

# Now Is The Hour

a play about events following the sinking of the troopship  
Laconia, 12<sup>th</sup> September 1942, based on survivors' accounts

by

David Walter Hall

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David Walter Hall (author)  
[plays@davidwalterhall.com](mailto:plays@davidwalterhall.com)

Peter Christopherson (producer)  
[peterchristopherson@hotmail.com](mailto:peterchristopherson@hotmail.com)

[www.davidwalterhall.com](http://www.davidwalterhall.com)

## Characters

### **Doris**

Doris M Hawkins, 31, English (RP), nurse, returning to England after five years' service as a nurse in Palestine.

### **Colonel**

Charles Stevens, 44, English (rough RP), lieutenant colonel, British Army, former Oxford Blue rugby player and career soldier.

### **Kat**

Katriona Lennox, 29, Scottish (RP), wife of Major Robert Lennox, British Army, returning to Scotland and her two young sons (John 6, Donald 4).

### **Peter**

Peter Medhurst, 24, New Zealander, lieutenant, RN Fleet Air Arm, returning to UK after 18 months based in Egypt.

### **Purslow**

Geoffrey Purslow, 26, English (RP), ship's doctor on board the Laconia.

### **Mac**

Simon McLusker, 20, English (Liverpool), able seaman RN, returning to England after duty in Mediterranean protecting Malta convoys.

### **A further six male sailors and soldiers:**

Coots (28), Robbie (20), Stubbs (20), Captain Simpson (51), Captain Thomas (27) and Spanner (18)

Peter, Doris, and Purslow all represent real people. Some biographical details are invented.

Kat and Mac are based on real people. Their names have been changed to conceal their identities.

The other characters are fictitious.

SCENE 1

12<sup>TH</sup> SEPTEMBER 1942 - DAY 0, LATE AT  
NIGHT

A BUGLE CALL PLAYS. WE SEE THE  
CHARACTERS PASSING TIME ON A LONG SEA  
JOURNEY.

DORIS: (VOICEOVER) Peter gave me his cigarette case when he realised that he could not go on much longer, and asked that if I lived I would send it to his mother in New Zealand. He told me your address, but I couldn't remember it as I was pretty weak myself at the time.

Peter died from the effects of exposure and privation on the night of Saturday the 26<sup>th</sup> of September 1942. He did not suffer acutely - none of them did. They just grew weaker and gradually faded. I think that he found the sailing that he had done on his holidays very useful: he was a great help to us.

WE HEAR THE CRASH OF A TORPEDO  
EXPLODING. DISTRESSED, CHAOTIC MUSIC  
BREAKS OUT. THE PANIC OF ABANDONING  
SHIP IS ALL AROUND.

ALL EXCEPT FOR MAC BOARD A LIFEBOAT  
WITH ROPES AND ROPE LADDERS, LIT BY  
FLARES AND TORCHES.

THE COLONEL TAKES CHARGE. AD LIB  
DIALOGUE AS HE USHERS THE MEN INTO THE  
BOAT.

COLONEL: In! Cootsy! In! You! Move it! Madam, this way.  
Gently.

DORIS: Thank you.

COLONEL: And you, yes, quick now.

KAT: Coming.

DORIS: The baby!

COLONEL: What baby?

DORIS: (POINTING) He's got it. He's carrying it.

COLONEL: Alright get him in here.

KAT: Peter!

COLONEL: Men, this is a British boat. There will be no  
Italian prisoners of war on this boat. Hear me men

- hack their hands off if you have to, this boat is for British soldiers and civilians only. (TO DORIS) Where is he?

DORIS: He's coming now.

PETER IS LAST TO BOARD, CARRYING AN INFANT.

PETER SLIPS COMING DOWN A ROPE, AND THE INFANT FALLS INTO THE SEA.

THE MUSIC STOPS. PETER SWINGS INTO THE BOAT.

DORIS: Sally!

PETER: Oh God damn it!

DORIS: Oh please! Oh dear!

PETER: She's gone. Gone. She's gone.

DORIS: Oh Lord bless her soul.

PETER: God! I couldn't... I'm sorry...

DORIS: You did what you could.

KAT: Oh Peter. Dear. Thank God.

COLONEL: That's it. Let's get moving. Or we'll be sucked down with her when she goes. Come on!

THEY ROW. MUSIC PLAYS. THE SHIP BEIND THEM SINKS, FOLLOWED BY A TERRIBLE EXPLOSION. DAWN COMES.

SCENE 2

DAY 1, DAWN

PURSLOW AND PETER ARE STANDING,  
SCANNING THE HORIZON. THE COLONEL IS  
WITH THEM, SEATED. THE REST ARE  
ASLEEP.

PETER: See the sharks?

PURSLOW: Mako longfins. They'll have been attracted by the blood.

PETER: Man-eaters?

PURSLOW: Only in wartime.

PETER: Bloody hell. Makos, yeah?

PURSLOW: Have you heard of them?

PETER: Don't think so, no.

PURSLOW: Well, I suppose you might say they're New Zealanders.

PETER: Really? How d'you mean?

PURSLOW: It's the name. "Mako" means something or other in Maori. So I suppose that makes them Maoris, technically.

PETER: I thought he was looking at me a bit funny. Hee'sa Maoriao shark-a-fella! Yeah-ao. Ka mate, ka mate! Ka ora! Ka ora! Ka mate, ka mate! Ka ora! Ka ora!

COLONEL: Come on lads, look ship shape.

PURSLOW: Aye aye. (LAUGHS)

PETER: Aw no. Look now. He's found his breakfast. That's horrible.

PURSLOW: Oh God save us all.

THE OTHERS REACT WITH SHOCK AND HORROR  
AT THE SHARKS EATING THE SURROUNDING  
CORPSES.

THE COLONEL STANDS.

COLONEL: Good morning ladies and gentlemen. Please, let's not watch that. Just listen to me. As Lieutenant Colonel, and the highest ranking officer aboard, I would like to formally take charge of this vessel. Are there any objections? Much obliged. Now, I am

an army man so I will be relying on the sailors among you for some guidance. Here is our situation. It is not grave, but neither is it secure. We have, it seems, become separated from the other boats during the night. Our best hope is that we may be picked up by a rescue vessel in the next few days. But we must nevertheless make plans for the worst, and I propose that in the meantime we make a course for the African coast - which we believe to be approximately six-hundred miles north-north-east of where we sank. We have a compass and some blankets. Those who are physically able will have to take their place at the oars.

