

A Night On The Caspian

Michael Grimberg

The ship is a 250 freighter sailing from Krasnovodsk to Volgograd with a load of cotton. It is past midnight and the captain and two of his mates are at the helm because of a stormy sea. Normally such a modern ship could be navigated by one hand on any other sea or even a river. But this is the Caspian and it holds many secrets. Like thousands of ships that have perished from its waters over the centuries. Though it is blustery the crew enjoys good visibility due to light snow scattering the light of a waning moon. The first mate has made radio contact with another Russian freighter sailing in the same direction. They've agreed to escort one another. The other ship is six kilometres starboard so they slow their engines that they might catch up. From the other radio reports they have been informed that the storm is only grazing them as it is centered some three hundred kilometres to the northeast over open water. They are at this time still shielded from the brunt of the waves by the Fort Shevchenko peninsula that juts out between them and the brunt of the storm. In under an hour they will be clear of its protective influence so the crew rests their nerves for a while.

The Captain pokes into the galley from which he retrieves a pair of coffee cups. He manages the short stair at the side of the control room all right but the next few steps are even too much for his experienced sea legs. Under the dim lights and swaying floor he spills at least half of each cup. The First Mate jokes, "Of all people you wouldn't think a captain would have such wobbly legs." The other mate smiles as he steadies himself at the wheel while the ship is hit with a rapid succession of big waves. The Captain passes the mates their cups and turns back to the kitchen to get his own. Upon returning he takes the helm. The Second Mate scans the sea with binoculars for any other ships in the vicinity. The distant waves look like a white sheet flapping on a clothes line at dusk.

For half an hour they wait anxiously until they start experiencing big ocean like waves. These aren't all that uncommon as the Caspian is the world's largest inland body of water. Nearly five times the size of North America's Lake Superior, the Caspian is the collision ground of three great climactic regions. To the north is the cold of European Russia and Siberia. To the southwest are the scorched deserts of the Middle East and far to the southeast is the turbulent monsoon belt of India. There is no such thing as a bad captain on this sea, there are only good captains and dead ones. This captain, Petrenko by name, though only 45 is experienced as few others. As a young man he served in the Russian Pacific fleet and once was a member of an expeditionary party to Antarctica. His mates are always intrigued by stories of the southern seas but it seems like there are more about the Caspian.

Out on the deck a tarp has become unlashd and is being torn at by the wind. The Second Mate volunteers to secure it. He puts on a heavy coat and gloves before he

ties a rope around his waist. When he opens the door of the cabin he is instantly blasted by cold air. Outside he descends some iced over stairs to the long flat deck where he promptly ties the end of the rope to a railing. Carefully he inches along the side of the ship where he is continually bashed by the partially frozen spray from the sea impacting the hull. His head is bowed over towards the holds but his body is turned towards the sea. Slowly he moves hand over hand on the railing and boot over boot on the icy deck. When he gets to the tarps he lunges at it. He works diligently to fasten it. This is done in short succession and when he has started back along the rail the ship is hit with an intense swell. He grasps the rail for dear life until the ship levels out a bit. Then he continues along the eerily moonlight emblazoned deck. The other two watch attentively from the bridge window as he reaches the aft part of the vessel. This looks very dangerous to them as the swell shifted a pile of ice accumulation into his path. Their fears are realised when the mate loses his footing as the ship is jarred again but luckily he keeps his hold on the railing. He looks very awkward trying to regain himself but does get back up the stairs without further incident.

Again the wind blasts the control room when the door is opened. Snowflakes shower the instruments as though as though waiting outside just for an opportunity to invade some warmer clime. It takes two attempts for the Second Mate to force the door shut against the wind. The Captain is uneasy with himself, " I shouldn't have let you go out there. I'd rather have wet cargo than lose a man." "It isn't so bad out there. I wouldn't have went if it was." The First Mate is a little soberer, "You went alright, almost over the side." There is a little stress starting show, especially in the First Mate.

Outside there is no sign of the other ship. The First Mate regains radio contact with them. The hiss of the static nearly makes the words incomprehensible. He has to ask them to repeat. On the second try it becomes evident the other radio operator is speaking in broken Russian. The First Mate looks at the Captain who answers his unspoken query with an aged confidence. "Kazakhs". The First Mate makes a brief conversation with them then turns down the radio volume. " They are about five kilometres to port and three behind." The Second Mate surveys the horizon through a rearward facing window. He can just barely see their lights as they bob up down along the waves. The Captain powers down the engine so the other ship can catch up . He is worried about the ship floundering under the lack of power so he doesn't back off as much as another captain might.

