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The Doorway to Eternity

The great scorching beast named July swallowed Annabelle Cross whole. It unhinged its jaws like a massive snake, slid its body in close for the strike, and finished its prey in a single gulp. In the belly of that monstrous beast, she was slowly, morbidly digested for all of eternity.

If I were to write a novel, it would begin like that. Those three sentences tell the entire story. The story of life on a boat. The story of life on the water. The story of life always reaching for a fleeting horizon.

The truth is that I've come to hate life on the ocean. I've never made a statement as honest as that. I loved it at first. When my father told me I would miss school to sail across the world, he was giving me exactly what I'd always dreamed. I was expecting to experience different cultures across each continent we briefly visited before moving on. A part of me also expected to see animals I've only known about from television or *National Geographic*. I suppose my expectations were much too high because the scenery never seems to change. It's always the same sky looming over the same water. It's desolate and certainly mind-numbingly boring.

I'm not saying that adventure was impossible to find in the middle of the Atlantic. It was a series of events beginning on a blistering July afternoon that gave me exactly what I'd searched for since we'd left port. The simple truth is what happened dramatically altered the way I view the world. Although I've traveled far in the

last three years, probably more than any thirteen-year-old you might know, it's apparently a world I know absolutely nothing about.

Before our sailboat came in contact with the doorway of light, I thought that my dad, brother, Brad, and I had a pretty good handle on things coming our way. I guess we live by the adage of life handing you lemons, and you make lemonade and all that jazz. Now I realize how life has a funny way of delivering a swift kick to the brain when you're not even paying attention.

What usually happened in front of the boat was of little concern to me because my eyes were typically focused on a book. My thoughts were always a million miles away from my life on the water. After spending all this time traveling the seemingly same stretch of ocean, anyone would desire a mental break for a short while. However, today of all days, my attention was right where it should be.

The light was a hard thing to miss. It appeared from nowhere and hovered on the Atlantic's surface like some sort of beautiful doorway to Heaven. Tangled streams of multi-colored light moved across the opening in a strange, hypnotic dance that pulsed every few seconds like a heartbeat. Ribbons of light stretched toward us like eagerly reaching hands.

I shifted my focus from the light and watched my father as he battled for control of the boat. Beads of sweat trickled down his reddened face. He caught me watching him and shouted something. His voice was drowned out by the light's whirring noise that sounded like helicopter blades chopping at the air.

It was either common sense or fear that made me stand from the bench, find balance, and carefully run toward the stern to my father's side.

“Why can’t we turn away from it?” Brad asked.

“I’ve been fighting it. The sails are catching the wind just right, and I’ve been trying to steer around it, but nothing is working. Whatever this thing is, it seems to be pulling us in. You two hang onto something,” my father said.

He continued to fight the ship’s wheel, but his efforts couldn’t match the hold the light had on us. When the bow hit the light, it released a shower of sparks and swirls of streaming light that raced across the deck and wrapped itself around every surface of our boat.

A moment later, my father gave up the fight. He grabbed us and pressed us hard to the deck. His body protectively covered us from whatever might happen as the light surrounded the boat. My father’s embrace was suffocating, as I felt my ribs compress, and the breath pushed from my lungs.

I was amazed that I didn’t feel an electric shock as the light brushed my skin. Instead, I felt a tingle that seemed no more dangerous than the pleasant touch of the sun. Strangely, the sensation of the light was more calming than terrifying.

I opened my eyes and looked at the bow. I then looked at the stern and realized that the web of light was now behind us. Our boat easily passed through one side to the other. Whatever strange phenomenon that created the storm of flickering lights appeared completely harmless.

“That was unbelievable. I thought for sure the thing was going to electrocute us,” my father said. He released us, and we all stood.

It was the moment when I noticed that our surroundings were different. A heavy gray fog stretched across the ocean. It wasn’t only the fog that seemed to change our surroundings. Even the water we drifted was

somehow different, blacker, and colder. I couldn't be sure. We watched the shifting fog with interest. Before the light appeared, we had smooth sailing as far as the eye could see. Now we were lucky enough to see fifty feet in any direction

"Where did this fog come from?" I asked.

"It wasn't there a minute ago," Brad said. He then quickly headed to the starboard side to vomit. He firmly held the railing and leaned dangerously over the side as he took care of business. Although he frequently suffers from motion sickness, I was sure that this time, it was the experience with the light which had rattled his nerves.