However, we have no rockets, no flares, no sail and no rudder. We have no medicine chest.

DORIS: Why not?

PURSLOW: They were most likely stolen while the Laconia was in port. This tends to happen.

COLONEL: Thank you. Now, the rationing situation. This man here is Doctor Purslow. He was ship's doctor on the Laconia. We have a nurse on board as well...

DORIS: Doris Hawkins.

COLONEL: Obligated. Doctor Purslow and I will be responsible for the distribution of rations, twice daily: four Horlick's tablets and three pieces of chocolate in the morning; two biscuits and a teaspoon of Pemmican in the evening, and two ounces of water. If you've never had Pemmican before, it's meat paste, and you've not missed anything. In the event that we are not rescued, these will last us some way towards the coast.

SILENCE

DORIS: Do we know where we are?

COLONEL: We think so... We are in the Southern Atlantic, probably two-hundred miles or so south of the Equator, and as I've said, approximately six-hundred from the African coast.

KAT: And what are our chances?

PURSLOW: If we are rescued soon, they are good. If we aren't, they're bad.

KAT: And what chance that we're rescued?

COLONEL: It's not in our hands I'm afraid.

SILENCE

PURSLOW: The ladies may use the bucket here, for their ablutions.

SILENCE

DORIS: Why do we not row back?

COLONEL: To where?

DORIS: Back towards where the Laconia was when she was sunk. If they send a rescue ship, won't it be nearer to there?

COLONEL: We'd be more likely to find a pack of U-Boats there. They'll gun us down. We can't risk that.

DORIS: But will a rescue ship find us where a U-Boat will not? Doctor?

PURSLOW: I understand...

COLONEL: On a north-north-easterly course we are more likely to meet an Allied shipping lane.

DORIS: But that's not the same as a rescue ship. It seems we're hedging our bets.

COLONEL: These decisions have not been taken lightly.

PURSLOW: North-north-east is our best hope right now. Honestly, Doris.

DORIS: Whose decision was it?

COLONEL: I am responsible for this vessel. I have explained to you our situation. Your support would be appreciated.

DORIS: Very well.

COLONEL: Everyone's support is going to be appreciated, and indeed, essential. Thank you. Medhurst?

PETER: Yes?

COLONEL: You can row?

PETER: Yes.

COLONEL: And Purslow?

PURSLOW: Yes sir.

COLONEL: Good. To your stations then, let's get moving.

PURSLOW AND PETER: Aye aye sir.

PETER AND PURSLOW BEGIN ROWING. TIME  
PASSES. MUSIC PLAYS.

SCENE 3

DAY 1, AFTERNOON

ROBBIE AND STUBBS ARE ROWING.

PETER: Look, look, look.

COLONEL: What?

PETER: Look over there. There's a raft full of survivors...

PURSLOW: How on Earth did they get this far?

COLONEL: Keep a steady course. They may try to board us.

PETER: Well of course they bloody will. They want our bleeding Pemmican. Why don't we look closer?

COLONEL: Keep a steady course Lieutenant.

PETER: Yes sir.

COLONEL: They look like Italians from here, and they'll be much better off waiting for one of their own subs.

PURSLOW: Colonel, we could at least tend to them, if they have injuries.

COLONEL: There are twenty of them doctor, and twelve of us. And they are the enemy, and we are still at war.

PURSLOW: We need only take their sick.

COLONEL: They're all going to be bloody well sick, aren't they? If they're bleeding they'll have been picked off by the sharks already.

PETER: One of them is swimming over.

COLONEL: Men, this is an order: you will defend this vessel by any means available. Lieutenant.

PETER: Yes sir?

COLONEL: Get the fire axe.

PETER: Yes sir.

COLONEL: No Italiano! Nono Italianos!

MAC APPEARS, SWIMMING TOWARDS THE BOAT.

MAC: I'm not Italian. English. Royal Navy.

COLONEL: What?

PURSLOW: He's one of ours!

PETER: (WITH AN AXE) Do we let him on?  
COLONEL: How many are with you?  
MAC: Just me. There's twenty-five Italians over there.  
They kicked me off.  
COLONEL: Let him aboard. Come aboard!

MAC SWIMS CLOSER, AND IS HELPED UP BY  
PETER AND THE COLONEL.

Lieutenant Colonel Charles Stevens, British Army.  
MAC: Able Seaman Simon McClusker, Royal Navy 24695, sir.  
COLONEL: Have a seat.  
MAC: Where are we heading?  
PETER: Africa.  
MAC: That's hundreds of miles away.  
PURSLOW: We are heading north-north-east, towards the coast,  
in case we don't get rescued.  
COLONEL: Do you have any information on our position?  
MAC: Yes sir. That's the right direction alright, but  
it's six-hundred miles.  
COLONEL: That's what we thought.  
MAC: I think they're sending ships.  
COLONEL: Who is?  
MAC: They said there'd be a French cruiser. And they  
put a call out to the allied ships, declaring it a  
neutral zone.  
COLONEL: Who did?  
MAC: The U-Boat commander.  
COLONEL: You saw a U-Boat?  
MAC: I was on one. Last night, after the Laconia went  
down, I was on a raft. Me and some of the other  
crew and a pack of them Italian P-O-W's, there all  
night. In the morning, the U-Boat must have  
realised what he'd sunk, and decided, seeing as she  
was mostly carrying the Italian prisoners, he'd  
better try and rescue some of 'em. So up he came,  
and the Germans started throwing us all ropes.  
Next thing we know we're up on deck and they're  
making us breakfast.

COLONEL: For the Italians?

MAC: For everyone. Anyone in sight. English, Aussies, women and children. They was real gentlemen to us.

PETER: Really?

MAC: Yeah. Strange, I know.

PURSLOW: We heard explosions...?

