

# *The Ship of Destiny*



# *The Ship of Destiny*

*A chamber play in nine 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 god s 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 unblessed 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 purgation, 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.)*

## Scene 8. The cabin

*Louis* It feels as if the whole world had been affected by a deadly disease, and although it's no fault of ours we feel guilty, if not for anything else at least for being alive, when we should have been dead with so many others. But the worst thing is that there is nothing we can do about it.

*Elsa (entering)* You shouldn't sit here alone brooding in isolation, Louis. There is after all fresh air out there.

*Louis* Do you think that would help?

*Elsa* Against what? Against your melancholy? Fresh air is good against everything.

*Louis* Not against the deadly disease of the world.

*Elsa* You are taking on too much. The world's condition is not your responsibility. You are innocent.

*Louis* We are guilty because we are still alive when we should be dead with all the other innocents who died because they stayed on.

*Elsa* Louis, you are just burying yourself in your grief and melancholy without being aware of how much joy and inspiration you are spreading by still practising your music.

*Louis* You only see the positive side of everything while I cannot shut my eyes to reality and forget it. It is the inescapable nightmare of my life.



*Elsa* It doesn't get better by your tormenting yourself with it.

*Louis* I am not tormenting myself with it. The nightmare is tormenting me.

*Elsa* And where do you find it? Out here in the open sea? The reality that you feel tormented by only exists in your imagination. It's an obsession of your mind. Reality is that freedom we still enjoy out here on the open sea in the paradise of our cruise.

*Louis* Which we don't know if it is real or not.

*Elsa* Louis, try to be rational and realistic. We still have a life, while you are denying it to yourself.

*Jerry (entering suddenly)* So this is where you are hiding! We are playing cards up there. Why don't you join us?

*Elsa* Is that your only reason for breaking in?

*Jerry* I think you need a drink. May I offer you a drink? (*shows his bottle*)

*Louis* You and your bottles. Aren't you afraid to become an alcoholic for all your drinking?

*Jerry* No danger. I am already an accomplished one. It's part of the profession. I am already professional and can't be more educated in the field.

*Elsa* You are a clown.

*Jerry* I have paid for it in the ticket. The bar is always open, and we may take what we want. It's on the company. We are privileged as refugees from the war and should avail ourselves of the opportunity. Even in the direst of straits you must at least try to make the best of it.

*Louis* Of course you are right, but I still maintain that you should take whisky with certain moderation, like it's not good for your health either to take too great amounts of medicine.

*Jerry* Stick to your measures, and I'll stick to mine.

*Elsa* What did you really come down here for?

*Jerry* We were worried upstairs when you did not show up for dinner. We feared that you might perhaps have committed some common suicide or got stuck in too deep depressions.

*Louis* Our depressions can't get any deeper, at least not mine, but that's not why we chose to decline from dinner.

*Elsa* We needed some rest and recuperation. You get cloyed by eating too much, while fasting is always good for your health.

*Jerry* Yes, instead of eating you could always have a drink. (*drinks directly from the bottle*) Are you sure you don't want any?

*Louis* A small dram couldn't do any harm.

*Jerry* That's the spirit! (*pours him a small glass*)

*Elsa* That will be on an empty stomach, Louis.

*Jerry* Then it will be the more effective.

*Elsa* Why do you drink, Jerry, really? Is it just to get detached from our impossible situation?

*Jerry* It's more to get away from worrying too much about it. Under the influence you can at least joke about it. Isn't it actually rather grotesquely funny? Here we float around the ocean abandoned and alone under no protection like a perfect target for the entire German submarine fleet to torpedo like on invitation, which it for some reason declines to accept, maybe just because we are alone without a convoy, so they just don't care about a single harmless boat while we easily can sneak across to America, perhaps without ever reaching the other side. What do you think, Louis?