"What do you make of it, Dad?" I said in a nervous whisper.

"I'm not sure. I've never seen heavy fog roll in this fast. There must be a strong storm ahead of us. I want both of you to put on life jackets and stay close to me."

Although I'm a powerful swimmer and I have no trouble keeping afloat beside the boat when Brad and I are allowed to go into the water, I did as he said. I know the power behind storms on the ocean. Storms out here can be an unforgiving force to battle.

I held out a life jacket for my father.

He waved his hand and said, "I won't need it, Annabelle. Have a seat right here."

"Take it, Dad. We're all going to wear one. What would happen to Brad and me if the boom knocks you on the head and you fall into the water and drown? What would we do?" I said sternly.

He smiled, took the life jacket, and said, "You sounded like your mother just now. You're right. I guess my stupid brain skipped a sensible gear."

“Sometimes it’s the children who are smarter than the parents,” Brad said, and then he slipped on a puddle and went down on his rear with a yelp.

“Well, that counts you out,” I said after I finally quit laughing.

“Shut up, Annabelle!” he said while massaging his butt.

“Quiet you two,” my father said, as he studied the fog.

“What is it? What do you see?” I said. I curiously watched beside him.

“I’m not completely sure. I thought I saw something moving in the fog.”

I wasn’t thrilled to hear that. I may hate life on the water, but I greatly enjoy reading tales of the sea. Nothing gets my attention more than books filled with tragedy on the high seas. Now all of those fictional monsters were coming alive in my mind.

As we watched the shifting fog, a thunderous boom viciously rattled me down to my sneakers. There was an immediate flash of fire in the distance. A moment later, something with incredible velocity splashed into the water ten yards from the boat.

“What was that, Dad?” I said.

“It almost sounded like a—”

I thought my father was going to say: *cannon*, but his voice cut off because another explosion made the entire boat tremble. A second later, something collided with the bow of our boat. Whatever the object was, it made our boat deeply groan from the impact. The perfectly crafted wood gave little resistance to the hit.

The boat shifted hard, and Brad and I nearly toppled over the railing. We managed to grab each other and find balance before taking a swim.

“What’s happening? What hit us?” Brad said as he released me. He moved to the center of the boat and took a firm hold on the mast.

“Are we sinking, Dad?” I asked.

I now had a terrible thought that the three of us would be floating in the middle of the ocean without a rescue ship in sight.

“Oh, my God. Another ship is attacking us,” my father said. He quickly moved to the emergency kit hidden beneath the stern bench seat.

He removed the flare gun, inserted a silver cartridge, and then thrust his arm in the air and fired. A flaming ball cut through the fog and raced skyward. There was a small pop as the parachute was released. A shifting red glow fell across us as the light signaled to anyone nearby that we were here and in serious trouble.

“There are children on this boat! Hold your fire!” my father shouted as he waved his arms.

Then I saw it. We all saw it. Something massive slipped from the fog. It *was* another ship, but certainly not the type of ship I was used to seeing. I blinked a few times because I was sure the fog was playing tricks on my eyes.

As the ship moved closer, I realized that there was no trick about it. The ship was greenish colored and with tattered sails. Strangely enough, it resembled a pirate ship, as if it had slipped right out of the eighteenth century and into modern times.

I know, a pirate ship, it sounds ridiculous, but that’s what I saw.

There was another flash followed by a roaring explosion. This time the force of the blast knocked me off my feet, and I painfully slammed on my backside.

The port side of our boat was violently hit again. The boat bucked hard to the starboard side. Our boat then

tilted to one side as it took on water. We tried to hold onto something, but as the boat began rolling, we had no choice except to slip from the deck and into the cold Atlantic water.

My father continued to plead to the unseen men to hold their fire, even as water rushed into his mouth.

I swam toward Brad. His arms were flailing as he desperately searched for a hold of something. His brown eyes were wide as his focus switched from the sinking boat to my father and then to me. I got in close and managed to get a grip on his lifejacket.

“Stop thrashing and hold onto me,” I told him.

Our boat continued to roll as water completely flooded the ruptured hull. The mast, riggings, and sail crashed around us in a tangled mess. A dozen different things that weren't secured flew at us. I never saw what it was, but something heavy catapulted from the deck of the boat like a hurled anvil and struck my forehead. The force of the blow shot a roaring pain across my head, forced the light from my eyes, and pushed me toward the grasping hands of unconsciousness.

