

## Youth Short Story Category – 1<sup>st</sup> Prize 2020

# AN ATLANTIC NIGHT

By Elly Miechel

The cabin door burst open.

“*Ma cherie*, wake the children. Hurry – we have little time.”

Pierre strode the ten feet across the cabin’s wooden boards and placed a cold, sweaty hand against my perplexed cheek.

I blinked, “What is it? What is the matter? I – I’ve just put them back to sleep - ” I nodded towards Colette and Louis, their small, sleeping figures dozing soundly in the bunk.

“Wake them. We must hurry.” His eyes, the colour of the sapphire sea below us, met my own with such intensity that, for a moment, the breath stopped dead in my throat.

Somewhere, buried deep in a subliminal consciousness, I knew what was happening. We’d all felt the jolt; every cabin aboard the ship had shaken, menacing and deliberate, waking me from a nervous sleep.

My wide eyes locked with his. “It’s sinking.”

Pierre gripped the iron bedpost. My whole body seemed to convulse within, churning and threatening to tear me apart. It couldn’t be happening. Surely. Surely there must be some mistake.

“I was on deck, Blanche - I saw the ice debris. It’s serious. There’s a panic. We must get up on deck before they close the gates.” He started grabbing clothes, books, and other belongings, jamming them into our worn, leather suitcase without hesitation.

I felt my blood run cold. It was as if the iceberg had missed the ship and rammed into my trembling body instead, knocking the breath from my lungs and rendering me speechless. The cabin, small beforehand, now seemed claustrophobic.

My dilated pupils drank in the sight of the children – Louis’ arm wrapped protectively around his younger sister as they drifted through a distant land, many miles from the disaster they would wake to.

“Colette,” I croaked, gently caressing my daughter’s silken, blonde curls. “Colette, you must wake up, *mon cherie*.”

Her young eyelids dreamily fluttered open as she shifted under the blanket, stirring Louis as she stretched. Their crystal irises gazed at me, disoriented, and my heart melted in an effusion of motherly affection. I had to get them off the ship; nothing else mattered.

Louis’ cough broke the trance. “Mama? Papa? What is going on?” His smooth forehead folded quizzically as his eyes darted from one parent to the next, searching for answers.

Without leaving the suitcases, Pierre glanced over at Louis, a weak smile barely concealing the terror I knew he was feeling. “Louis, you must be a big boy now. There is a problem with the ship, but I’m sure -,” he glanced at me, “I’m sure the captain will fix it.” I could hear the quiver in his voice.

The yellow lamp suddenly flickered, leaving us, for a moment, in total blackness. Colette whimpered, unaccustomed to being woken twice in one night.

“But, Mama? Will we still get to see *Amérique*? Our new home?” probed Louis, his small hand creeping tentatively into my own like a lock and key.

I squeezed it, mustering a contrived smile, and soothed, “*Oui cherie*.”

Was I lying through my teeth? No point in speculating - there simply wasn’t the time.

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The stark white corridors of E Deck seemed to close upon us, engulfing our bodies within an eternal snowy maze. Pierre, the suitcase in one hand and clutching Louis with the other, strode briskly in front, stopping only to turn and check that Colette and I were paces behind. Despite my ethereal, deafeningly silent surroundings, my insides screamed with adrenaline. I held

Colette tightly to my chest, trembling and tense. The suffocatingly narrow corridors wound left, right, right, left as we passed cabins upon cabins, soundless with sleeping families.

I could sense my husband thinking it too - if we woke them, they'd at least have a chance.

"Pierre? We must warn them." The thought of all those innocent lives drowning in their slumber made me nauseous.

He stopped then, turning to me with eyes that poured with sorrow. "*Non* – if we wake them, we'll never get off this ship."

Pain, sharp and bitter as icicles, pierced my heart. He was right. We needed to escape the lower decks before the crowds began to swarm and the crew closed the gates. We needed to fight to survive.

