

The Ghost Ship



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A chamber play in seven scenes,

*inspired by Sutton Vane's "Outward Journey" (1923)
and its major film version 1944 "Between Two Worlds"*

by Christian Lanciai (2019)

The Characters:

A harbour-master
Louis, exiled Austrian pianist
Mabel, a passenger
Jerry, American journalist
An official
Elsa, Louis' wife
Walter, steward
Robert
Ruben
Herbert, doctor
Doris
Harold
Benjamin

The action takes place in London during the blitz 1940
and on board a ship.

Scene 1.

A terminal. A group of people sit patiently waiting for something to happen. Louis turns up, nervously on edge, looking around as if he sought some way out. An official turns up, observes his nervousness, turns towards the whole group.

Harbour-master (to Louis) Just sit down and take it easy. You will all get on board.

Louis But I have no visa. I am waiting for my visa.

Harbour-master Just sit down in the meantime. *(turning to all of them)*

Don't worry. A car will come and take you all to the ship.

(Sirens are heard and explosions.)

Mabel (an elderly lady) It's a new bomb attack.

Harbour-master Don't worry. You will be among those who will get away.

Jerry (slightly under the influence) We wish to get away at once. Where is the car?

Harbour-master Don't worry. It's on its way. As soon as it arrives, it will take you all to the ship, and you will be safe.

Louis But I haven't got my visa yet.

Harbour-master Follow me. I will bring you to the passport control. *(Louis follows the harbour-master, who shows him into an office.)*

(to the man in charge) This man has no visa.

Official Do you have a passport?

Louis Of course. Here it is. *(offers his passport)*

Official (examines the passport) Hem. Austrian citizen. Interesting stamps from France. You have been active in the resistance?

Louis Yes, for several years. Unfortunately I had to escape the country in the end.

Official At least you got away alive, and you are safe here. And now you wish to proceed to America?

Louis Yes, as soon as possible. My wife is American.

Official Unfortunately you have to obtain a visa yourself as an Austrian citizen, since Austria is one of the countries we are at war with. Unfortunately this demands some paper exercise.

Louis Can't I leave at once? It would be most desirable.

Official Unfortunately not. The process time will take at least six months.

Louis I can't stay and wait here that long. My situation is desperate. I can't manage here when London is daily subject to paralysing bomb attacks.

Official I am sorry. There is nothing we can do. You must be patient.

Louis You give me no other alternative.

Official You were lucky to get out of France alive. That's unfortunately the best comfort I can offer you. You must have patience. If you made it out of France alive you will probably also survive all the German blitz attacks on London.

Louis I am sorry. My situation is too desperate to allow me any peace or patience. I must travel on at once. Is there nothing you can do?

Official I am sorry. Many are in the same position as you. They also have to wait.

Louis But the group of people sitting outside? They will be on the same boat. And they will have a car lift directly to the ship.

Official They are all British or American citizens. Their documents are in order. They have no citizenship in any enemy country. I am sorry. It will all work out well if you only take it easy and grant yourself the patience that is needed.

Louis It will not do! *(leaves the office in despair)*

Harbour-master (returns, talks to the official) Can't you make an exception? He is an acclaimed concert pianist of international renown from Vienna. If he gets stuck here it might turn out a tragedy.

Official He must have patience like all the others.

Harbour-master (hurrying after Louis) Sir, I trust you have a home or somewhere to stay?

Louis Yes, I have a temporary apartment.

Harbour-master Go home then and take it easy. Think it over and relax with a bottle of rum, and then you will wake up in a better mood tomorrow.

Louis It's not that easy. This was my last chance. *(hurries on.)*

Harbour-master (aside) I just hope he doesn't do anything stupid.

Scene 2. Louis' temporary apartment, a rather shabby basic place.

Louis (enter staggering, a finished man) I am lost. What more have I to live for? Everything is lost. I can't play any more, my hands are shaking after all the traumas in France. I fled to France after the fall of Austria to the Nazi dictatorship, hoping to continue as an active musician in France, which worked out well until the war started. France fell like a house of cards. I joined those who refused to give up, especially Artur Koestler, but he quickly got over to England. I was left as a full time partisan, which cost me my music. My only chance to recover the music is to leave the war, that's why I must get away from England, but now I am stuck here infinitely by the bureaucracy. That leaves me no other choice.

(closes the windows and puts on the gas in the stove, sits down by it in the hope that it will pass quickly. Then there is the doorbell, followed by eager knocks.)

Not now! Who could it be? *(doesn't know whether to answer or not, when someone breaks in.)* Elsa!

Elsa I have been looking for you all over the harbour! In the terminal they said you had gone home. Couldn't you get a visa?

Louis They asked me to wait for six months. I can have a visa in six months.

Elsa Can you wait that long?

Louis You know I can't. I must get away from the war.

Elsa Didn't they know who you were? Didn't they realize that you were an international pianist of world renown and that you just had to get over to America?

Louis What's the use? The war reduced everyone to mortal victims. No one can escape. It doesn't help how talented you are or what you have done or what reputation or status you have. The war sweeps you all away to nothing.

Elsa But it's not acceptable!

Louis I know.

Elsa (feels the smell, discovers the switched on tap) But what are you doing?

Louis There was no other way, Elsa. I am desperate. I can't accept or endure the war and the world that has given itself over to it.

Elsa It will pass! It's like a storm that you'll just have to endure and survive! You must have patience!

Louis That's what the harbour-master said. Do you think that will help? I am lost, Elsa. I can't take any more. (*shows his hand*) Look, Elsa! They are shaking! I can't keep them steady any more! I can't concentrate since the worries keep assailing me all the time, sabotaging and ruining the music! I can't face up any more to this reality which is effacing humanity to replace it with the opposite!

Elsa But you must not give up! That's the last thing you may do!

Louis I know, but I am not more than human, and I know when I have reached the end of the road.

Elsa But there were others also in the terminal. They were all waiting for a car that was to take them to the ship. We were all going on the same ship. We are the only ones missing. There must be a way for us to get on board anyway.

