

Lost at sea

In the end we're all potential recycling material, as Berwyn Lewis reveals.

Everything was going according to plan on board the luxury cruise ship. The average age of the wealthy passengers was 80-something and most were ageing gracefully, tottering in and out of the dining room, nibbling around the edges of sumptuous banquets, nodding off over breakfast, snoozing in the deck chairs.

We were somewhere between heaven and earth, Hawaii and Tahiti, the sea a shimmering millpond lapping at the blue sky, when it happened.

A passenger, an elderly gentleman, had tucked into his 'last supper,' a final trough out, and quietly passed away.

His death on this geriatric cruise was not unexpected and the arrangements for this event had been made well in advance. A burial at sea, the ultimate recycling job, had been requested and according to the conventions at that time, and the policies of the captain of the ship, plans were set in motion with discretion and tasteful efficiency.

A section of the A Deck was sealed off but I managed to slip unnoticed past the cordon of ropes and canvas screens.

The captain and a handful of officials, including a man of religious authority, stood beside a flag-draped shape. It stood at right angles to a section of the deck railing which was raised in readiness. Under the flag the shape of the head formed a mound.

The minutes ticked past, the captain perfunctorily checking his watch, anxious to dispense with the brief ceremony as quickly as possible.

But, where was the widow? She was below deck, making final adjustments to her little black dress, hat and gloves, an outfit packed for the cruise in anticipation of exactly such an occasion.

Time passed. Looks of impatience were exchanged. A stiff breeze ruffled the surface of the ocean and the flag. Suddenly, the ship lurched, a huge wave — a roller from nowhere — almost threw everyone off their feet.

Without a sound, the body under the flag slid off its mount, flew through the open deck railing and, with scarcely a splash, sank beneath the waves.

In a flash the Captain radioed down to the ship's galley.

'Two sacks of potatoes, one large cabbage on the A deck on the double.'

Were we about to have a picnic lunch?

'They better move. We must have it done before the widow gets here,' the captain barked. No one moved or blinked.

Finally the sacks of potatoes and the cabbage materialised.

The sacks were placed where the body had been and the cabbage at the head. They were covered with the flag just as the widow, a small white handkerchief in her freshly lacquered, red fingertips, appeared on deck.

A few prayers were said and, as the captain raised his arm, a signal to release the 'body,' the widow stopped him, insisting on one last look at the face of her late beloved.

'Madam,' said the quick-thinking captain, 'at sea, it is bad luck for a woman to look upon a dead man's face. Release the body.'

The 'body' slid to its watery grave, the widow sobbed quietly, the captain comforted her with a few kind words about superstition, life, death and the universe as we sailed on, another day, another life and a feed for the fish.

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