Outside the sea has become more energetic. The waves are striking the starboard side diagonally with regular, threatening, rhythm. Usually lakes and inland seas like Azov only get bad chop during storms but tonight the immense Caspian is behaving much like the fierce southern ocean. Deep troughs slowly swallow then heave the freighter upwards. It doesn't do much for the crews' nerves and it seems like they're not moving forward at all. Only the groans of bulkheads reminds them the engine's strains.

A crewman appears from below deck. He is not on shift for another six hours and was

awaked by the change in engine R.P.M. He looks groggy like a bear roused from hibernation. The Second Mate explains the situation then he lumbers back down below. The First Mate wonders how anybody could have actually slept on a night like this.

Long rollers turn into black chop for a while as the ship gets into some shallower water. This kind of a abuse will snap rivets and buckle weaker sections of the hull if it continues for any length of time. These smaller and more numerous waves are dangerous in that their energy dissipates against the ship. Occasionally a wave will break square to the hull. This sounds a short ring right through the metal all the way up to the control room.

The First Mate is back on the radio to the other ship. They are maintaining a parallel course at about a kilometres distance. He asks for a confirmation of their estimate of time to port. Again the static makes communication difficult. They have to repeat themselves several times. The First Mate and the distrot ghost on the other side haggle over the number. He informs the Captain that at their present speed of 12 knots they will reach the safety of the Volga River Delta in another eight hours, provided that they stay on course. The estimate behoves the Second Mate into remarking that eight hours in storm is six days on a regular sail.

The Captain tries to make time go by faster by initiating a conversation. "I think this will be our last voyage on the sea this year." The Second Mate is curious to find out why as he is new to these waters. "When does the ice pack begin to form?" "Not until mid or late December.", answers the Captain. "It's only the end of October, I don't see why we wouldn't be making a few more trips." "The Volga ices up sooner than the sea." "Will we not be hauling cargoes in the south of the Caspian this winter?" "No, I don't think so. When we get back I assume we'll be crossing the Don Canal." "To the Black Sea?", the Second Mate seems excited as he is from the Ukraine. "Isn't there enough dry cargos in the south to keep us going through the winter?" The Captain knows the area too well, "A small cotton crop and a glut of salt in the north. I'd bet we'll be hauling grain from Rostov out to the Mediterranean." This gets the First Mates' attention, "Warmth at last!" The Second Mate points out another possibility. "I could see us being refitted to haul oil or gas." The Captain scoffs at the suggestion " There's lots of tankers around and now that they have the pipelines running through Turkey and Armenia...."

The southern two thirds of the Caspian remains open to shipping year round but the majority of the cargos are raw materials from the south bounds for industries along the Volga. There is a comparable volume of exchange between the ports of the south for the transportation authority to justify operating so many vessels. The crews of older, non-essential ships are usually sent home to drink vodka but a newer ship like theirs' will work the year round somewhere else.

This is probably a good thing for this crew as the Caspian is a dangerous place in winter. To bide the time the captain decides to tell a story about a near tragic incident

one of friends once had. He had been the first mate on a tanker loading oil from an offshore platform near Baku. With little warning a storm blew in from Persia forcing them to uncouple and go a ways out to sea so they wouldn't endanger the platform or some of the many shallow water oil rigs in the area. A few kilometres from the oil field their ship lost power and was being lashed about by great waves. The ship floundered as it took on water having one of its holds bashed open by a rogue wave. They dropped anchor but it was just out of reach of the bottom. The ship began drifting back towards the oil field. To complicate things the nearest tug was a half an hour away.

This was right after the Chernobyl disaster so it happened that the local party official had to be summoned. The Union would not have looked too kindly on another accident of any kind so his thinking was more about that than the safety of a ship or crew. To have the ship impact an oil rig and have a giant oil spill was unthinkable. So very callously it was decided that two MiG Fighter Aircraft were to be sent from the base at Yerevan to sink the ship if it got within 500 metres of a platform.