Louis As stowaways?

Elsa As anything! There is always room in the cargo space!

Louis It's too late, Elsa.

Elsa It's never too late! (*traffic outside in the middle of all the bomb explosions*) Look, Louis! There is our car! Our fellow passengers are all going with it! We must hurry down to catch it!

Louis Save yourself, my love, but I am an Austrian citizen and politically an enemy.

Elsa Nonsense! Your only citizenship is music!

Louis Tell that to the passport control. (*A sudden explosion outside.*)

Elsa (hurries to the window) It was the car! A bomb hit the car! I hope the others got away!

Louis Elsa, either you get away now and catch the boat, or else you stay here with me and die with me.

Elsa So you have definitely given up?

Louis Yes, for this lifetime. My life is ruined by the war, and I am stuck in its death trap, but you can make it.

Elsa I will never leave you.

Louis Then die with me. I feel the effects of the gas. I am getting drowsy.

Elsa (embracing him) Louis! Don't give up! Live for the music!

Louis What music? World politics have killed it for me. (*passes out*)

Elsa (still embracing him) This is not acceptable. It just will not do. But I can't leave you. (*leans against him, putting her cheek to his*) If you give up I must follow you, for I

refuse to survive alone. Come then, my love, and let's embark on the journey to eternity. (*embracing him, she also passes out.*)

Scene 3. On board the ship, on deck.

(*enter Elsa with Louis*)

Louis How did we get here?

Elsa I don't know. We just happen to be here.

Louis It almost seems unreal

Elsa But it's the right ship, and we are on our way to America.

Louis Was it you who got me on board?

Elsa I don't remember. I just remember the explosion outside and the car going up in smoke which all our fellow refugees were supposed to take, but somehow we seem to have managed to get on board anyway.

Louis Perhaps the harbour-master found a way.

Elsa I never saw him. But we definitely got away under exceptional conditions.

Louis As what?

Elsa Covertly. The ship is secret. You may not visit other areas on board than our passenger's deck, and you may not ask the crew or the command any questions.

Louis What kind of a command is it?

Elsa I don't know. I haven't seen anyone belonging to it.

Louis But there must be some commanding officer in contact with the passengers.

Elsa Yes, there must at least always be a steward.

Louis I am sure we will run into him.

Elsa But even he will probably not be able to answer any questions about the ship's destination or position.

Louis It's enough that we know we are on our way to America.

Elsa Yes, let's assume that. Nothing else is possible.

Louis Shall we go inside and see if we find any one on board?

Elsa There must at least be other passengers.

Louis Exactly. (*They go inside the ship.*)

Scene 4. The lobby.

Jerry (at the bar when Louis and Elsa enter) Welcome, fellow passengers! You are lucky! The bar is open and well equipped! It's just to take your choice – everything is included in the ticket.

Louis So you also got on board. How about the others who were sitting there waiting? We thought you all were lost in the car that was hit by a bomb.

Jerry They are all here. We made it all. We got away. It's just to celebrate. And here we are now as first class privileged passengers on a cruising ship to America. We couldn't have it better.

Steward (kindly) What will it be, Sir?

Louis Are you the steward?

Jerry His name is Walter, and he is amiability itself. He is only here to make the passage as agreeable as possible for us.

Walter What will it be, madam?

Elsa Thank you, I think a brandy would do me some good.

Jerry And what about you, fellow refugee? What are you escaping from?

Louis Why do you think I am a refugee? I could have stayed in England.

Jerry We are all refugees here on board. That's why we are here. I have carefully examined the ship, that is those parts of it we have access to. We are limited to our deck and our cabins and may not try to get up to the bridge or any other part of the ship that is screened off. You could say that we are prisoners and fenced in, but we have the whole ocean around us, and those parts available to us are the best parts: the bar, the restaurant, the lobby, the salon, our first class cabins – all the best.

Elsa It sounds too good to be true.

Jerry Yes, doesn't it? It *is* too good to possibly be true, but still we can't deny that we are here.

Louis What have you learned about our restrictions of freedom?

Jerry The steward is the only member of the crew we are allowed to speak with. We will never be able to even see anyone else. But within the best parts of the ship our freedom is total

Elsa What about dinner?

Jerry Rather soon, I think. It's included in the ticket.

Louis How did you get your tickets? I could never get any visa.

Jerry There was no problem. We who should have gone with the car that exploded already had our tickets. How you got on board I don't know.

Louis Neither do we.

Jerry What is the last thing you remember?

Elsa I and my husband were in my husband's apartment. He had tried to come with you but had been obliged to wait out an uncertain process time for his visa. I found him there. While we were there we saw your car coming to fetch you and how it was bombed and exploded. We thought you were all in the car. First we considered ourselves lucky who hadn't joined you in it.

Jerry Yes, you are really lucky being with us on board. We are a privileged lot who got away by pure coincidence. But here we are now and safer on sea than any Englishman on land.

Louis But there are submarines. We live in the worst terror of the war everywhere and also on the sea.

Jerry That's why we may never show any light when we go out. That's why the ship goes so quietly and slowly. It's all about security.

Elsa Are you all refugees?

Jerry Almost. But in different ways. One is escaping from justice. One is on the run from his creditors. Another is trying to leave his personal problems behind.

Elsa And you?

Jerry I am not on the run. I am going home. I am a journalist and intend to write an article about the poor shipwrecked people on board. You fit perfectly into the picture. *(to Louis)* I understand that you have been in the French resistance and acquired some psychic damage by the war and therefore want to get rid of it.

Elsa It's worse than that. He is a pianist and can no longer play because of his hands shaking.

Jerry Post-traumatic stress syndrome?

Louis Yes, that's what they call it.

Jerry It's very common nowadays. Most people suffer from it, and most of them perish in it.

Elsa That's why Louis must get away from the war at any cost.

Louis I find the sea very soothing and relaxing.