MAC: Yeah. That was then. When we was up waiting our turn for food, a plane came by over us. Goes away, comes back, and starts bombing us. Blew two of the lifeboats clean out of the water, and there's bodies floating everywhere, but he missed the sub. I was on deck at the time. The commander says he has to dive, so we all cleared off, quick as we could like, and I grabbed a bit of wood and started swimming, and wound up with that lot. And they wasn't so friendly.

PURSLOW: Lucky you found us then.

MAC: It's Doctor Purslow ain't it?

PURSLOW: That's right: Geoffrey.

MAC: Lucky we got you here 'n'all. People call me Mac, by the way.

COLONEL: Was it the same U-Boat that torpedoed us?

MAC: Yes, sir.

PETER: Still, nice of him to make you breakfast.

MAC: Like I said, they was gentlemen.

COLONEL: Did you get a look at the plane?

MAC: Yeah.

COLONEL: Do you know whose it was?

MAC: American. B-24 Liberator.

PETER: Aw Jesus these bloody Yanks...

COLONEL: Well they won't be sending any boats. Will they?

PURSLOW: What are the plans Colonel?

COLONEL: McClusker, how certain are you of our position in relation to the coast?

MAC: Positive. The U-Boat captain said it was one hundred and eighty-eight miles south of the

Equator, six hundred and something miles north-north-east to the coast.

COLONEL: Well then nothing has changed. We're as likely to find rescue here as we are a few miles on.

MAC: Are we seriously rowing to Africa?

COLONEL: Robbie, Stubbs, get to your stations. You'll have two hours to row before you're relieved.

ROBBIE AND STUBBS: Aye aye sir.

DAYLIGHT FADES TO NIGHT. TIME PASSES.  
MUSIC PLAYS.

SCENE 4

DAY 4, NOON

MAC AND PETER ARE ROWING, SLOWLY.  
PURSLOW IS ATTENDING THE SICK.

MAC: (PAUSING) One... Two... Three... Four...

MAC AND PETER: (ROWING) In, pull, out, feather.

PETER: (PAUSING) One... Two... Three... Four...

MAC AND PETER: (ROWING) In, pull, out, feather.

MAC: You know you're a pretty good rower for an airy fairy.

THEY MOUTH "IN, PULL, OUT, FEATHER" AND ROW.

PETER: A what?

MAC: For a pilot, you're really holding up - sir.

THEY MOUTH "IN, PULL, OUT, FEATHER" AND ROW.

PETER: I'm a damn good rower, but...

MAC: It's tough, isn't it?

PETER: Exactly. ...there's a limit.

THEY MOUTH "IN, PULL, OUT, FEATHER" AND ROW.

MAC: We're barely doing a knot. It's killing us.

PETER: Exactly.

MAC: There's no point, is there?

THEY MOUTH "IN, PULL, OUT, FEATHER" AND ROW.

PETER: Well yeah, I agree.

PURSLOW: Everything okay gentlemen? Any more sores or blisters?

PETER: Aw come on, it's getting worse, and the sunburn, and this bloody heat. We quitting?

MAC: Yeah.

COLONEL: Gentlemen you may not.

PETER: Honestly Colonel, I'm pushing my hardest, and I've passed out twice in an hour, an so's Mac; where is the logic in us exhausting ourselves, to the point of death?

COLONEL: It is an order.

MAC: Yes sir.

COLONEL: You may not like it but...

PETER: It's not that I don't like it, though naturally I don't. It's that it's impossible.

COLONEL: I beg your pardon.

PETER: The orders are wrong. Help me Mac.

MAC: I don't agree with the orders.

COLONEL: You don't have to. The orders are not yours to question.

PETER: Well I'm questioning them. You can row.

COLONEL: I have been rowing, just as we all have. I know how it feels. You will have to persevere.

PETER: For how long? We cannot row to Africa. We will all be dead.

MAC: The Lieutenant's right. We've been rowing four days now, and I don't think we're an eighth the way there. Our hands are bleeding.

COLONEL: Doctor, what's your opinion?

PURSLOW: I'm afraid to say I think the men are right.

COLONEL: Really?

PURSLOW: As a physician, I think they're right, and as a sailor, I think they're right. We haven't the man-power.

COLONEL: (TO ALL THE MEN) And you all agree do you?

THEY NOD, OR MUMBLE THEIR AGREEMENT.

I hadn't counted on a mutiny.

DORIS: The men are only trying to be rational.

MAC: This is not a mutiny.

COLONEL: Men, I remind you that you are British servicemen, and subjects of the King.

PURSLOW: May I make a suggestion?

COLONEL: Yes. What is it?

PURSLOW: We can make a sail, with the tarpaulin. It means using one oar as a mast and the other as a tiller, which means we can't row, and if it doesn't work or it breaks then we're a sight worse off than now, but I think it could work. I think we have enough rope for it, and if we can use the ladies' blanket as a jib, we might just have a sailing boat.

COLONEL: You didn't think of this earlier?

PURSLOW: No sir I didn't.

COLONEL: Get to it then gentlemen. Purslow is in charge.

PURSLOW: Thank you Colonel.

DORIS: The blanket Doctor. You're most welcome to it.

PURSLOW: Thank you.

THE MEN BEGIN CONSTRUCTING A MAST AND SAIL.

KAT: Doris, can I ask - you don't hold Peter to blame for losing Sally?

DORIS: Blame him? Of course not, no.

KAT: He's as strong as anything... He was doing everything he could.

DORIS: You haven't been worrying yourself about that, have you?

KAT: Oh, not really. On and off with everything else.

DORIS: I am sure that God took her immediately to Himself without suffering.

KAT: I really don't know what you think of him, not much I'm sure, but I hope you don't hold anything against him.

DORIS: He seems a good sailor. I know you're friends.

KAT: Have you spoken to him about it?

DORIS: No. It was an accident, a tragic one. We've quite enough on our hands without delving into what can't be helped.

KAT: Peter...?

DORIS: Katriona please!

PETER: Yeah?

KAT: How are your hands?

PETER: I'll cope.

KAT: Good.

PETER: Alright.

KAT: Doctor, is there anything else we might be doing to help?

