across the table. The shaker silently passed from my father’s hand to my hand to my mother’s hand and back again. Cozy as could be.

“Daddy,” I said. A plan had been formulating in my head, and I was about to put it into action. “Do you think maybe I could go to a movie this weekend?”

“I think it depends,” he answered. My father was tired from working three part time jobs and going to graduate school. In the mornings, the apartment complex paid him to baby sit kids onto to the buses. In the afternoon, he worked as electrical maintenance for the seminary and then skipped over to the library to shelve books. Classes were scattered in between. Come supper time,

he preferred silence. He pushed his glasses back onto the bridge of his nose and continued shoveling mashed potatoes and green beans into his mouth.

“Well, you know *Titanic* is out now,” I said cautiously. “And the French teacher, Mrs. Young, says there is a lot of historical content in it.”

“I already said you and your sister couldn’t watch that movie. And don’t tell me a French teacher is qualified to assess historical content,” my father replied.

“I know you said that, but I thought maybe I could go with Mommy, and then I would have adult supervision.” Serve. I gnawed down on a fried chicken leg.

“What about me?” he said.

I looked at him puzzled. Why would he want to see *Titanic*?

“If you can’t watch a movie in front of me, you don’t need to watch it.”

“It’s not that—” I blushed, and he cut me off.

“I already said ‘no.’ If you wouldn’t want your father or Your Heavenly Father in the room, you’re not allowed to do it.” Spike.

I started to whine. “It’s just— I haven’t seen a movie in a really long time.”

“Like Anastasia that you and your sister weren’t watching this afternoon when I came in.” He paused. “You know, maybe I would like to watch a movie every once in a while!”

Everyone sat quietly.

After that, the only sound was the silverware on the kitchen plates. My tears dripped silently into the gravy below. This was not a good day. As my father finished, my mother got up to take his plate away.

“I’m sorry that I lost my temper,” my father said. “I’m really tired right now. I have a lot going on.” He rubbed his eyes and got out his handkerchief to clean his glasses. He held them up to the ceiling light and puffed air onto the lenses.

“If you really want to go to a movie, I’ll let you see the French film,” he said defeated. For weeks, I had begged my father to let me go on Mrs. Young’s field trip to the hole-in-the-wall theatre across town that showed only art movies and films with subtitles. The school sent out special forms well in advance since the theatre did not include ratings with any of its features. Mrs. Young

reassured the parents that it was only a kid’s film, but some parents—like my mine—were still stubborn. I had stopped hoping days ago and was dismally awaiting a half-day of study hall. My mind was already considering the possibility of talking my mom into letting me stay home sick and then writing a note. Now I was saved!

“Thank you, Daddy! Thank you!” I screamed.

He looked over wearily. “When I was in school, we never went to see movies.”

III.

This movie was all mine. As Spanish students, Sarah and her 6-1 friends weren’t allowed to come on the field trip. I would get to see a movie that Sarah would probably never see in her life.

My friend, Pamela, and I stepped off of the big yellow school bus and into freaky town. We gaped looking at the movie posters for the theatre’s coming attractions. Spiders crawled across a man’s face, dramatically back lighted. One poster was completely white with large implied blood splatters. Most were just weird, though. Colors, abstraction, meaningless fluff to our twelve-year-old minds.

We got in the back of the line going in. Mrs. Young tried to address the students, but we could barely see her, let alone hear her, at the front of the line. Finally, she yelled out, “Stay close and pay attention!” The line seemed to not be moving at all. After a time, Pamela and I seemed to merely sleep walk to the door. Suddenly, our eyes shot bolt awake.

“Is that ...” Pamela said, staring at the wall. The final poster was two black stick figures on a pink ground moving together.

“Oh, my!” I said.

Pamela laughed. “Why do you say that? My grandmother says that.”

“It’s just what I do. I dunno,” I said. I blushed but looked back at the poster again. How did it feel? Was it nice? Maybe that’s why my par-

ents didn’t want me to see *Titanic*. Too many questions, and they didn’t want me to go looking for answers. They needn’t have worried about me, though. They should have kept a better eye on my sister who expressed her desire and gave birth to my nephew, Sean, when she was eighteen.

“Fifty-two. Fifty-three,” Mrs. Young said tapping our heads. Pamela and I were the last in line and got seats in the very back. The theater had been an old Tivoli gone to pot and still bore evidence with its charming statues and little stage fallen into disrepair. The air seemed uncommonly subdued. Somehow, even more light creped out of the room, leaving us in total blackness.

Dreamy music seeped thru the speakers and without previews or ado, the movie began. Pamela and

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I could barely see the tiny subtitles from our seats. I leaned forward, straining to even see. The plot that I was vaguely able to piece together told the story of a young Parisian, Pierre, who had ran away from home. He wandered the city, crossing bridges and moving thru arches, in search of destiny. A typical quest narrative.

“This is boring,” Pamela said.

“Shhhh. I’m trying to concentrate,” I said. I’d never had to work this hard to watch a movie in my life. Pamela slumped back in her seat.

“At least we get to go to the mall for lunch,” Pamela said.

“At least we don’t have to listen to Mrs. E.’s lectures,” our friend Karen said from my other side. In the dark, I hadn’t even seen her. The students all called our Science teacher Mrs. E. because no one could pronounce or remember her last name. Karen had told me that her mother said Mrs. E.’s first name was Claudia. It sounded beautiful, and I wished I could just call her that. I’d never met a Claudia before. Claudia sounded like she could be a good companion for Pierre.