Jerry Take the opportunity and enjoy it. It will be a long voyage, since the ship goes as slowly as possible.

Louis Yes, you could believe it was a ship hospital.

Jerry Perhaps it is, but in that case we will never see the other departments and their patients. *(enter Robert)* Here is Robert.

Robert I thought so, Jerry, that I would find you here at the bar.

Jerry Where else could you possibly have found me? I knew you would be the first one to turn up here, but these two actually anticipated you.

Robert Who are they?

Louis And who are you? I can't remember having seen you among the others who were waiting to be driven to the ship.

Jerry Allow me to present him. Robert is the maximal refugee. He is the most typical war wreck of all. He had a bad time in the previous war and has never recovered. He could never adjust or make himself compatible with the world after 1918 and has never been able to show himself among people since he is too sensitive by his permanent war damage. Those who suffered a grenade shock in the last war are uncountable and all damaged for life, and Robert is just one of them. How did you get on board, Robert?

Robert I should have been bombed in London together with all the other innocents who happened under the bombs, but somehow I got away. I don't know how I ended up here. I am like a displaced guest at a party who has come to the wrong place and can't find any bearings in the brave new world which, just because the first world war ended after only four years, decided to launch another even worse world war which would last longer. Believe me, this war will go on until we are all dead. But so far we are obliged to survive and endure the hell no matter how

little we wish to, and believe me, we will get the hell paid for being alive when we should be dead. My life has been like that all since the end of the last war. I don't accept the new world and can't fit into it. I am impossible in it and stamped as more or less a mad outsider who has no place in this world, while I think I know better. Perhaps there is nothing wrong with me. Perhaps it's the world that is all wrong. It derailed completely in 1914, and just because it has accepted its derailment and never bothered to try to find its way back, it has introduced an even worse derailment by a new even more disastrous world war. Am I right or am I wrong? I live, and I say what I know and publish my truth, and since I am not dead when I should be I am right. If I had been wrong, and the world would have had the right to discharge me as an anachronism, then I would not be here but dead. But who are you?

Elsa This is the world famous concert pianist Louis Loewenhaupt, just like you a victim to the war and a wreck stranded on board this strange ship sailing like a mystery across the sea, and he also suffers from a post-traumatic stress syndrome – he can't give concerts any more, for his hands are trembling after his war experience in France. We thought we could find a safe refuge in England by our friend Artur Koestler, but then they started bombing London, and Louis almost lost his mind when he was brought across the limit to a panicky desperation. We just had to leave England, since the war now had come to England.

Robert You are escaping like everyone else.

Louis And like you.

Robert But I am not escaping the world. I am escaping history. I deny it and can't accept it, I curse it for what it has done to the world and humanity, and I consider the course of history a meaningless universal berserk rage, which human reason just can't accept and tolerate. Anyone who thinks at all just has to detach himself from the world and history. It's not for humanity any longer and their welfare but for their destruction. The world and human civilization have turned self-destructive, and therefore I denounce it and curse it, since I wish to live in spite of all.

Louis Do you have friends in America?

Robert Not that I know of, but I don't care. I trust Jerry.

Elsa Jerry is just a licentious and generally discarded journalist who only indulges in drinking.

Jerry Thanks for that. I feel honoured and as highly rated as Robert here as an incurable war invalid both physically but even more in his soul, for he can never become human again.

Robert No, it's humanity that never can become human again. That's why I detach myself from humanity, because I want to be human.

Jerry A wise decision. Give him a double, Walter.

Walter With pleasure. (*serves Robert a double whisky*)

Robert And you, strange complacent lackey, what part are you really playing in this mysterious journey to nowhere? You just keep up a gentle nature and good show but should know everything about the ship that none of us may know.

Walter I just stick to my duties. Ask no questions, and you'll not have to know what you don't want to know.

Robert Is it that simple? Are those your orders? Does the command trust you with following such directions?

Walter My friend, I have no choice. I just run my business and do what has to be done. Mind your own, and I will care for you to make you all satisfied. What more can you ask?

Robert The ideal steward. What do you know about him, Jerry?

Jerry No more than you. He is a good-natured sphinx who serves us more than well and with honour.

Elsa Will we have dinner soon, Walter? We are getting hungry.

Walter Quite soon. I think they are already preparing the table in the dining hall.

Elsa I think we are all rather hungry. We shall probably meet more passengers in there.

Jerry Perhaps it's about time to retire in that direction. What do you say, Walter?

Walter Apply a few more drinks, and then you can gradually start moving down to dinner. You have all the time in the world and no schedule to observe, so it's just for you to take it easy and enjoy.

Elsa What more can we ask for? Life on board is getting more and more like something of an ideal existence, in contrast to the blitz of London.

Walter That is perhaps intended.

Robert (to Jerry) I believe Walter knows something of the utmost importance.

Jerry I think he knows everything, but he may not speak about it.

Walter My task is to care for you for your own good, nothing else. And it pleases me to do so.

Jerry Then we can safely grant ourselves a few more drinks, or what do you say, Robert?

Robert Absolutely.

Jerry Come, Louis and Elsa, and keep us company. You drink, don't you?

Louis I never say no to a glass of white wine.

Elsa Neither do I.

Jerry That's the spirit! Pardon me for sticking to whisky.

Robert Whisky is the universal medicine as the first elixir of life in the world. I am with you, Jerry. *(They all get their drinks.)*

Jerry Cheers then! *(They all toast together.)*

Scene 5. The dining hall.

The guests gradually enter and take their seats, all with their faces to the audience. When they are seated they all start to serve themselves with food from the buffet, kindly aided by the steward, who is the director. No other personnel are visible.

General small talk, until all are comfortably seated with their plates full.

Walter You are most welcome all. It's the sincere wish of the shipping company that you all should be as comfortable as possible during the voyage and never lack anything, least of all food and drink.

Louis (*rising*) Thank you, Walter, but now when we all are here and there seems to be no one else coming I dare to put the question openly to all of you: Is there anyone among you who knows how he or she at all came on board?