*Louis* I think we will get there in the end, although we travel so dead slow in spite of the war and all those threatening submarines, but actually I don't mind and don't care. I already tried to commit suicide a number of times, and I would have succeeded in London if my wife hadn't interrupted me, so if we get sunk and hit the bottom it suits me just as well as if and when we would reach America and there probably be subjected to harsher conditions than those of the more cultural Europe. After all, there is no Paris and no Vienna in America and not even any London.

*Jerry* Instead we have New York, which can't be matched by anything in Europe.

*Louis* But I don't know any person there.

*Jerry* You know me. That's enough to get connections. New York is swarming with exiled cultural Europeans. You will easily get the right contacts in Carnegie Hall.

*Louis* We'll see when and if we reach that far.

*Elsa* I am sure we will get there and that you will be able to continue working there, Louis.

*Louis* The question is if I want to continue as long as the war goes on.

*(There is a knock on the door by someone)*

*Jerry* Here is the next visitor wondering where we are and how we are doing.

*Robert* So, here you are hiding away! Why don't you come up? Were you not supposed to go and get them Jerry?

*Jerry* We got stuck here with the bottle.

*Robert* I can see it. But there are more bottles up there.

*Jerry* We are in no hurry as long as this bottle lasts.

*Elsa* Is that your therapy, to handle the war situation and the constant threat of extinction and our critical uncertainty about the real situation?

*Robert* Is there any other possibility? For my part, I consider us all hopelessly lost. We don't know who has taken us for a ride or why, we don't know if we are alive or dead, we don't know anything about our destination, and the ship seems rather be guided by some higher destiny than by an invisible command that refuses to have anything to do with us.

*Jerry* For security reasons, our steward says.

*Robert* I take it as a joke or at best as a fake explanation. I am sure we will never reach America. Then we might as well as Jerry avail ourselves of the situation to explore and exploit the bar.

*Elsa* Isn't it a little unnecessary to thus give up in advance and ignore the mere possibility of any hope?

*Robert* My lady, I have been through all this before. I know what reality is about. It doesn't show, but the world is doomed and has been so since long, to be exact since the outbreak of the last world war. There is no hope for man. She is hopelessly self-destructive. We are sailing across a minefield with lurking hostile u-boats, who are longing to bring us down.

*Louis* Then why don't they do it?

*Robert* A very good question. Don't forget that we perhaps don't exist. We are perhaps all dead already. Our existence here on board is maybe just a dream, perhaps even an illusion, perhaps some vain wishful thinking, a mirage that at any moment could be proved to be just thin air – or actually be proved a reality by a torpedo from a u-boat, and in that case we shall all really be dead indeed. That's perhaps in fact the only thing we can hope for.

*Jerry* Robert is the wisest of us. He has been in it before. He had his life ruined already in the last war and could never return to normal, so he knows what he is talking about when he sees through a reality that does not exist which is only an illusion, an unreal dream, which we have the possibility to adorn by the actual access to unlimited amounts of liquor of the best quality and with only the best whisky. I consider it an honour, Robert, that we are colleagues in the same boat.

*Robert* Are you also hoping for an awakening by a torpedo?

*Jerry* The fact is, that such a torpedo would actually prove that we really were alive up to this moment and that our existence here on board was not just a dream but a reality that surpassed and transcended the dream.

*Louis* I think it's time for me to refill my glass and keep you company.

*Jerry* That's the spirit! You are getting wise and learning something, Louis!

*Louis* You only live once.

*Robert* Even that is relative. It has never been proved that you don't get another chance after death. Many live just for that chance, especially in these times. Many greet death as a liberator, whether they see that chance or not. That's another kind of realism.

*Elsa* You are getting very metaphysical.

*Robert* Wouldn't that be the very meaning of our absurd journey, that we should realize and learn something from the metaphysical reality as something superior to mundane things?

*Jerry* Cheers! There is more left if your glasses are empty.

*Robert* Our lady here hasn't had any drink yet.