The mates listened intently less wary of their own ship's troubles. They urge him to continue which he does after a long, cold look out over the sea. He said that they'd have gone to life boats immediately if not for the roughness of the water and the fact that the lifeboat was nothing more than a dingy. The usually slacker bunch poured over the engines with the intensity of demons hunting for souls. The Captain alone remained above deck to monitor the radio and watch for the airplanes' arrival. Within a few minutes the bloodthirsty MiG pilots were circling the ship. They had covered 500 kilometres in 15 minutes. This horrified the captain and he urgently called shore for a helicopter rescue. They stated that everything in the vicinity had been grounded, except the fighter airplanes that can fly in anything, and recommended that they go to the lifeboats.

This left the Captain with a terrible dilemma, go to the dingy and drown, or stay on the ship and be blown up. With fear as his motivating factor the Captain demanded that his crew restore the engines. After the first minute of the crew not having done so he went on the intercom describing the potent looking missiles slung under the fuselages of the fighters. After a few more minutes he came on yelling about how the fighters were doing mock bombing runs. This was of course a lie as no good Russian would blow up another Russian until they actually strayed into the 500 metre zone. Orders are orders. And so it was with him and his crew as suddenly they got some power back. It was just enough to keep them put. In utter relief he called shore stating their new situation and learned that a tug was on its way. Frighteningly the MiGs continued to circle until the tug's line was secured and before parting they rattled the ship with a full afterburner pass.

"I'd have taken my chances in the lifeboat.", says the Second Mate. The First Mate comments, "I can't believe they would be so callous." The Captain on the other hand tends to romanticise things. "This sea is like a ghost. It has an unseen power and if you dare challenge or disturb it, that will surely be your end.", he says as he examines

the dark horizon with a pair of binoculars. The Second Mate looks at him curiously. "You think that they sent the fighters so as not to upset the 'spirit' of the sea?" "Maybe." The First Mate looks agitated. "Common sense?... They haven't a grain of common sense." The Second Mate is more logical. "What else could they have done?" "Well, for one thing they could have shown a little bit of restraint." "And have a platform torn asunder pouring thousands of barrels of oil into the sea every day as long as the formation has pressure to drive it up?" "Who says the ship would have even come close?" "I guess that's a chance they weren't willing to take. I'm sure they'd have waited until the crew had gotten off of the ship." "I tell you I sure wouldn't have wanted to be in their shoes."

The Captain brings them both to order by assigning them each a task. The First mate radios the other ship to see if there is any change in their situation or if there is anything they should know about. The Second Mate goes under for some more coffee. He returns with some cups, and just as the Captain before him, briefly loses his sea legs and spills coffee all over the place. He makes a second trip for his own and when he passes the First Mate secretly passes him a black market wake up pill. Though the mates seem a bit opposite they are both a generation apart the Captain.

With the passing of the hours the storm intensity abates. The snow has ceased to fall which improves visibility the moon now spreading its full light upon the turmoiled sea. They still feel apprehension over the storm but there is a comfort in knowing that they aren't that far off from safety.

Another hour goes by as they talk of things. A favourite topic is the geography of the area. The nearby Caucasus Mountains have had a small earthquake and threat of a volcanic eruption. Some scientists had discovered yet more faults that go under the Caspian Sea. Some even to the mantle itself. The First Mate tells of a story heard about some Sturgeon fishermen in the delta hauling up 1000 kilo specimen for its prize of caviar and having the normally docile fish go berserk injuring several men and escaping back into the water. They speculate that it went mad with the gas that lies under the sea.

Being sailors they do skirt the issue of womanhood and do so in unrepeatable manners. Fitting that the sea should go black with the loss of the moon. Slowly they go on as they slip into a netherworld of thoughts and words and tales that maintain them through the long hours.

As has happened eight or ten times one of the mates returns from below with coffee. They have consumed four pots and are half zombies by now. They have been up all night and all of the previous day just as the captain and mates of the accompanying ship have been. They behave strangely, as though they were suspended on the end of some great rope. One of them speaks and then it takes a long while for another to respond like pieces of bobbing driftwood disappearing from one another. Towards the first hint of daylight they cease talking all together. They just stare out at the choppy sea as it gradually becomes more luminous. The engine's tone changes pitch fooling

their ears thinking they've slowed or sped up. Their eyes become heavy and standing is more than a chore. The night somehow has telescoped itself into an eternity.

The Second Mate's chin crashes his chest. He won't be able to hold on much longer. He glances at the dim light reflecting off of the clock. Their relief won't be on for another hour. He wagers to himself the Captain will stay up all the way to the Volga. Stubborn Captain. He stands like an angry zombie at the wheel. He doesn't move. It looks like he is a figure poured out of concrete. It looks like he isn't even breathing. Maybe he's asleep with his eyes open the mate thinks. After all, he's done that himself before. He looks back over the sea. It's short rollers are now cresting white with the approach of dawn.