Mabel We all have our tickets, don't we?

Jerry Louis and his wife came on board without tickets.

Walter Allow me to answer your question and dispose of all possible question marks. Yes, you all have your tickets, and you all got on board in the last minute, while Louis Loewenhaupt and his wife almost missed it, but since the ship was unique and specially arranged to transport passengers in extreme emergency across to America from the deadly threat in England with bomb raids day and night over London, the command made an exception and allowed Mr and Mrs Loewenhaupt to join and come along although they did not have any valid visa documents.

Ruben Is there anyone who remembers anything of the formalities at the embarkation and the boarding?

(All look at each other like searching for an answer from the neighbour, while they all more or less negatively shake their heads.)

That's what I suspected. No one knows anything, and our steward refuses to answer questions.

Walter I am not allowed to answer questions. It's for your own good.

Mabel The car that was to take us to the ship exploded, didn't it? That could have given us all something of a shock. After a serious shock there are few who remember anything of the incident.

Ruben You suggest that you all would have been seized by the same shock and more or less got on board like unconscious sleepwalkers?

Herbert I happen to be a doctor. It's a well-known fact, that if you happen to a shock the memory of everything that led up to the shock is obliterated until you wake up after the shock. For example, if a boy is struck by a lightning out in the country, he could then walk around all night without knowing where he is or where he is going, until he wakes up after the effects of the shock have ebbed out.

Jerry Robert, you were shocked for life in the last world war, since you never got over your grenade shock. Could it have been, that we were too shocked by the bomb hitting the car that was to take us to be aware of what we did afterwards and thus taken ourselves aboard like sleep-walkers?

Herbert Robert knows what shocks can do, and I endorse that it could have happened just as you say, Jerry, mostly because no other explanation could be possible. Do you know anything about the passenger procedure before the ship left the port, Walter?

Walter I can attest to the fact that you were all led aboard. We simply had to take care of you.

Herbert Is the answer enough satisfying, Mr. Loewenhaupt?

Louis Somewhat.

Elsa And then we would have joined the ship so to say at the fag end.

Walter Yes. But the only important thing is that you are alive and well on board. Please provide yourselves now richly. If anything runs out, it will immediately be replenished.

Doris That does not explain the mystery how we all could survive the car bomb.

Jerry Louis and Elsa were not in the car.

Doris But all the rest of us were.

Herbert Do you remember the bomb, Doris?

Doris I recall the dreadful terror on hearing it coming whistling through the air with a deafening shrill banshee-like scream, and I think we all knew it had to hit us directly or at least hit the ground in the immediate vicinity. Where it finally hit the ground I don't know and don't remember.

Herbert But you remember that you got out of the car alive?

Doris No, I remember nothing after the screech of the bomb.

Herbert That confirms my theories.

Harold (rising) Since we anyway are investigating the reason for our strange situation here, I must ask you all some questions, since we would not all be here unless we had something in common. At least I am convinced that destiny works in that manner. My first question is: do you also feel like me, or anyone of you, that we have landed in something having its closest resemblance to a Limbo?

Mabel Limbo? What's that?

Louis It's the forecourt to hell. All those end up there for whom there is no place in either hell, heaven or purgatory. There you find all the righteous heathens from the times before Christ. It's like a vacuum. What is your impression?

Harold My feeling of it is of an existence which is neither life nor death.

Jerry But by golly, we have everything here on board! Our existence here is pure paradise! We may all eat our bellies full and only of the best stuff, we may quench our thirst in unlimited quantities of any drink of any advanced quality, we have a steward like a godsend ideal of a perfect one whose only interest appears to be making life as enjoyable as possible for us as long as we are on board. God knows what kind of hells then will expect us when we disembark. Perhaps the war also will reach America so that we then will have to escape to South America...

Harold Which brings me to the next question. You, Jerry, are here alone on board, and none of you brought any family members with you, apart from you, Mr Pianist, who managed to bring your wife along. But all the rest of you seem just like me to be completely alone in life. Is my assumption correct? Do you have any relatives in America that will take care of you when you land? Do you have any relatives left in England that would cry for you if our ship suddenly was torpedoed by a German U-boat? Which of you have any family at all?

Doris I am alone. The gods made sure of that. I left England to at last get rid of all my men.

Mabel I am a widow with nothing left to live for except a daughter in America.

Harold And what about the rest of you? Are you also alone in life? (*Most of them nod.*) That's what I thought. Destiny has brought us together on a journey which seems to lead away to nothingness, and none of us can understand or is at all clear about how she landed on board. Most of us seem to have got away by a miracle from a bombed taxi which no one knows whether it succeeded in getting here or not, but we all got on board. We face an overwhelming mystery comprising us all, which could be the task given us by destiny to get to the bottom of.

Louis At least to get the better of.

Benjamin Mr Loewenhaupt, you appear to be a famous pianist. How would it be if you played something for us? We have a fine grand piano here in the hall, and we lack some entertainment, while everyone knows you are a qualified pianist. How would you feel about the suggestion?

Louis I suffer from a nervous damage after the ordeals of the war and its shocks in France, which made my hands tremble chronically, and I can no longer play faultlessly.

Jerry Never mind that as long as you play.

Louis But it is awkward. I don't want others to hear when I make mistakes.

Herbert (walks up to him) Let me see your hands. (*Louis shows his hands.*) Pardon me, Mr Loewenhaupt, but I can't discern the smallest tremble in your hands.

Louis (examines his hands himself and closely. After a while:) By my soul, I think the shakings have vanished.

Herbert It must be the wholesome sea air.

Elsa (comes up and also studies his hands) You are not shaking it all! It's true! The trouble has passed!

Jerry So he can play for us.

Benjamin We can't force him, but he could at least try.

Louis You asked for it. I take the risk, but will not be responsible for the consequences. (*goes out to the grand piano and sits down out of sight starting to play, carefully at first, then more boldly: Chopin's Ballade in G minor.*)

Jerry I knew he could play.