*Elsa* Thank you, I'll wait for my turn. It's not good to drink on an empty stomach.

*Jerry* On the contrary. That's when it's most efficient.

*Robert* Here is another melancholy one. (*Harold has just appeared.*)

*Harold* They are worried about you upstairs.

*Jerry* Welcome, Sir Harold. You look as if you needed a drink.

*Robert* How did you know we were here?

*Harold* We assumed as much, since we sent down Jerry and Robert to look for you. I heard voices, so I didn't bother to knock.

*Jerry* What's the appearance of the black hole we are slipping out through from up there?

*Harold* What black hole?

*Jerry* You likened our journey with gradually disappearing into a black hole, and that black hole ought to be the entire universe. We could hardly get out of it.

*Harold* There is nothing new. We still believe we could obtain some information from the steward, but he just keeps dodging us.

*Jerry* As long as he serves his drinks he is doing his job.

*Harold* But what is his job? To guide us down the black hole?

*Robert* I don't think we could completely exclude the possibility that we are still part of reality and that our steward is just an ordinary employee, as he claims.

*Jerry* We will have an answer to our question when we get torpedoed, was the agreement we already reached.

*Harold* You sound as if you longed for that incident.

*Robert* At worst we will then be fished out and saved by the submarine crew.

*Louis* Unfortunately we have grown rather defeatist here, Sir Harold. Could you form a brighter aspect of the situation?

*Harold* Neither brighter nor dark enough. The whole world is at mortal peril, since humanity is trying to extirpate itself, but we are alive and still have the possibility to make the best of it.

*Jerry* Have your drink at last, Sir. Are the others all right upstairs?

*Harold* Or else I wouldn't have dared to leave them.

*Robert* This whole situation reminds me of a scene in a film with the Marx brothers, where more and more are coming to visit a cabin, constantly getting more crowded, so that the throng gradually becomes critical.

*Jerry* We are not crowded yet, but if the whisky runs out I am afraid we'll have to evacuate the cabin.

*Louis* Perhaps we might as well do it at once before it gets too crowded.

*Jerry* Wait a moment longer. At least we'll have to finish the whisky bottle first.

*Benjamin (entering)* Are you all right here?

*Jerry* Welcome, Benjamin! Don't we look all right?

*Benjamin* When more and more disappeared down here we started to suspect that you were celebrating a party.

*Jerry* And that's why you came down to join in. Welcome. You did the very right thing.

*Benjamin* Is there any possibility that you might have found out something about the problem of our journey?

*Jerry* What is the problem?

*Benjamin* That we don't know anything about it, that we are at the mercy of providence, that no one has informed us about our destination or given us any timetable, and that the ship's command seems non-existent.

*Robert* Just because we haven't seen anyone of them it doesn't necessarily mean that they don't exist. Someone is still running and steering the ship.

*Benjamin* So you haven't got anywhere closer to the mystery problem.  
*Jerry* We don't have to, as long as we have whisky free of charge.  
*Benjamin* Sooner or later there must be some sobriety.  
*Jerry* We'll deal with that problem when it turns up. For my part the booze is welcome to hang on all the way to New York.  
*Benjamin* So you still think we will reach that port?  
*Jerry* Why shouldn't we? There is nothing to prove that we won't as long as we don't get torpedoed.  
*Benjamin* Pardon me, Jerry, but as long as we go on this dead slow and without any escort, the risk to get torpedoed and sunk will constantly grow worse and more imminent.  
*Louis* I never had anything against a quick and efficient end on my life.  
*Benjamin* Think of the others. You do have fellow passengers.  
*Robert* I think we are all rather stoically indifferent to the aspect of death. After all, we have all lived with the constant presence of death all since the blitz started, and we never got out of its immediate and imminent present danger throughout this voyage.