PURSLOW: No, just - keep your strength, and we'll make sure you get the first go on the tiller.

KAT: (TO DORIS) But Sally, she was yours to look after. You'll have to inform her parents.

DORIS: Yes. Of course. They're in Palestine. I'll write to them as soon as we reach England.

KAT: Have they other children?

DORIS: No. They're only a young couple. She's a nurse. They told me that if anything happens and Sally has to go, that I must do all I can to save myself. So here I am, doing all I can.

KAT: It's terribly noble of them.

DORIS: I could not be replaced so easily as her they said.

KAT: Yes, quite. I have a medical question for you.

DORIS: Yes?

KAT: How will all this, the thirst, the dehydration and the hunger and the strain of it, how will it all affect an unborn child?

DORIS: Oh my goodness... Are you pregnant?

KAT: Four months.

DORIS: Really?

KAT: Yes.

DORIS: You needn't worry. After the first few months, the babies get tougher than the mothers. It'll pull through, so long as you do. I had no idea.

KAT: You haven't any children, Doris?

DORIS: No.

KAT: I've two sons, and another one I lost.

DORIS: Do they miss their mother?

KAT: They're too young I think. I miss them. They're why I'm sailing home, for them and to have my new one. I ought to get to know them before they get too old. I want to see them grow up.

DORIS: And their father?

KAT: Oh Robert's going to be stuck in Egypt for God knows how long. And who can say if he'll ever come back? The idea of them growing up without a father - seems gloomy. (PRIVATELY) Peter says he'll look after me if anything happens.

DORIS: Oh. Where does he stay, in Britain?

KAT: Peter? In barracks normally, except he's got leave. (MORE OPENLY) He's dead set on coming up to Scotland with me to see the boys. But who even knows if we'll make it back, or where we'll end up?

PETER: We'll be alright. Why doesn't Doris come too?

KAT: She'll be very welcome - Doris you will - but I can't quite think whether it'll appear any worse to have you escorting two ladies or one.

PETER: Doris and I could pretend we're married.

DORIS: We could not!

KAT: I've as much chance of passing you two off as that as I have Peter of passing you off as a gentleman.

PETER: Who to?

KAT: To Daddy.

PETER: Bloody hell. I have dined with Admiral Cunningham himself, and he had confidence enough in my gentlemanly qualities to even stand me a drink afterwards.

KAT: I know but that's just your roguish charm. And you know it won't wash with Daddy. He'll think I'm running off with a bounder.

PETER: You told me you were.

KAT: Of course I'm not.

PETER: Well you're not running off anywhere too fast right now.

KAT: Touché.

MAC: Is that true?

PETER: Admiral Cunningham? Damn right. Bought me a bloody brandy.

PURSLOW: Peter, here.

PETER: Sorry.

DORIS: (TO KAT) You'll be more than welcome to stay in Dorset with me some day, if you like.

KAT: Thank you Doris. Yes. That's very kind.

PURSLOW: Up she goes now, steady.

MAC: (TO DORIS) What do think Freckles?

DORIS: Wonderful. Wonderful.

NIGHT FALLS. TIME PASSES. MUSIC  
PLAYS. DAWN COMES. PURSLOW IS UNABLE  
TO WAKE SIMPSON.

SCENE 5

DAY 12, EARLY MORNING

STUBBS IS AT THE TILLER.

PURSLOW: Your attention please, friends, I have some bad news. Simpson has left us. He died in his sleep some time last night. He was, I believe, fifty-one years old, and in the conditions, had succumbed quite inevitably to infection.

It is the least of our duties I should think, that we commit him to the sea with honour and respect. With your permission Colonel, I'd like to lead us in prayer for the deceased.

COLONEL: Of course Doctor.

PURSLOW: Would the crew assemble themselves? Captain Thomas, could you help me with the body?

THEY MOVE.

Thank-you. We are gathered here together in the sight of God to pay tribute to the life of Captain Philip Simpson. Let us pray.

Lord, who is sovereign of Heaven and Earth, and master of all who toil on land and sea, we ask that you gather the soul of our good friend into the folds of heaven.

We give thanks to you for life. We devote our lives to you. We draw strength from the courage of those who have been called upon to make the ultimate sacrifice to defeat evil here on Earth. We place ourselves in your hands.

Simpson has been the first among us to fall victim to the elements. We know that others among us may follow. We pray that by your good grace you will grant us all protection in life, and peace and tranquillity in death.

COLONEL: We aren't praying for death.

PURSLOW: As we pray for God's love in life, we pray for it in death.

COLONEL: Well I don't. I'll pray for Simpson and his soul. And I'll pray for myself, for the equanimity and strength to get us home. To live.

PETER: Here here.

COLONEL: And I'll not have you pray for an easy death for anyone.

PETER: Do you really believe praying is going to help us now?

COLONEL: We can discuss theology in private later Lieutenant Medhurst. This is not the time. The least we can do is hope that we're not alone out here.

DORIS: And do you believe we are not alone Colonel?

COLONEL: I said I am in a bad mood for theology, sister.

DORIS: Tell us what we should be praying for then.

COLONEL: Your prayers are your own. It's not my business. My business is to get us home, and to that end, I suggest you all sincerely hope for life, not for death, for everyone's sake. Praying has nothing to do with it.

DORIS: Well I shall pray for you both, for you and for Peter.

PURSLOW: I am sorry to have upset you.

COLONEL: Please, doctor, please, I didn't mean any disrespect, not to you or to the deceased. Please continue.

PURSLOW: I don't know what more to say.

COLONEL: May he rest in peace.

ALL: Amen.

COLONEL: (TO PETER, MAC AND SPANNER) Come on.

PETER, MAC, SPANNER AND THE COLONEL LOWER THE BODY OVER. THE MEN, WITH THE EXCEPTION OF PURSLOW (A CIVILIAN), SALUTE.

THE CREW RETURN TO THEIR RESTING POSITIONS, WITH PETER AND KAT TOGETHER.

TIME PASSES. MUSIC PLAYS. SUNLIGHT INTENSIFIES.

SCENE 6

DAY 12, EARLY AFTERNOON

NOBODY HAS MOVED SINCE THE BURIAL.