Benjamin We all knew that.

Doris I can't hear that he is making any mistakes.

Herbert If he does he masks them well. All pianists make occasional mistakes, but if they are good no one will notice it except themselves.

Elsa I am so glad for his sake. He has recovered the grip and the touch. Now he can go on playing for the entire journey as if the war never was.

Mabel If he can play to make us forget the war, no one could play better.

Elsa That's what he is doing.

(*Louis has interrupted himself after the first exposition and come back in to the others.*)

Benjamin Don't stop! Play some more!

Louis I have to collect myself in between. I haven't played this piece for a very long time. I need to practise more.

Elsa Here you can practise every day.

Louis I know, and I intend to do so.

Harold With your music you have brought us straight out to eternity.

Louis You can thank Chopin for that.

Harold No, we owe our thanks to you, because you are the one who have brought Chopin back alive.

Louis He never died.

Harold But I hope you will continue keeping him alive.

Louis Fortunately there are many more than I all over the world who apply themselves to that activity.

Herbert I am very glad for your sake that your nervous shakes are over.

Louis It's like a miracle. It must be due to the good sleep I get at sea. All since I came on board I have slept well every night, while I earlier always had terrible constant nightmares or couldn't sleep at all.

Herbert Like so many others who have been marked by the war.

Elsa You haven't taken your snack yet, Louis.

Louis No, I just returned for that purpose. Then it will do with an excellent cup of coffee.

Benjamin The divine potage above all.

Louis I am inclined to agree with you.

Jerry What's wrong with whisky?

Benjamin There is nothing wrong with whisky, but coffee is more beneficial as it is no intoxicant.

Jerry Do you mean to say that getting drunk is not beneficial? Could it possible be wrong? Consider our situation! We got away alive from the bombing inferno of Britain but didn't get rid of the war anyway! We are travelling in secret across the Atlantic with no lights visible as a kind of ghost ship during the night and slowly, so that the engines will not raise the curiosity of U-boats, who long for sinking whatever peaceful British ships they can find. We could be sunk in any moment. We don't even travel in a convoy. And is it then wrong and unhealthy to drink yourself into a pleasant state for a change? When even the ship offers free drinks all the way?

Benjamin I didn't say that.

Jerry But you prefer sobering coffee.

Benjamin My friend, by all means, drink your fill of whatever you choose, but let me have my coffee.

Jerry I didn't want to stop you from that.

Benjamin And I didn't want to stop you.

Jerry Then we are agreed.

Benjamin Mr Steward, I can't enough marvel at the generosity of the ship towards its brave passengers. You offer us an overwhelming dinner buffet and drinks in unlimited quantities and explain it by the excuse that it is included in the ticket, but honestly speaking I doubt it. Our ticket said nothing about dinner and drinks being included. Your generosity almost gives me the impression of being intended on

purpose, as if it anyway would be inevitable that we all must die on board or that that this would be our last journey anyway. Can you explain this incomprehensible generosity to me?

Walter Honestly speaking I don't quite understand it myself. I only know my directions, and since they anyway are absolutely positive and constructive I don't mind following my orders meticulously.

Benjamin So you can't help us solve the mystery?

Walter What mystery?

Benjamin The one Harold was elucidating, why we all are here, how a common denominator still seems to have brought us together, what really happened with the taxi car which exploded but brought us all on board anyway and anyhow, the fact that no one remembers the check-in, as if we all were clandestinely brought on board, and all the other mystifications on board. You are actually the only member of the command that we ever saw any shade of.

Walter It's part of the regulations. Just because you are prone to ask questions about your predicament you are deprived of all possibilities of any contact with those who run the ship, for security reasons and for your own safety.

Benjamin The only thing that I can observe as a certain fact about our journey is that we still are moving forward and going ahead.

Walter At least something.

Benjamin But will we reach America?

Walter We shall see.

Benjamin Well, I imagine it will take some days and some extra days, with this snail speed.

Walter Fortunately the weather is favourable. I heard some good weather forecasts for the entire journey.

Benjamin It's good to know that we at least will not run into any iceberg.

Walter That's the last thing that could happen to us.

Benjamin That sounds reassuring.

Ruben On the other hand, that's what they used to say on board the *Titanic*.

Harold (coming forth) What does the steward say? Could he help us to some orientation in the great mystery?

Benjamin He is very helpful but only makes matters worse by making the mystery more inextricable.

Harold What do you think yourself? How did you get here?

Benjamin I escaped my creditors. I was bankrupt, and everyone desired to flay me alive. I had nothing left to give. It was just to run away with the first available Atlantic cruiser.

Harold And no family?

Benjamin My wife left me ages ago, and my ladies have always left me.

Harold A common fate for incorrigible bachelors. Were you happily married?

Benjamin Not at all.

Harold So it was just as well that she left you.

Benjamin Honestly, I didn't care much about it. It was rather the same to me if she left me or hung on to me. We had had our good time together, and it had run out with time.

Harold And your other ladies did the same?

Benjamin Yes, but they grew tired much more quickly.

Harold I consider all bachelors happy and fortunate for being bachelors and being able to endure it. Don't you ever feel alone in the lack of female company?

Benjamin Doesn't the Bible expressly say: "It's not good for man to be alone." Yes, of course I feel alone, but still I prefer that to be stuck with some shrew.

Harold I could almost say the same.

Louis (to Elsa) Harold's performance gave me something to consider. Would you like to follow me outside for a while?

Elsa I always welcome every opportunity for a breath of fresh air.

Louis Lets' take a break then. We could continue with the banquet later. Come!
(*They leave discreetly.*)

Scene 6. On deck.

Elsa What was it you came to think of?

Louis What Harold did in there was to question our entire existence. It made me wonder and start reconsidering.

Elsa Did you reach any conclusion?

Louis I don't know yet, and that's what I wanted to discuss with you. Perhaps you have the same feelings, inklings and apprehensions. I can't quite get my bearings on them yet.