Now the Second Mate is feeling true misery. His wake up pills have worn off and his stomach feels like a rock in the middle of his gut. It's trying to pull him down to the floor. He wonders if that is the feeling drug addicts get when they come off. He begins to have resentful thoughts. Why is he even up? The ship only needs two people to run. He could have been sleeping right now. Instead he's trapped there because of the Captain's paranoia. This is stupid he thinks. He should ask if he can leave. He is definitely going to pass out before he is relieved. But then his thoughts suddenly change to thinking that he can hold on for another hour. He tries to enliven himself by pacing around a bit. He looks down at some charts on a metal counter. They seem to grab his eyes and try to pull them down. He head juts back up and he shuffles back to his post.

The First Mate is sitting down by the radio. He is awake but just staring into space like the Captain is. The Second Mate is bothered that he should be so calm. It is dragging his spirit down. He looks over at what the other ship is doing. Previously it paralleled them but now it leads them by a good 400 metres. The lights of their stern briefly invigorate him before his gaze slides back out to the dull blue sea.

Is his mind playing tricks on him? He thinks he heard or felt something. He looks over at the First Mate and the Captain but they are mannequins in a store window. Then he hears it again. A dull, barely audible rumble. He thinks he must be hallucinating. He feels dizzy when he looks back out to sea. He stares ahead for a while then pans from horizon to horizon. It's just the same old stormy waves under the bleak sky. Then for some unknown reason he looks back at one spot in front of the other ship. He thinks this act is very strange. "Why am I looking at this spot?" He stares for a few seconds. It looks really white and there are no waves there. He shakes his head. He thinks he must be seeing things and looks away for a while. He returns his attention to the spot which is now about a hundred metres ahead of the other ship. It's a huge circle a few hundred metres across and he didn't know any better he'd say the sea was boiling. He can see a vapour coming off of the phenomenon as it is swiftly carried off by the wind. He thinks to himself that he has slipped into madness. "How can the sea boil?"

He can't help it but he must bring his madness to the attention of the others. He startles them, "What the hell is that!?" He vehemently points in front of the other ship.

Both the Captain and First Mate follow the Second Mate's sight line to the white disruption in the sea. For half a second they both stare incredulously at it. The Captain explodes. "GAS!! GAS!! Quick get on the radio tell them to steer away!" The First Mate scrambles to grasp the receiver. He screams, "GAS!! Turn! Turn! Quick turn!" They can hear something of a transmission in return. It is some yelling and then static.

Then the Captain suddenly cranks their ship's wheel veering their ship away from the of the pool of rising gas. The other ship starts a turn but is now at the edge of the whiteness. A second later its bow starts to lose buoyancy. The Captain and his mates watch in horror as the other ship nose dives straight down into the sea. If anyone has ever seen the edge of the world they have seen it now. The sea has reneged its pact with humanity, that things would float.

The three strain their eyes as their ship avoids the whiteness that has engulfed the other ship. They can't believe what has just happened. They are all at a loss of thoughts. There is only stricken silence. It is broken horribly by the Captain yelling at the Second Mate. "Get out on deck and throw out a buoy!" He turns to the First Mate. "Radio Fort Shevchenko tell them what has happened, get a fix on this position!" He then frantically searches the sea for any other columns of rising gas with his binoculars. The First Mate isn't even one sentence into his communication when the Captain yells at him to get below deck and wake the rest of the crew.

It has only taken the Second Mate one breath to return to the control room. The Captain throws a set of binoculars into his chest and tells him to get up onto the tower above the control room. The Second Mate just about collides with the First as he scrambles back in from below. "Are we circling back?" The Captain does not hold back his anger. "Are you stupid?!" "What about survivors?" "There are no survivors." "How can you be sure?" "Did you not see it descend like it were falling from the sky to the ground?" The First Mate slumps at the realisation as the Second hurries out the door. He scurries up the heavily iced ladder to the tower.

The air is brisk and thick with the smell of wrotten eggs. He looks back through the hazy light at the retreating white spot. It looks so innocuous. He thinks of his actions of the last few minutes and turns to face the sea to the front of the ship. The Caspian has revealed itself to him.