I looked up again. Pierre had hitched his way across France and was stand-

ing at the seaside. He looked out to his past and secret pain. Pierre was probably no older than Pamela and I. Looking down at his feet, oranges drifted on the waves. Pierre hadn’t eaten for several days, and he eyed the mysterious oranges in hunger. Desperately, Pierre tugged on his shirt and unbuttoned the front. He slipped his arms out of the long stripped sleeves to reveal a stained white tank top. His stomach rolled as he peeled the tank from his toned chest. Pamela sat up.

All around, people began to snicker as Pierre dropped his pants.

“What is he doing?” Pamela said. I sat quietly frozen in my position.

“I think he doesn’t want to get his pants wet while he’s gettin’ the oranges,” Karen said. Pierre dove into the sea stark naked and gathered the oranges. As he submerged, Pierre gasped and stepped out, displaying his entire being—frontally.

“*Abbbbbb*” Pamela, Karen, and I turned to see where the scream had come from. Mrs. Young stood in the doorway of the screening room stricken. The theatre manager held her hand, trying to prevent her from fainting.

“I thought this was a children’s film!

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What will I tell the parents?!" Mrs. Young yelled. Her true Midwestern upbringing showed as her accent faltered. All of us had quite clearly known she wasn't a true Frenchman. Her scarves and beads swayed in dismay.

"Madam—" the manager said. He was a short man and was getting shorter under her scowl.

"Mademoiselle," Mrs. Young corrected him. He was trying to be a polite Brooklyn boy. The whole world was French to her.

"Of course, mademoiselle, the the-

atre will be returning the money to the school." He did what he could, but she was absolutely inconsolable.

"You don't understand. You are very kind, but the children have been scarred."

Our eyes shot back to the screen. Several minutes had passed. We had been more interested in Mrs. Young's performance. Pierre was re-pantsed and now wearing a jersey boy hat. He walked down tiny alleys and emerged under a golden sun with his bag of oranges. Silently, he un-wrapped the bundle, peeled an orange, and ate it in the lush grass. The closing credits

rolled.

“What did that mean?” I asked no one in particular.

IV.

The weekend passed, and I enduring the slumber party in all of its scents. I reached into the freezer and pulled down a popsicle. The grape juice tasted good to my dry tongue. I turned left from the kitchen and walked thru my parents’ bedroom to the backdoor. I sat on the back step and thought about Sarah and her friends and Pierre. To the left, I looked across the yard at her backdoor, hoping she would come out. I at least wanted her to tell me about Titanic and maybe I would tell her about Pierre. It was really too much to hope for though that she would

just walk out like in the movies. I slurped the final liquid from the stick and went back into the kitchen to throw it away. Back out the door and across the yard, I knocked on Sarah’s backdoor.

“Hey,” I greeted her. “Do you wanna talk?”

“Sure. Just a minute,” Sarah said. She closed the door for a few minutes and returned wearing a pair of sunglasses. She joined me at our picnic table in the center of the yard.

“So, what’s up?” she said.

“Nothing much. How was *Titanic*?” I asked.

“It was good. If Kevin and I had been alone, I wouldn’t have watched

“They showed some guy’s penis or something,” she said matter of factly. “It’s no a big deal. Who hasn’t seen a penis before? Really, who hasn’t touched one?” Sarah went on and on, dreaming that everyone lived in her little world.

Finally, I just had to stop it. “I haven’t,” I said. She was quiet for a minute before chattering on.

“Well, duh. You don’t count.” Sarah said.

the movie. But I had to have an excuse to keep Andrew from kissing me. You'll understand one day. It's so difficult."

"I could imagine," I said, dryly.

Sarah took the sunglasses from her head and moved them to her hair. "Andrew's mom got these for me at the mall. I guess there are some good things about dating him." I can't see any, I thought in my head. Andrew wasn't worth a million pairs of sunglasses. I could never sell myself that way.

"*Titanic* is so romantic! And Leo is so hot! You would have died. I mean he's nothing next to Kevin, of course. Kevin sat on the other side of me next to Bleniss. I wished we could be alone the whole time," Sarah gushed. Her ignorance was too much sometimes. If Kevin had wanted her, he would have asked for her by now. Andrew could never buy her Kevin. There was nothing to be said to Sarah, though.

"Oh! I heard about your French movie. That is too funny with Mrs. Young," said Sarah.

"How did you know?" I asked.

"Stephanie told me. She heard it from Sashlyn who heard it from

Jessica who heard it from your friend Pamela. I guess she was pretty upset."

Sarah had ruined the only thing I had: my story. "Yeah, but did you hear why she was upset?"

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V.

And *Titanic* hadn't counted to my parents. For a few weeks, I had nothing to talk about at the lunch table, but it was alright. I grew up and went on. In a world where dollars counted so much, this movie meant nothing in their eyes. The sting was that it had meant something in my eyes. I never told Sarah and I've since thrown them out, but I created a series of stories about what I thought the movie might be like. I could never stop her long enough from

talking about Kevin to get her to tell me the actual plot.

The first time I saw the movie, I was almost shaking. It was exciting to finally be “in” on what everyone else knew. The water surrounding the elderly couple in bed, probably married forty years or more, and I cried, startled. The rest of the film was Hollywood fluff. I barely enjoyed it. Leonardo DiCaprio looked better in real life than his dirty immigrant clothes. I didn’t think Kate Winslet’s body was that different than mine. I could see that in the mirror any old time.

I never told my parents about the French movie, though. Some things were better left unsaid when they already didn’t understand. Pierre’s body would have been ten times more shocking to them than the subtlety of *Titanic*. That afternoon in the theatre, I began to understand them. Seeing Pierre made me think of things that I wanted deeply but had never imagined before. But maybe that was natural. That’s what I was supposed to think that time in life. It was a course that no one could stop. A ship that was unsinkable. 