Elsa Tell me!

Louis Harold's conclusion was that we all had something in common, our loneliness, our exposure, our lack of families and the strange circumstances that led to our ending up here.

Elsa Tell me, no matter how unpleasant it is.

Louis We don't know ourselves how we really ended up here. We don't remember. It's the same with the others. They all seem to have come here with that car, but no one knows how they got out of it when it exploded. We actually saw from the window how it was bombed and caught fire.

Elsa We couldn't see if our friends were in it.

Louis No, we couldn't, and that leaves us all possibilities. But then think of our own situation. I had turned on the gas, and the gas was streaming affluently, I would have died if you hadn't suddenly entered. That interrupted my intention, but did we ever think of turning off the gas?

Elsa No.

Louis There you are.

Elsa But when the car exploded outside, your window broke, and we went there to see what had happened. That should have interrupted gassing the chamber.

Louis But consider if we didn't do it enough. The thought hit me, by Harold's speech, with pointing out the unreal nature of our common situation on board, which he likened to something like Limbo, that – could we all be dead?

Elsa What do you mean?

Louis Imagine if we all have ended up in an existence after death? Consider. We should have died from the gas poisoning, we were already rather befuddled when the car exploded, and everyone in the car should have perished with it. What if they did? No one of us was prepared for death, except possibly me, who had been considering suicide already for a long time. But then you came along and brought me better thoughts and so to say recalled me to life and the lust of life. Imagine if we all were left hanging somewhere between life and death? We were all interrupted in our intention to save our lives – and landed here.

Elsa Do you suggest a possibility that our existence and all of us are unreal?

Louis Yes, I would like to investigate that possibility.

Elsa It's impossible. The fact is that we are all real. We eat and enjoy good food and drinks. Our steward is real although he was neither in the car or up in your apartment with us. We had never seen him before. The purpose of all the protection policies and regulations of the ship is to avoid attention by hostile U-boats and is quite normal. We must not forget the war and its horrible reality. That the command has implemented extra security measures for our protection is also logic. At least they gave us a steward to care for us. And your music. If anything is real, it's your music. You can play again and better than ever, which you yourself attribute to the wholesome ocean air and that you can sleep well for the first time since very long. No, Louis, everything is convincing no matter how unreal and strange it may appear. It is reality that is extremely absurd and not we.

Louis But isn't it a little too good to be true? We came on board without tickets and are still invited for the same enormous buffet and unlimited drinks at the bar like everyone else. And how wondrous hasn't our journey been so far! The fogs have never lifted, we still haven't seen the horizon, which creates the illusion like as if we were sailing on clouds all the time, which is further accentuated by that the ship is so quiet and travels with almost uncanny quietness. Everything on board is like a dream. And I know that for certain about dreams, that they can often be experienced as more real than reality. You can feel scents in the dream, you can feel close relationships and material objects, there is always something concrete in the dream that links it to reality no matter how absurd and illogical the intrigue and the story of the dream can be, and it's the same dreamy character about all the life on board.

Elsa I still believe more in the reality of your music than of reality. Don't we have each other? Aren't we loving each other? Don't we feel it when we embrace, and don't we experience each other as more than real in our intellectual togetherness here out on deck? Don't we feel and enjoy the fresh air? No, Louis, everything here is real and more real than any dream can be.

Louis I hope you are right.

Elsa Shall we join the others, before they start wondering where we are, and perhaps get worried that we might have jumped over board?

Louis I believe that's the last thing we will do, especially considering that our investigation of this extraordinary reality has only begun.

Elsa Let's fulfil it and hear what the others could think and say about it.

Louis I suspect they are all as confused and wondering about the situation as we are.

Elsa I suspect that too.

Jerry (showing up) Sorry to intervene. So you believe that we are all dead?

Louis No, we just wonder.

Jerry Do you think we will ever have any clearance of the matter? Life is after all as unreal and incredible as death.

Louis Do you see them as two different dimensions of the same existence?

Jerry Something like that. But to explain myself further: the others got worried about your staying out here so long and asked me to go out here and check if you still were present and hadn't jumped over board.

Louis No one would have any reason to do that on a voyage like this.

Jerry That's what I mean. At the same time it would be rather unnecessary, wouldn't it, if we all were dead already.

Louis Do you attach any credibility to that theory?

Jerry It is as interesting in its absurdity as our whole existence here on board. It can't be excluded or discarded, no matter how unreal it is.

Elsa It is impossible, since Louis can play the piano.

Jerry You find that a proof that we are not dead? It is undeniably a strong argument. But who can't play the piano in his sleep and with any advanced skill in his dreams?

Elsa But you all heard how Louis played. Would you all then have had the same dream?

Jerry You couldn't be more convincing, Madame Loewenhaupt. Still I wouldn't directly exclude the theory that we all could be dead, mostly because it is intriguing and interesting. It will be most rewarding to hear the views of the others on the matter.

Louis Shall we go inside and ask? We were already on our way in, weren't we?

Jerry Absolutely. Lets join the others in the bar and keep them company. They all should be there by now.

Louis Then also the steward could take part in the discussion.

Jerry Exactly! After you, ladies and gentlemen!

(They all three go back in.)

Scene 7. At the bar.

The banquet scene is over. Instead all are at the bar.

Jerry (enters with Louis and Elsa) Hallo, everybody! Our pianist has had an excellent idea! He thinks we are all dead!

Benjamin What an absurd idea! Is it true?

Mabel That's what I suspected all the time. I knew I would never see my daughter again; if I reach America she will probably be dead.

Doris Are you serious?

Louis No, it's just a theory and possibility, which occurred to me by Harold's interesting observations and conclusions. I simply followed his train of thought and drew the consequences.

Harold I have actually entered the same train of thought myself. Just think of the possibility that we actually all could be dead and that being the reason why we are here? Imagine if we all actually were lost in that car and we simply have suppressed and lost that memory?

