

O CAPTAIN MY CAPTAIN

by Chris Van Strander

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CHARACTERS

ESTHER Around 50

HOWARD Around 50

BRUCE Early 20s

SETTING

A lifeboat in the middle of the ocean.

(A lifeboat in the middle of the ocean. ESTHER, HOWARD, BRUCE.)

BRUCE

(sobs uncontrollably)

HOWARD

“Cruise of a lifetime” *my ASS!*

ESTHER

It’s all right now. The tempest has passed. Fate’s seen fit to spare us.

HOWARD

(scans water, shouts) ANYBODY OUT THEEEERE?! ANYONE AT ALLLLLL?!

ESTHER

(shakes head sadly) *Now would I give a thousand furlongs of sea for an acre of barren ground.*

BRUCE

This’s the worst Spring Break ever!

ESTHER

Everyone lie down. We have to keep all our weight in the center, stay balanced, fight seasickness.

HOWARD

I like bein’ seasick. Reminds me I’m still alive.

ESTHER

Not for long. You don’t control it, you start throwing up and throwing up ‘til eventually you’re throwing up your own organs.

BRUCE

Oh god... (dissolves into sobs)

ESTHER

It’ll be dark soon; we have to keep watch. (to HOWARD) We’ll take shifts—you first.

HOWARD

Who’m I, your ex-husband? Don’t order me, lady.

BRUCE

What’re we watching for?

ESTHER

Ships, planes... Sharks. Sea snakes. Portuguese Men of War.

BRUCE

Oh god... (dissolves into sobs)

ESTHER

Don't fret, young one. We're going to make it. Remember the *Bounty*? Captain Bligh? Lived for weeks in a lifeboat with nothing but a sextant and his wits.

HOWARD

We ain't got no sextant here, woman.

ESTHER

Well what do we have?

(HOWARD and ESTHER search the boat, huddle; HOWARD holds a small object wrapped in sailcloth.)

ESTHER

Compass? Flares?

HOWARD

(unwraps it) Sunblock.

ESTHER

This is sailcloth; we'll make a signal flag. We have to stay as close to the wreck as possible. So our rescuers can locate us.

HOWARD

And what do we do for food?

ESTHER

Fish.

HOWARD

With the sunblock?

ESTHER

(beat) We can live off our own fat.

HOWARD

Come again?

ESTHER

Human body's a glorious creation, it can go weeks without food. One pound of your fat's worth four Thanksgiving dinners.

HOWARD

That's your rescue plan? Rig some cockamamie rag and live off our own fat? Hell with this—I'm takin' command. (to BRUCE) Look alive, junior: we're headin' for shore.

ESTHER

We're three hundred miles from shore!

HOWARD

See those clouds? The puffy ones?

BRUCE

The cumulonimbus?

HOWARD

They only ever form over land. We're right by an island, I know it. Cabo San somethingorother. Ten miles, tops. We'll rig a sail, follow those clouds. (to BRUCE) Start pullin' up planks, troop, we need a mast.

ESTHER

(to BRUCE) Don't! (to HOWARD) That is the single most half-cocked strategy I've ever heard. These are shark-infested waters, you can't go ripping apart our craft! (to BRUCE) Signal flag. Now.

HOWARD

Who died and made you captain?

ESTHER

The captain! I was crew! I have rank!

HOWARD

You were crew?

ESTHER

I was the nutritionist. And as the highest-ranking member present, I am officially sanctioned by the bylaws of American Cruise Lines to take charge of this vessel.

HOWARD

Yeah? Show me. These so-called bylaws.

ESTHER

I don't have them *on* me...

HOWARD

Convenient.

BRUCE

She's right. We need a captain.

HOWARD

Then it's me. I got naval experience too, ya know—I pilot the Staten Island Ferry!

ESTHER

We are staying here!

HOWARD

Sailing!

(Impasse.)

ESTHER

Draw straws. Let the universe decide.

HOWARD

We ain't got straws, cupcake, we ain't even got paddles.

BRUCE

We'll vote. That's the only fair way.

ESTHER

(beat) I'll accept it.

HOWARD

Me too. (hand up) I vote for me.

ESTHER

(hand up) I for me.

(They turn to BRUCE.)

BRUCE

(turns to HOWARD; wavering) Uh... (turns to ESTHER; wavering) Uh... (to both) I'll give you each two minutes.

ESTHER

Well, here at American Cruise Lines we have a saying: *Welcome to American: what can we do for you now?*

HOWARD

Well first I think we should all get on our knees and offer a prayer to Our Lord Jesus Christ to deliver us—

BRUCE

Stop.