KAT: Is it raining?

PETER: A little. It's just a little sea fret.

KAT: It's wonderful.

PETER: It's good. Makes it feel good being alive.

KAT: Now all we need is a G'n'T, and some boys to fan us.

DORIS: I'd settle for a cup of tea.

MAC: Iced tea with lemons.

DORIS: You'll have all the tea you want when we get home.

MAC: Egyptian beer!

KAT: Do you think it will last?

MAC: The rain?

KAT: Yes.

MAC: A little while.

KAT: Do you feel it on your lips?

PURSLOW: If it weren't for the heat, we could collect it with the sail.

PETER: You don't think it's worth a try?

PURSLOW: It'll evaporate too quickly. Best just enjoy it.

KAT: I wonder if it's Simpson trying to help us.

PETER: Poor old sod. Well... He led a good life. He was telling me, one night when he was sick, about all the women he'd been with, ones on every continent.

KAT: Were you jealous?

PETER: He said when he goes, he wanted their names to be all written down and folded up in his breast pocket, with the titles of all the books he'd ever read on the back, as he drifted down into the deep. The books, he reckoned, were only slightly more numerous than the women.

DORIS: Were they to be used as currency in the next life perhaps?

PETER: Maybe.

KAT: Peter's probably embellishing.

PETER: I swear, he said it. The man knew life.

DORIS: A kind of life. Not exactly a life of virtue.

PETER: You must like books.

DORIS: Yes I do of course.

KAT: Take no notice.

PETER: So it's only the expression of his lust, his God-given and natural lust that doesn't qualify with you. And it's not about virtue.

DORIS: Life isn't?

PETER: No.

KAT: Oh Peter.

DORIS: Is it about vice?

PETER: No. It's just about living. And living well.

DORIS: So we agree.

PETER: On living well? Sure. Depends on your definition of "well".

DORIS: We live well when we live with the love of God in our sails.

PETER: Or the lust... no?

DORIS: Lust is only of the Devil's, and it'll carve a void in any heart. Simpson's good deeds will outlive him.

PETER: Only if we live for long enough to remember them - and if we don't, then he's got his girls and his books and what have you got? Anyway, carve me a void and frankly, I'll fill it with wine and follow him down. Wish we had some wine now, to go with the roast beef. You know you're bloody funny Doris. It must be awful to be so inhibited about life that one has to hold it delicately with fingertips, and at arms length.

COLONEL: Take it easy Peter.

DORIS: I'm perfectly content in my life, and are you?

PETER: Who's happy? I'm dying.

DORIS: Well I hope you die happy in that case.

PETER: Oh to be so bloody innocent!

MAC: Leave her alone won't you?

DORIS: Thank you Simon. Anyway I doubt I'm quite as innocent as you suppose; there is a war on.

PETER: (LAUGHS) So what's the answer to it all Maccy? What's life about?

MAC: Eat, drink and be merry.

PETER: ...for tomorrow we die.

KAT: I had an infant child of mine die, quite suddenly, just before the war began. It was my first taste of death: the first time I'd come face to face with it. Somehow, up until then, death had never quite touched me, like it did then. Like it does now. Life had never seemed so crucial before.

For what one battles against when a life is lost is the horrible feeling that nothing, really, is left of a life when it's gone. There is the strange whistling of memory, which is so desperately close to nothing, and there is nothing. Which makes living all the more important. Which is, I think, not inconsistent with the feelings and the wishes of brave old Simpson.

Have you all gone to sleep on me?

PETER: We're with you. Promise me Kat... (WHISPERS, UNHEARD) Will you promise your life to me?

NIGHT FALLS. TIME PASSES. MUSIC PLAYS.

SCENE 7

DAY 14, EARLY MORNING

ROBBIE, STUBBS AND COOTS ARE NOW  
ABSENT.

THE MEN ARE SLUMPED AT THE STERN, PETER  
AT THE TILLER. DORIS IS CRADLING KAT  
IN THE BOW. KAT IS SLEEPING.

MAC: (TO PURSLOW) Eh Doc. What's happened?

PURSLOW: Our friends, yes... They went in the night.

MAC: Three at once(?)

PURSLOW: No. Robbie and Stubbs...

COLONEL: The pissdrinkers - the captain and I hauled them  
over the gunwales last night.

MAC: Were they dead?

COLONEL: Close enough.

MAC: And you just threw them over?

PURSLOW: Their bodies were giving up. There was no point  
prolonging it.

COLONEL: And Coots just said he didn't want to be tortured  
any more, and he swam away.

MAC: When did he go?

COLONEL: He wanted to see the sun rise one last time, so  
that's what he did.

PURSLOW: May their spirits guide us onwards.

COLONEL: Let's hope so.

MAC: Me and Stubbs were at HMS Drake together. Signed  
up together like. Was it the piss that killed him?

PURSLOW: No, no. It didn't help, but it was the heat. It  
was dehydration. His heart was hardly beating.  
Sorry Mac.

MAC: Wasn't like we was close or nothing but, dunno...  
You think we'll make it?

PETER: Coots made it, didn't he? 'Scuse me gents. (TO  
DORIS) How is she?

DORIS: She's sleeping for now. It's hard to say. She's  
definitely weak, but she might pick up.

PETER: Did she mention the baby?  
DORIS: Yes. But there's nothing to be done..  
PETER: Of course. Alright thanks. If she wakes up..  
DORIS: I'll let you know.

TIME PASSES. MUSIC PLAYS.

SCENE 8

DAY 14, AFTERNOON.

PEOPLE ARE MUCH AS THEY WERE.

KAT: I'm giving Doris my wedding ring. For Robert.

PETER: Kat!

KAT: Well I can't give it to you, can I?

PETER: You can't give up now.

KAT: It isn't me. It's my body.

PETER: How do you feel?

KAT: Nothing. Like cut flowers. Just fading.

PETER: Think of Scotland. Think of the boys.

KAT: Oh Peter, who are you to hold such life? Even when you're starving you're beautiful. My world.

PETER: Kat, you're my world too.

KAT: And I'll still be on your list.

PETER: There is no list, just you, my world.