Robert But the ship is still real, and we are alive. We breathe, and I feel exactly the same pains and damages after the last war as before I came on board, but I know that I did get on board, and I don't think any of us could deny it.

Doris But imagine if we all really are dead and have landed, as Harold suggests, in Limbo, in a no man's land between life and death. None of us was prepared for death, we were all set on getting on board, and then came that bomb and struck the car in a direct hit. Weren't we all in that car?

Harold Your reasonings are all quite relevant, Miss Davis. No one can deny that you are thinking rationally.

Robert But do we have any possibility at all to find out the truth?

Benjamin That would be if someone of the command could inform us more explicitly about the matter.

Elsa The only representative of the command who has been allowed to be in touch with us is our steward here.

Harold Well, my good Sir, have you anything to say or comment on our speculations?

Walter I think you all had better refill your glasses with a drink of your preference.

Jerry A splendid idea! The solution of all problems! Think about it while you drink and feel well, which will bring you on better thoughts! It couldn't be better!
(has his glass refilled)

Benjamin I really think we all need a regular grog.

Harold But what are your grounds for your interesting theories? Do you have anything to support them with?

Louis No, only indications. How our journey is wrapped up in mystifications. The foggy weather which never lifts. We have so far never seen the sea. Our isolation on our own deck without any possibility of contact with other decks, any other official in command than the steward, the strange generosity and care about our

welfare without any obvious reason, the nature of unrealness over our whole existence, and not least the fact that we have been allowed to journey forth without a convoy completely unprotected and exposed to any submarine attacks out in an open sea swarming with enemy U-boats, while none has tried to sink us.

Jerry Just wait. They will come, sure enough.

Benjamin We are going ahead so quietly and in protection of being alone, wherefore we so to say pass unnoticed on this great ocean. The German U-boats are only interested in convoys.

Harold But why this singular privilege to enjoy special protection and so to say being specially chosen to be brought inaccessibly and inviolably across the sea of war of only darkness and death towards an unknown destination...

Doris Isn't it America?

Harold Yes, it is formally, but we are far from there yet. All these strange not to say unique circumstances make me inclined to in the highest degree take your theory seriously, Mr. Loewenhaupt.

Louis It's still just a theory.

Harold But nothing contradicts it – so far.

Benjamin So far you haven't wished to closer comment on our speculations, Walter.

Walter The less said about you and the world situation, the better.

Benjamin That would indicate that you know something.

Walter Yes, I know too much.

Benjamin And you can't reveal anything of what you know even to just please us?

Walter You have to bide your time. All things will be resolved with time. Meanwhile, the best advice I can give you is, be happy that you are alive.

Jerry That I buy without arguing and intend to celebrate until I pass out for natural reasons. (*refills his glass*)

Walter And you do the right thing. I wish your fellow passengers also could devote themselves to the same principle.

Jerry Just give them some time, and they will get better thoughts and away from their depressing speculations about death and our situation, and they will forget to worry in vain.

Walter That I can truly assure you all, that your situation at least is nothing to worry about.

Doris But will we reach America?

Walter You will see.

Harold Everything here is so symbolic. We are almost like a company representative for all humanity in its present condition between life and death, in the middle of a burning war, in a historic moment that has totally come off course and away from reality, while no one knows where this is supposed to lead us.

Jerry Just as well.

Ruben Is it? Do you suggest, Jerry, that ignorance about actual facts is something to be regarded positively as something to be desired and to strive for?

Jerry I didn't say that.

Ruben But that is what your remark suggests.

Jerry Then inform me of actual facts, if you know better.

Ruben (addressing all) There is much to support the probability of Harold's and Louis' speculations. If we are then to draw the extreme consequences of what has been suggested and what everything seems to indicate, I arrive at the following conclusion: that it might well be so that we all are dead and have landed in a limbo existence between life and death which is neither one nor the other, as it often has been depicted in cases of sudden interruption of life in the middle of their activities ending up in an unblest existence without being able to communicate with reality to explain what happened to them and to remedy all their unfinished business which they were forced to leave behind. We could very well have happened in such a cosmic vacuum of nothing, of neither life nor death, like ghosts and unblest spirits, who only have dreams left to comfort themselves with. I don't profess that to be the case, but if it would be so I don't think we shall ever reach America. We will be stuck on this mysterious ship forever and never get anywhere, eternally bound for an unknown destination without ever reaching it or learning what the destination or intention was. We will then never have any contact with the command or anyone else in the real world, but we will forever be moving around in these small circles around the bar and our cabins, the dining hall and the salon and never get any further in our speculations. Is that how it is, steward?

Walter I am only a steward. I know nothing.

Ruben How did you get here yourself?

Walter That's what I always wondered.

Ruben Have you ever seen anyone in command?

Walter Your questions are too difficult.

Ruben That's no answer to my question.

Mabel But surely you must be able to answer if you ever had anything to do with anyone in command?

Walter I only know that I am here to make your stay here as pleasant and agreeable as possible for you.

Ruben How long have you been in this service? Have you had other passengers to take care of besides us?

Walter Oh yes, there have been many passages.

Ruben To where?

Walter To the other side.

Ruben Life or the Atlantic?

Walter Both.

Harold Don't pester him. It's obvious that he knows as little as we.

Walter Yes, I am a victim to circumstances just like you.

Ruben We don't seem to get any wiser by him.

Louis Maybe it's just as well then to accept that it is as you believe and which everything seems to point at: that we are in Limbo and on our way to nowhere in a

mystery between life and death which never can be solved towards a destination that never will become known. We have ended up in a black hole of existence.

Harold Yes, it doesn't look any better, does it?

Jerry Then at least drink and be merry. There is still liquor in the bar.