*(A prudent knock.)*

*Elsa* Someone wants to get in.  
*Benjamin* It sounds like too prudent a knock to be anyone of us.  
*Robert* Open the door then and let's see who it is.  
*Elsa (opens. The steward is there. All are surprised.)*  
*Walter* Excuse me for disturbing your nice gathering, but unfortunately I bring you some bad news.  
*Louis* What has happened?  
*Walter* One of your fellow passengers has gone over board.  
*Jerry* Who?  
*Walter* Ruben Vanderbilt.  
*Benjamin* The first one who questioned the reality of our situation, the one who had given up about humanity.  
*Jerry* How did you discover it?  
*Walter* When he didn't show up for dinner I went down to see if he was ill. No one opened when I knocked. So I went in. Then I found his note of departure.  
*Robert* What does it say?  
*Walter* I have it here. I think he would have liked me to read it to you.  
*Robert* Please do.  
*Walter (reading from a note)* "Pardon me, but I cannot stand it any more, the uncertainty, the tension, the constant worry about not knowing anything, and I think we have as small a chance as all humanity. I don't want to be part of it any more. Pardon me." And his signature. That is all.  
*Jerry* What will the company say about that? A suicide on board is very bad publicity. There will undoubtedly be some investigation and interrogation when we reach land.

Walter I am afraid so, even if the farewell note says everything.

Louis He had every right to take his fate in his own hands. I understand him.

Elsa But what will this mean to our journey?

Walter That's why I came down to see you, to inform you, that the others are waiting for you at the bar. They want to talk this over. There seems to be an opportunity.

Jerry An opportunity of what?

Benjamin Now if ever there are crucial reasons for contact not only with the command but also by radio contact with authorities ashore.

Walter That's the very thing. We have wired the company, and they have offered you a way out of this awkward situation.

Benjamin And the command?

Walter The command has agreed to the suggestion. You will all have the opportunity of direct escort ashore on much shorter time if you would accept to be transported the rest of the way on a submarine.

Jerry (*breaking the silence of all considerations*) No thank you. I would prefer to remain on board to enjoy the advantages of the cruise. A submarine would only give me claustrophobia.

Louis Me too.

Walter That's what the others wished to discuss with you at the bar.

Benjamin What is their preference?

Walter They have different views, but a majority seems inclined to remain on board.

Robert Let's go up then and meet them and conclude the evening with a riveting discussion about our future destiny.

Walter Excellent. Just take it easy, gentlemen, and take your time. There is no hurry. The bar is open all night, and the others are also rather uncertain. I shall tell them that you are coming.

Robert Thank you, Walter. (*The steward leaves.*) That was a most unexpected turn of events. Do you really want to go on with this unendurable voyage of destiny?

Louis That's the question.

Jerry If there will be only you and me, Louis, do we then wish to be the only passengers on board?

Elsa I will stay with you in that case.

Benjamin I think Robert is as hesitant as I.

Jerry I have another suggestion.

The others Well?

Jerry I suggest that we all have another glass before going up to the bar.

Robert (*happier*) Excellent suggestion!

(*The mood gets more relaxed, and Jerry gladly refills all the glasses.*)

Scene 9. The bar.

*Herbert* If the condition was serious earlier, it is now critical.

*Mabel* What do you think the others will say?

*Doris* I think most of them would like to stay on board.

*Herbert* And continue this nightmare journey under the constant risk of getting torpedoed?

*Doris* We managed well so far.

*Herbert* Consider, that the submarine alternative would immediately place us all out of risk, while at the same time we would reach New York considerably swifter and safer.

*Mabel* So you don't think that even the submarine possibility could be a part of our great unreal illusion about reality?

*Herbert* I don't think the steward is just making things up.

*Doris* Here he is now.

*Walter* They are coming. They just wanted to finish their drinks first.

*Herbert* Were they celebrating something?

*Walter* No, but Jerry had brought a bottle of whisky with him down to them.

*Mabel* Then they are prepared at least.