KAT: Oh don't. I'd settle for just being in large print, at the top.

PETER: You are. You are. You're everything.

KAT: No, no. The Flamingo Club is everything, and that ridiculous morning you took me fishing.

PETER: You're more than a part of me, you're every hope I have.

KAT: It would never have worked.

PETER: Kat...

KAT: Oh. I don't want to die at the bottom of the sea. I always thought I'd die in the cold, up a mountain somewhere, up in the mists.

Sing, Peter, remember...

(SINGING) La la-la lah, dee dum dee de-de..

PETER: Now is the hour?

KAT: (SINGING) Now is the hour, when we must say goodbye.

Soon you'll be sailing, far across the sea.  
While you're away, oh please remember me.  
When you return, you'll find me waiting here.

Night night Peter, night night.

PETER: (WHISPERED) I love you.

KAT: (WHISPERED) I love you too. And so it goes.

NIGHT FALLS. MORNING COMES.

SCENE 9

DAY 15, FULL MORNING

PURSLOW, NOW QUITE ILL, IS CARRYING ROUND A RATION TIN. THE OTHERS ARE SLUMPED AROUND THE BOAT. THOMAS IS AT THE TILLER.

PURSLOW: Rations. Can you wake her?  
DORIS: I'm afraid not. She's gone.  
PURSLOW: Your rations then. (PAUSE) I'm so sorry.  
DORIS: No, it's...  
PURSLOW: Really, I didn't mean...  
MAC: Is she alright?  
PURSLOW: I'm afraid not.

SILENCE

COLONEL: Let's give her a decent send off.

THE COLONEL LIFTS KAT'S BODY WITH GREAT EFFORT AND LAYS HER FLAT, COVERING HER FACE.

Doctor, would you say something for us?

PURSLOW: Kat... Katriona will be a great loss to us all.  
She... I...  
DORIS: Perhaps we could recite the twenty-third Psalm.  
PURSLOW: Yes.

AS THEY SPEAK, MUSIC IS HEARD.

ALL BUT PETER: The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not want.

He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: He leadeth me beside the still waters.

He restoreth my soul: He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.

Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies; thou annointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the House of the Lord forever.

THE MUSIC RECEDES.

PURSLOW: Amen.

ALL BUT PETER: Amen.

MAC: Can I say - that she was like a saint. She was graceful and good, I mean, just like someone who brings you hope. And I just want to say that we should think of her, graceful and good and ladylike, and I want to remember her, and still let that bring me hope. And hope for everyone. Thanks.

PURSLOW: Thank you Mac.

DORIS: Have you any words to say Peter?

PETER: No.

NIGHT FALLS. A TRUMPET BEGINS PLAYING "NOW IS THE HOUR".

SCENE 10

DAY 15, LATE AT NIGHT

"NOW IS THE HOUR" PLAYS SOFTLY  
THROUGHOUT.

PETER IS AT THE TILLER, TALKING TO  
DORIS. MAC IS AWAKE. THE OTHERS ARE  
ASLEEP.

PETER: A few weeks ago, I wrote to my mother from Durban. I said if Kat and I do get sunk at least it's together so what the hell.

DORIS: I know you loved her.

PETER: I did. She was having my child. Doris, if I die, will you do me something? Take this cigarette case, and send it back to my mother in New Zealand. She bought it for me - she sent me the money and I got it in London but she never saw it, and it's only simple but - I still wanted to show it to her. But if I never get that chance...

DORIS: Peter... of course.

PETER: Fifty-four Saint Andrew's Street, Auckland, New Zealand. Please remember.

DORIS: I'll try.

PETER: It seems the only sliver of purity left.

DORIS: Look. Why don't you hold on to it, and if the worst happens, I'll...?

PETER: No. I don't want to.

DORIS: You must be devastated.

PETER: I don't know. She has left me now, and she has left me so whole.

DORIS: So whole?

PETER: Whole. This is the root of it: I feel so strangely, acutely, painfully intact. She has simply slipped out of view and left behind her not a ghost of a man, but a ghost of a world, and me intact.

DORIS: She so wanted you to live on, so you must. Do you think there may be some way to find hope, in that?

PETER: No. No hope. No hope. 'Cause I shouldn't be intact at all should I? My existence is all wrong, it's a torment and aberration. My very flesh is

utter painful torment. I am the guilty heart of this ghost of a world. I am the guilt of the ocean: the lie that lies unconfessed.

DORIS SHIFTS OUT OF VIEW.

Where will we live? When we get to Scotland where are we going to live? Is your father going to buy us a palace? I'll put up with the Scottish weather if we have ourselves a nice palace. Oh after the war of course. On the shores of a lake. Fishing with the boys, and rolling around in the heather with their mum.

KAT APPEARS, IN A BALL GOWN.

Have you ever been spear fishing?

KAT: I beg your pardon.

PETER: We've got these spears. We're going to go out tomorrow and see what it's about.

KAT: And I look like the spear-fishing sort do I?

PETER: Oh it's nothing sordid. Seriously, the whole squadron, we're off on a mission.

KAT: A fishin' mission?

PETER: Exactly, and we need a woman with us. Sort of like a mascot. You see the fish don't really trust men.

KAT: Well I'd love to.

PETER: Settled then.

KAT: But can my husband come?

PETER: Does he like to fish?

KAT: Not really.

PETER: Well you better leave him then.

THERE IS A SHIFT, TO ANOTHER TIME.

KAT: What about the children?

PETER: They'll grow to love me.

KAT: Peter this is serious. He's their father. If I leave him, they'll lose him completely.

PETER: Maybe he'll get killed. You'll not have to leave him.

KAT: That's horrible.

PETER: I know but it's true. What other way out is there?  
Jerry might finally come in useful.

KAT: Peter stop! I'll never be able to understand you.

PETER: Oh never mind. He's a great sport. I'll take them  
all fishing.

A SHIFT, BACK TO THE BALL.

KAT: With spears?

PETER: No. Robert, he'll never make it. We'll leave him  
on the bank and the boys and I will set off to the  
bottom of the ocean with our spears and our knives,  
to find you there, blue and dead, to carve you free  
from the algaed hands of Poseidon, and resurrect  
you. To carry you off to the misty lands. To  
Scotland, and the ice, to keep you there, to die  
with you there and be eaten by the polar bears.