Robert Pardon me, but allow me to differ and separate from the majority to sober up just a little, and I will try not to become a bore in my objections to your carelessness, but we still remain completely aware of the reality, don't we? We know what we have left behind, and just because we here have been awarded some godsend privilege of free liquor, thanks to our amiable steward and the assistance of the merry Jerry, there is a certain liability in denouncing all responsibility to just abandon oneself to light-hearted superficiality. Pardon me for recalling you to reality, which I least of all accept and embrace myself; but you, Mr Loewenhaupt, are still on a personal run from Nazism and have perhaps yourself had some experience of its inhuman horrors of the concentration camps and its ruthless persecution of Jews, where no difference was made between highly educated and qualified experts on music and science, physics and mathematics, philosophy and literature, while they inconsiderately pushed all over the same edge denying any of them any human dignity just because they maybe had one drop of Jewish blood, like even Einstein after the Nazi assumption of total power 1933 was informed, that if he ever returned to Germany he would be hanged in the nearest lamp post, while they demonstratively burned his books and writings on science just because he was a Jew – can you really discharge this reality and take for granted that we live in a dream in a limbo on our way to nowhere out of reality? I can't deny that I had experienced the great war with all its traumas and survived by a hair's breadth with permanent nervous damages for the rest of my life, but can you just ignore this inhumanly cruel reality to abandon yourselves to a dream of that reality being just fake and that you are lucky to be rid of it?

Louis The problem is not just the inhumanity of reality. The core of the problem is that man has turned inhuman.

Jerry That sounds interesting. Explain what you mean.

Louis We are all humans and claim to be human and the more so for being separated from the inhuman reality and fortunate enough to be exiled into the free zone of some timelessness of eternity, but humanity is still there in the mundane world and still suffers from the tyranny of a monstrous world order that has been dehumanised and denaturalized unto irrecognizability by the imposition of technology, bureaucracy and automatization taking over control of the world, which is subsequently being poisoned by pollution and toxic chemicals by medicines and the destruction of the environment, nature at the same time being brought to suffer by mass extinctions of animals and forests with desertification and the contamination of waters by industrial waste, while even the air we breathe is being polluted by the constantly increasing industrial exhausts and lethal fumes... In brief, man has become inhuman, most people are unaware of it and allow themselves to be brainwashed into dependent slaves and passive zombies, while we here still are

fortunate who realize that all humanity has been totally corrupted and ruined by its own derailment and lack of birth control in an increasingly reckless population explosion...

Doris Is then all humanity doomed?

Louis Look for yourselves! Behold the war! Look at the bombings of London! Look at the ruthless automatization and mass production of weapons of mass destruction which all countries phrenetically devote themselves to! What hope could there be for such an idiotic humanity, which isn't even aware that they are victims to their own self-destructive stupidity? What can save humanity from its own suicidal stupidity and irresponsibility?

Ruben A leading question. The only possible answer could be humanity's own self-destruction by their own stupidity and irresponsibility.

Robert And believe me. The two world wars, where the first was just an introduction to the second, which is just a foretaste of what will follow which will be infinitely worse, until the greater part of all humanity has perished in its own self-destructivity, is just a prelude and warning.

Jerry You really sound most cheerful and positive. Then I would rather listen to the wisdom of our good steward, who simply advises us to make the best of it and have another drink

Benjamin May I ask you, Sir, if you pardon my lack of delicacy, but since you mention all the world's misery and almost make a catalogue of it, do you have any experience yourself of the ravages and persecutions by the Nazis among opponents and Jews? Do you yourself happen to be in any part Jewish?

Louis The answer is no. I am Arian to a hundred percent, but I have seen the ravages and violations among my colleagues, a number of which have been driven to suicide.

Benjamin With your ordeals and difficult experience as a resistance fighter in France with apparently as deep scars in your soul as our friend Robert here, have you yourself been initiated in the problems of suicide? I mean, have you almost been driven to suicide yourself?

Louis I was actually well on my way to commit suicide, when my wife came and disturbed me and interrupted the effort. That's why we happen to be here.

Benjamin Were you going to hang yourself?

Louis Not at all. I had turned on the gas in the stove and covered all the windows.

Benjamin Suicide is the ultimate exit by desperation. All rational thinking denote it as extremely foolish and condemnable and even as the supreme irresponsibility. Can you see any advantages or defence for it at all?

Louis It is a fact that it is only wholesome to associate with suicidal thoughts. It results in a beneficial detachment from yourself to put your whole existence to trial with all you lived for, which is a kind of advanced way of sobering up, you force yourself to a detachment from yourself by placing yourself outside your own existence, and already the Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius realized the extreme

soundness of always being prepared to leave everything behind by the ultimate demise at any moment. You can't take anything with you anyway. Death is nothing else than the ultimate purification, whether you actually venture on it practically or just mentally and spiritually.

Benjamin So you have transformed your suicidal thoughts with an actual effort to commit it into a kind of stoic and sober and actually sound suicidal philosophy?

Louis I would rather call it a daily association with death.

Benjamin What does your wife think of that?

Elsa I can share his life but not his thoughts.

Benjamin Still you are a prominent musician and carry on your music. Could it have saved your life?

Louis Definitely and on several occasions. Even in moments of utter despair, music always remains as an eternal friend who always keeps waiting for you with her beauty and timelessness almost like a voice of God directly out of eternity. If I hadn't had my music, I would have been lost long ago.

Benjamin But you still occasionally associate with suicidal thoughts.

Louis Only when moments and circumstances press me to. They are a permanent alternative as an exit of emergency.

Elsa I try my best to keep him anchored in reality and to life.

Benjamin And so far you have succeeded and done it well, it seems. And Mr Loewenhaupt has actually by the positive aspects of the journey started to play again. We must ask you to play some more. If there is anything suitable for gilding and accompanying a timeless existence and its intimate communion with eternity, it's beautiful music. Wouldn't you please take your seat at the piano again, Mr Loewenhaupt?

Louis Well, if you insist... Actually I have nothing better to do.

Benjamin Please. When we ask you with earnest sincerity.

(Louis goes out to take a seat by the piano. All the others take their seats in the salon and make themselves comfortable, preparing themselves to enjoy the entertainment.

He starts with Schumann's Fantasy opus 17.

The music and the scene slowly fade out.)

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