*Doris* I bet that they all want to remain on board. Jerry doesn't want to miss his free access to the bar.

*Mabel* Here they are now. (*Enter the others.*)

*Doris* Well, boys, what do you say? Isn't it a funny situation?

*Herbert* A suicide is no joke, Doris. It's actually the most serious of all human actions and always caused by the most difficult and incurable of all human conditions.

*Harold* The doctor has spoken.

*Herbert* You must realize the seriousness of the situation. One of us has chosen to bereave himself of his life in despair over the situation in which we all are, alone on an ocean swarming with murderous u-boats, without any contact with the command and with only a steward to take care of us. We know our destination is New York, but we don't know if we'll ever reach it, since even this journey has been questioned and caused considerable doubts concerning its reality. Ruben was the one of us who first presented the hypothesis that our journey in fact was a phantom of our imagination and at best pure wishful thinking, since we all very well might have been casualties of that car accident that was bombed on its way out of London, since none of us even has any memory of having been in that car.

*Walter* Perhaps I at last could explain something of the mystery. We have now been in touch with the port authorities of New York, which actually have answered some of your questions about your situation. I was informed, that since the ship anyway had been cleared and bound for New York with a classified cargo demanding absolute secrecy, the company agreed to take on the unfortunate stranded passengers who by a hair's breadth had escaped being bombed on their

way out of London. They offered this ship at their disposal in order to relieve and ease the difficult situation for the company.

*Benjamin* Does that mean that we are the only passengers of the ship?

*Walter* Yes.

*Benjamin* And the crew? Is there any crew? Is there any chance for us to get in touch with the command?

*Walter* As soon as you reach land. Remember that this ship is classified and top secret for its invaluable cargo, which must reach America intact without having been noticed and revealed by anyone.

*Harold* So there is no use even asking what the cargo is all about.

*Walter* No. I don't know it myself.

*Harold* May one even wonder whether the cargo would give the Germans reasons for sinking this ship?

*Walter* They don't know about it. No one knows about it. Therefore I can't answer your question.

*Robert* That reminds me of the 'Lusitania' incident that was sunk in the last war by the Germans, because it carried smuggled explosives on board, which America tried to get across to England under the pretence that it was an untouchable passenger ship.

*Benjamin* That disaster with thousands of passengers on board became one of the major reasons for America to enter the war.

*Harold* I hope that we at least are not carrying mass weapons of explosives in the cargo?

*Walter* Not to my knowledge. They learned something from the 'Lusitania'.

*Herbert* To the point! Do we wish to remain on board or to accept being carried by a u-boat safely all the way across?

*Louis* No u-boat gives access to any piano. I stay on.

*Elsa* Me too.

*Jerry* I don't want to lose the bar that easily. There is no bar on any u-boat.

*Robert* Even less any whisky.

*Jerry* Exactly. I don't want to risk losing everything I have got here.

*Robert* I will stay with you to keep you company.

*Herbert* Even if only a few would prefer the submarine alternative, it would still be an opportunity for those few. No one has to go on it against his will.

*Mabel* I am happy in my cabin and wouldn't have it replaced by considerably stricter conditions on a u-boat, where you would hardly even be allowed any privacy.

*Doris* I take the risk of getting torpedoed, which appears a much more exciting prospect than to have the cruise interrupted and be brought to New York at once. This is an adventure. I don't want to miss it.

*Herbert* Sir Harold?



*Harold* That might be the deciding point. The human factor will be much more interesting to study on board under constant mortal danger than closed up in a claustrophobic submarine.

*Herbert* Does that mean that no one is accepting the offer?

*Jerry* So it seems, doctor.

*Louis* Perhaps I can understand Ruben better than anyone else here, since I have been a potential suicide myself. It's true as the doctor says. A suicide is the supreme human tragedy, for like you save an entire world if you save someone's life, an entire world is lost if someone commits suicide. I will gladly remain on board, and if it is suicidal, at least it isn't voluntary so.