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It had been a challenging Parisian winter. The snow had fallen thickly, smothering the streets in a layer of white slush. In our bare apartment, Colette and Louis had been forced to spend the days in their bed beneath a thin blanket, curling up together to keep their young bodies from freezing. I was powerless. Pierre couldn't find work, and he relied on his sister for the few supplies and food we had. It seemed an endless fight for survival. And so, when we first heard the news that a ship, the *RMS Titanic* – the largest passenger vessel ever to journey the seas – was heading to America, the land of a new life, Pierre and I had bundled up the children and boarded a train to the Cherbourg docks. *Unsinkable*, they'd claimed. We couldn't believe our luck as the majestic ship's horn blasted its arrival. Our future lay before us like the dazzling blue jewel of water. It had seemed a dream.

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Biting wind stung our stunned faces. On the upper deck, masses of well-dressed ladies and gentlemen, swathed in long greatcoats and furs, bustled about. From beneath our feet, the big ship groaned. It really was sinking.

Taking in his surroundings like a whip, Pierre signalled to a queue forming beside the railing. Crewmen were rapidly untangling the ropes around lifeboats, their panicked faces red against the black starry night.

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“Like I said afore, mister, first-class passengers only.”

The ruddy youth looked us up and down, screwing his eyes up at our patched coats and worn leather boots.

Calmly, Pierre managed a smile. “Please, sir. Only four of us,” he pleaded, in his best English.

The crewman stepped back. “Frenchies, ay? Listen. I don’t give a rat’s tail if there’s a hundred of ya – like I said, we’re only taking first class. Wait ya turn.” He pushed Pierre aside and beckoned for a young couple, guiding them into a lifeboat.

Fuming, Pierre grabbed my hand and nudged us over to a vacant wooden bench. I sat down, exhausted by the long walk up to the deck, my frigid muscles slowly easing their tight grip on Colette. The children yawned and shivered, burying their cold faces into our coats. There was nothing else to do but wait. Looking around at the orderly scene before me – courteous ladies and gentlemen waiting patiently in straight lines as crewmen directed them to lifeboats - I sensed the chaos was yet to begin.

I gazed at Pierre, the one solid space in this nightmare. He kneaded my raw fingers soothingly, and I nestled my weary head on his firm shoulder. There was no horizon beyond the ship’s railing, only infinite darkness; my eyes seemed to lose themselves in the ebony night.

The ship was motionless, floating listlessly on the enormous black sea. It was as if we were in a kind of stasis. The monster below creaked and moaned, tilting its body so that we had to grasp at the bench to stop from sliding. Elegant ladies gasped at the sudden movement and clung to their husbands’ in fear. What was to become of us? Were we to be devoured by the savage beast, choking on saltwater? It couldn’t be a dream – the wind bit too viciously for my imagination.

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“Calling all women and children! All women and children on deck,” yelled the crewman closest to us. Down the length of the ship, others took up the same call, and suddenly the air became a salty thick cacophony of cries, moans and tears as fathers parted from their families and sons kissed their mothers’ goodbye.

My heart stopped. Pierre.

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Bitter tears blinded my vision. Pierre, fat droplets in his eyes, kissed me and the children, swallowing the urge to scream. Louis and Colette started crying too, clutching their strong father, unsure as to what was happening but alarmed by their parents’ show of emotion. It was surreal. “I can’t, I can’t, *non, non*,” I sobbed through gritted teeth.

Pierre grabbed me firmly and fought the lump that rose in his throat. “*Oui*, you can, Blanche. You must. Be strong for our children, and I’ll see you in *Amerique*. I love you, *ma cherie*.”

Just as he bent to kiss me for a final time, a loud bang rang out across the deck. Screams cracked the heavy air.

“Somebody shot a crewman!” a man yelled.

People started shoving forcefully and pushing their way towards lifeboats. I was swept up in the moving chaos, too stunned to fight back. In the mayhem, I glanced around me. They were gone.

“Pierre! Pierre!” I shrieked.

Before I had a chance to grasp what was happening, someone pushed me into a lifeboat. The hard wooden boards thumped my shoulder, and burning pain sliced through my arm. I could barely feel it.

“Cut the ropes!”

Crewmen flashed before me, swiftly severing the hemp fibres with glinting knives. To my horror, the wooden boat began to descend. I lay, dazed and staring up at the ship’s railing, my heart pounding into oblivion.

“*Non, non*, stop...” I mumbled helplessly.

The boat continued its journey down the side of the black ship, jolting, sporadically, as the ropes unravelled. Through the blurry flood of tears I made out my family, their small heads peeping over the railing at me, mouths open in silent screams.