KAT: Nonsense.

PETER: What?

KAT: It's nonsense. You'll never catch a single one.

PETER: Oh really?

KAT: Oh no, look, he's coming. My husband. I've got to  
go. See you in the morning Lieutenant.

PETER: Name's Peter...

KAT: See you tomorrow Peter.

SHE DISAPPEARS.

PETER: (FROM COLERIDGE) Alone, alone, all, all alone,  
alone on a wide, wide sea! And never a saint took  
pity on my soul in agony.

MAC: Mad bastard.

PETER: Take me to Scotland. I want to go north with my  
whisky and my wine. I've got a magic potion here  
and nobody to drink it with me.

PETER BITES OPEN THE COMPASS, AND  
DRINKS THE ALCOHOL WITHIN.

MAC: The compass!

PETER: Well I've tasted worse in Cairo.

Alone, alone, all, all alone, alone on a wide, wide  
sea.

Doris, come with me, where are you? We're in the wrong world. We'd better find another, where it's not so bloody wet. Ah ha ha. All you ghosts, this ghost of a world, this ghost of a sea. We have been abandoned.

This is my revenge.

PETER STUMBLES AS HE LOWERS HIMSELF  
OVER, AND IS TAKEN BY THE SEA.

THE MUSIC STOPS AND DOES NOT RETURN  
UNTIL THE BOAT REACHES LAND.

TIME PASSES. DAY BREAKS.

SCENE 11

DAY 20, EARLY EVENING

THOMAS AND SPANNER ARE NOW ABSENT.  
PURSLOW IS AT THE TILLER.

NOT ALL OF THE DIALOGUE WILL BE CLEARLY  
HEARD.

MAC: Jelly...

DORIS: Watermelons...

MAC: Are we all gonna end up mad - like that? That what happens?

DORIS: Not necessarily.

MAC: Purslow?

COLONEL: He's asleep.

DORIS: I don't care contemplating it.

MAC: If there's only one of us left? Imagine - you and a sea of bodies, and you couldn't die.

DORIS: I don't contemplate it.

MAC: Might not be you. Might be me. Might be Colonel.

DORIS: Please Simon.

MAC: When Katriona died, Peter said she was his world.

DORIS: Yes?

MAC: What were they?

DORIS: Running away together. I suppose. He was very passionate.

MAC: He was in love with her?

DORIS: Oh absolutely.

MAC: Was she in love with Peter?

DORIS: You know, I don't really know.

MAC: It's a wonderful world. It'd be a shame to have to leave it.

DORIS: The sea, isn't she beautiful?

MAC: She is.

DORIS: Who'd think we could still say that? How wonderful life is. Will you look at water the same way?

MAC: No.

DORIS: Across England, they're swilling it in buckets, floors, baths, and three drops out here...

COLONEL: You're both crazy. I don't give a bloody damn about anyone anywhere and their damn mops. I just want to get off the godforsaken boat. I want off. I can't stand it here. This floating bloody madhouse. You're all mad. All the sane ones have gone and bloody copped it. Now I don't want to hear anything more about mops or baths or leaking bloody taps again.

MAC: How many days is it now?

DORIS: Twenty... since it sank. Must make it the second of October.

MAC: I'm twenty-one.

DORIS: Sorry?

MAC: Years old, today.

DORIS: Simon?

MAC: It's my birthday.

COLONEL: Ah ha ha! Buy the man a pint.

DORIS: I wish we had something to give you.

COLONEL: We do! Wait.

MAC: What?

COLONEL: I'll get the tins.

THE COLONEL FILLS A TIN WITH WATER AND  
PASSES IT TO MAC.

MAC: What's this?

COLONEL: Double ration. Don't refuse it.

MAC: Alright.

COLONEL: Good. Good.

THE COLONEL PASSES MAC HIS RATIONS.  
Now drink. Your first one. And your second.  
THEY APPLAUD.

DORIS: Happy birthday.

PURSLOW: (WEAKLY) For he's a jolly good fellow.

COLONEL: Doris.

DORIS IS PASSED HER RATION.

MAC: I was supposed to be home for my birthday. There'll be no party now. My old man, he'll have been the first to declare me dead.

COLONEL: My God look. A ship!

MAC: You're imagining.

COLONEL: It looks just like the Laconia.

MAC: Then you are imagining.

DORIS: Yes, for pity's sake, calm down.

COLONEL: No. Look.

MAC: Where?

COLONEL: Look.

MAC: Where? You're right. And it is, it must be, it's her sister ship, on the same route.

DORIS: What shall we do?

COLONEL: Wave something. Anything. A life-jacket.

MAC: We can burn it. In a bucket. They'll see the smoke.

COLONEL: Excellent plan. Excellent.

DORIS: (PROFFERING) The bucket.

MAC: (WITH A LIGHTER) Hope this thing's got juice in it.

COLONEL: Come on Mac, come on.

PURSLOW: They won't see it. They honestly won't ever see it at this range, and it's a waste of a perfectly good life jacket. Honestly.

COLONEL: We've got to try.

PURSLOW: You're very welcome, but there's really no point.

MAC: Purslow's right.

COLONEL: Doris?

DORIS: I'm no sailor.

COLONEL: Well, what then?

DORIS: Keep waiting I suppose. There'll be another.

COLONEL: Doctor, your rations.

PURSLOW: No thank you. It would be wasteful. I have blood poisoning.

DORIS: Oh no.

PURSLOW: I have blood poisoning, and that means that I am sure to be a gonner, and I'm a likely source of infection. So no thank you. As I cannot be of any further help, and if I am now a source of danger to you all, it is better that I should go.

PURSLOW MOVES TO THE SIDE OF THE BOAT

You don't need me anymore.

DORIS: (FROM JOHN 15:13) Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.

PURSLOW: Goodbye. Good luck.

PURSLOW TUMBLES INTO THE WATER.

COLONEL: Well that's it. Enough excitement for me today. Goodnight everyone. I'll see you for rations in the morning.

THE COLONEL LIES DOWN.