*Harold* It's braver to accept a challenge and remain on board under constant mortal danger, than to accept a safe delivery on a u-boat as a more comfortable alternative for a lazy and passive passenger.

*Benjamin* I agree that it could be more rewarding and interesting and even beneficial for the edification of the character to continue following this mortally perilous journey.

*Jerry* I am sorry, doctor. No one wants to follow your sound advice. We would rather remain on board and have our whisky for comfort.

*Herbert* Still it gives great credit and honour to the company for having succeeded in arranging an alternative.

*Harold* Absolutely.

*Benjamin* Won't you accept it yourself?

*Herbert* A doctor never abandons his patients. We are all in the same boat, and I have assumed a certain responsibility for all of you, especially after the demise of Ruben Vanderbilt. There must not be another suicide. Therefore I stick with you.

*Robert* Do you think there is any risk for another?

*Herbert* Ruben was not in any more difficult position than any of us. If he could do it, anyone could. Anyone can have suicidal thoughts, and only if he shares them with others he could be considered out of risk. Almost all who commit suicide and who succeed therewith finally commit it, because they have no one to talk with in the critical decisive moment, when the decision is taken and the act is committed.

*Robert* You sound as if you spoke of experience.

*Herbert* I do.

*Louis* As I said, I understand Ruben and his course of action. What are we humans to the world today? What are we to this world the leading powers of which now for the second time in twenty-five years insist on trying to sacrifice all humanity in a meaningless world war? What is this ship more than a vanishing spot on the sea of eternity? Who cares about us? As Ruben pointed out, none of us has really any relative ashore who cares about us. To the ruling powers of the world, we are just a figure if even that, and if we are lost at sea we will just be a jot in the statistics. They say that Stalin cynically expressed himself about executions, that a murder is a murder but that a million murders is just statistics. Ruben refused to accept himself as just a figure. But as a living man existing on this gradually vanishing boat, what

am I with all my enriched Austrian culture and musical knowledge and mastership with a universal world repertoire, what am I to this monstrous automatic mechanised and robotized new world with apocalyptic stagings of mass murders galore more than an ignominious figure, that might not even be included in the statistics? Against this annulment of all things human, Ruben protested with his maximum power and right as an individual in the only possible way as forced into a dead end of a corner of a blind alley by committing suicide, which was his only final possibility of any protest against eternity.

*Jerry* Another insurance against suicide is not to be sober. Only people who are too sober generally commit suicide.

*Robert* Do you mean that only they see any reason for it?

*Jerry* Something like that. The reasons are always there and good enough indeed with a surplus, but under the influence you usually wholesomely forget their existence.

*Herbert* There is actually some truth in what Jerry says.

*Louis* Also music is usually enough uplifting and inspiring, if it is genuine, to disperse the awareness of the universal misery. Instead you are elevated to ideal levels of a better world of spirituality.

*Benjamin* It was some time ago since we last heard you play anything, Mr Loewenhaupt. What about a small recital?

*Harold* Just to disperse all possible tendencies to suicide.

*Louis* What do you wish to hear? Any wishes?

*Mabel* Something romantic.

*Harold* But not Chopin. He is too melancholy.

*Benjamin* And not Bach. He is too dry.

*Robert* Some Mendelssohn or Schumann would be nice.

*Louis* Mendelssohn's music has been banned and forbidden all over the third reich for the sake of his Jewish ancestry. That makes him, a dead composer who died all too soon at the age of only thirty-eight, a martyr to the dominating political establishment of Europe, which thereby desecrates him after his death.

*Harold* That says something about the innate hopeless barbarity of all politics.

*(Louis goes out to the grand piano, and soon Mendelssohn's "Lieder ohne Worte" are being heard, while the others make themselves comfortable in listening.)*

*Gothenburg 5-7 November 2019,  
with additions 23.12  
and April 2020.*