(They stop.)

BRUCE

(checks watch; to ESTHER) You. Go.

ESTHER

Well, before I begin, let me first extend a gracious thank you for giving me this forum to present my arguments.

HOWARD

Clock's tickin', toots.

ESTHER

Here at American Cruise Lines we have a saying: *Welcome to American: what can we do for you now?*

BRUCE

I know, it was on the sheets.

ESTHER

Well to me that's not just empty stitching. It's the credo I breathe by, every moment of my life. And what I want to do for you now, David... may I call you David?

BRUCE

Sure, but my name's Bruce.

ESTHER

...is save your life. Of the three candidates present, I am by far best equipped and most qualified to captain this vessel. My experience speaks directly to this challenge: I have been a full-time staff member in unblemished standing for a three-star-rated cruise line for six years. Unlike him. Only I have undergone a rigorous half-day open-ocean emergency preparedness course. Not him. And, I am a fully-licensed nutritionist to boot! Now at first glance, no, that might not seem a relevant aptitude, but I ask you—consider this: what's my vocation? Helping people attain their highest level of health and well-being. And that, Bruce, is what I vow to do for you if you entrust me with the privilege of this captaincy. You're an intelligent young man.

BRUCE

I am?

ESTHER

When you boarded the ship, did you check for rivets falling out of the side? Go up to the bridge, demand typhoon reports? Don't answer. Of course you didn't. You placed your trust in the captain and his crew, didn't you? Don't answer. Of course you did. So place in me now the faith our beloved captain—Buddha rest his soul—did when he made me a member of his crew. That crew who led you through so many ports of call—

HOWARD

Straight into a hurricane...

ESTHER

Storm watch was not my department! (beat) And if you have lost faith in American, let me restore it. 'Cause I believe in this cruise line. I believe it can still deliver great things. This is a moment of immense challenge, Bruce, but also immense opportunity. You have the power to bring this boat together!

BRUCE

(watch) Time's up.

ESTHER

Bruce: let me be your flotation device.

HOWARD

Time's up, ballcracker!

ESTHER

Thank you for your time. *Namaste.*

BRUCE

(checks watch; to HOWARD) Two minutes. Go.

HOWARD

(shaking his hand) Bruce—Howard. Good to know ya. Four words: float, DIE. Sail, LIVE.

(Long pause.)

BRUCE

That's it?

HOWARD

Yep.

BRUCE

You've got lots of time.

HOWARD

All this highfalutin elitist noise ya just heard from nut-buster here? Bylaws, credos? Won't hear none a' that from me. See, I'm a straight shooter. 'Cause really it just comes down to common sense. Float here, we die. Sail to land, we live. You wanna live, don'tcha Bruce?

BRUCE

Of course.

HOWARD

Me too! See? I'm just like you. Hard-working, red-blooded, God-fearing guy. I don't sail around givin' rich people coffee enemas.

ESTHER

I don't do that.

HOWARD

I just wanna get *Home*. Same as you. I'll getcha there, Brucie. Back to your *Family*. Your *Friends*. Got a girlfriend?

BRUCE

(scoffs) What do I look like?

HOWARD

What's her name, sailor?

BRUCE

Lacey.

HOWARD

Can'tcha just picture her, waiting to plant a sloppy French kiss on ya when that great big red Air Force chopper drops ya off? You go back to your dorm, make love like two good redblooded American kids ... you wanna make love to your gal again, don'tcha Bruce?

ESTHER

Oh for the love of god...

BRUCE

Yessir!

HOWARD

Now picture Lacey again. In black. Standin' over your closed coffin with her new Mexican boyfriend. Why closed? 'Cause sea crabs ate half your face off while you floated around with ball-breaker here, waitin' for a rescue THAT NEVER CAME! Scary picture, eh Bruce?

BRUCE

Yessir.

HOWARD

Join me, son. We'll rig that mast and steer this ship together. Let the quitter here live off her own fat. You and me: we'll be chowing down tuna and jellyfish.

ESTHER

Jellyfish are poisonous, nimrod.

HOWARD

See?! More fearmongering! Well I say enough! This is not the day for Fear. This is not the hour for Panic. We hafta sail, Bruce. Towards Land! Towards Life! Towards—

BRUCE

Time's up.

HOWARD

God bless you, son.

(Long pause; they look at BRUCE.)

ESTHER

Well?

**To read the rest of this play, please contact me at:
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