NIGHT FALLS. THERE IS NO MUSIC, ONLY THE DISTANT RUMBLINGS OF THUNDER. DAY BREAKS.

SCENE 12

DAY 21, EARLY MORNING

DORIS AND MAC ARE HAVING AFTERNOON TEA. TAIL-COATED WAITERS CIRCLE THE BOAT OFFERING TEA IN CHINA CUPS, AND SANDWICHES AND CAKES ON SILVER PLATES. A MUSICIAN PLAYS DAINTY MUSIC ON A CHILD'S TOY PIANO, WHICH WAKES THE COLONEL.

DORIS: Tea?

MAC: That'll be lovely.

DORIS: Yoo-hoo! Two teas please.

MAC: Can we have cake?

A WAITER SERVES THEM TEA.

DORIS: Of course. But quench that thirst first, m'boy. Sugar?

MAC: Love some. Two spoons please Freckles.

DORIS: Yes, you've been working hard after all. And here comes the cake.

MAC: Bloody lovely, eh?

THEY HELP THEMSELVES.

DORIS: Colonel, you're awake! Will you have some cake with us?

COLONEL: No. I don't want any.

MAC: It's seriously good stuff.

DORIS: Make him some space. Come and join us.

COLONEL: Please be quiet.

MAC: Suit yourself.

DORIS: Save him a little bit.

MAC: Right-o.

DORIS: We must start doing this more often.

MAC: Too right Freckles. After all those rations, it's such a treat just having a nice perfect cup of tea.

DORIS: And all the world is right and calm. Oh if we could only drink more tea.

COLONEL: Listen! There's thunder.  
DORIS: (MOCKING) Brrrrhhh!  
COLONEL: That could be the rain to save us. Did you feel that?  
MAC: What's that Colonel?  
COLONEL: Rain, I felt rain.  
DORIS: What rot! Ooh scones.

THE THUNDER BECOMES LOUDER.

COLONEL: Will you two listen? Be careful. Look. The clouds are coming our way. It's going to rain.  
DORIS: Oh no, we'll have to move everything inside. Waiter!  
COLONEL: Shut up! Shut up both of you!  
DORIS: Wait. I felt it too. Good God, you're right.

THE STAFF DISSOLVE.

COLONEL: Get the sail down! Get the sail down!  
MAC: Aye aye.

THEY TAKE DOWN THE SAIL, LAYING IT FLAT TO COLLECT WATER, AND PLACE RATION TINS AROUND THE BOAT.

COLONEL: (TO DORIS) Put these out.

IT RAINS HEAVILY, FILLING THE TINS, AND CONTINUES RAINING.

Doris. The first cup, for you.

DORIS: My goodness!

SHE DRINKS.

MAC: Y'know Colonel, I never really thanked you, for my water yesterday.

COLONEL: Ha. Well it wouldn't mean much now. It's a bloody miracle.

MAC: But thank you all the same.

DORIS: We reap what we sow Colonel. And we have the Lord to thank.

MAC: We have Doctor Purslow to thank. He's put in a good word for us.

DORIS: We must thank them all.

COLONEL: To them all!

MAC AND DORIS: To them all!

MAC: And to Peter and Kat.

DORIS: To Peter and Kat. And to us.

MAC AND COLONEL: Us.

MAC: Aye.

COLONEL: Did you ever think you'd live to see it Maccy?

MAC: Faith is a funny thing Colonel.

COLONEL: Bollocks. You're just a lucky little bugger. That's all.

DORIS: A final toast. To baby Sally, who never knew sin nor suffering. If this rain means survival for us, let it be in her name.

MAC: I agree.

COLONEL: Couldn't argue with that sister.

MAC: To Sally then?

COLONEL AND DORIS: To Sally.

COLONEL: Now fill up the tank. We'll have enough for days and days if this lasts.

NIGHT FALLS. TIME PASSES SILENTLY.

SCENE 13

DAY 27, FULL MORNING

DORIS IS AT THE TILLER. MAC AND THE COLONEL ARE RESTING. THE SOUND OF A FLYING BOAT PASSES LOW OVERHEAD. MAC WAKES.

COLONEL: Did you see that?

MAC: A flying boat.

COLONEL: But did they see us, that's the question.

MAC: Sure they must've. It was flying so low.

DORIS: They did. It's the same one. Two hours ago they flew past.

MAC: Thought I dreamt it.

DORIS: Ah, so you weren't asleep. You two were both so peaceful, and I thought I might have been dreaming it too.

MAC: I wonder who they are.

DORIS: Goodness knows.

COLONEL: Why didn't you say?

DORIS: Well, you were asleep, and I was rather enjoying the suspense.

MAC: Doris.

COLONEL: Here he comes. He's banking around. They're coming lower this time. This is it. They're either going to kill us or save us.

MAC: He's doing a bombing run!

THEY DUCK.

THE PLANE DROPS A PACKAGE: A PILLOWCASE TIED TO A LIFEJACKET. IT LANDS A FEW YARDS FROM THE BOAT.

MAC SWIMS OUT TO PICK UP THE PACKAGE.

DORIS: Oh my goodness Simon be careful!

HE RETURNS.

MAC: (OPENING PACKAGE) Bananas! And orange juice! And there's a note: "O.K. Help coming! You are sixty miles south of Monrovia." Where's Monrovia?!

DORIS: I don't know! I don't know.

COLONEL: Me neither. No wait. I know where it is. It's bloody well over there!

THEY COLLAPSE TOGETHER. OFFSTAGE, A CHORUS SINGS "NOW IS THE HOUR".

DORIS: (VOICEOVER) We learned that morning, that there are indeed few words so beautiful as "help" and "orange juice" when help and orange juice have been the objects of one's hope for so long. We were saved, and our hearts sang. With us we carried the scars of twenty-eight days in the scorching heat with next to no water - burning pain beyond imagination - and we carried too, the little artefacts, promises and personal messages of those who were lost, which we the living were duty-bound to pass on. And through those simple duties, we the living became the lasting embodiment of their hopes.

I am so sorry for you all. With real sympathy, sincerely, Doris M Hawkins.

CURTAIN

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