

0645h.: A triple ding from the speakers in cabin and halls and then a cool female voice says Good Morning, the date, the weather, etc. She says it in a gentle accented English, repeats it in an Alsatian-sounding French, then again in German. She can make even German sound lush and postcoital. Hers is not the same PA voice as at Pier 21, but it's got the exact same quality of sounding the way expensive perfume smells.

0650-0705h.: Shower, play with Alisco Sirocco hairdryer & exhaust fan & hair in bathroom mirror, read from *Daily Meditations for the Semiphobically Challenged*, go over *Nadir Daily* with yellow HiLiter pen.

0708-0730h.: E.S. Breakfast at Table 64 in 5☆C.R. Last night everybody announced intentions to sleep through breakfast and grab some scones or something at the Windsurf Cafe later. So I'm alone at Table 64, which is large and round and right up next to a starboard window.

Table 64's waiter's name is, as mentioned before, Tibor. Mentally I refer to him as "The Tibster," but never out loud. Tibor has dismantled my artichokes and my lobsters and taught me that extra-well-done is not the only way meat can be palatable. We have sort of bonded, I feel. He is 35 and about 5'4" and plump, and his movements have the birdlike economy characteristic of small plump graceful men. Menu-wise, Tibor advises and recommends, but without the hauteur that's always made me hate the gastropedantic waiters in classy restaurants. Tibor is omnipresent without being unctuous or oppressive; he is kind and warm and fun. I sort of love him. His hometown is Budapest and he has a postgraduate degree in Restaurant Management from an unpronounceable Hungarian college. His wife back home is expecting their first child. He is the Head Waiter for Tables 64-67 at all three meals. He can carry three trays w/o precarity and never looks harried or on-the-edge the way most multitable waiters look. He seems like he cares. His face is at once round and pointy, and rosy. His tux never wrinkles. His hands are soft and pink, and his thumb-joint's skin is unwrinkled, like the thumb-joint of a small child.

Tibor's cuteness has been compared by the women at Table 64 to that of a button. But I have learned not to let his cuteness fool me. Tibor is a pro. His commitment to personally instantiating the *Nadir's* fanatical commitment to excellence is the one thing about which he shows no sense of humor. If you fuck with him in this area he will feel pain and will make no effort to conceal it. See for example the second night, Sunday, at supper: Tibor was circling the table and asking each of us how our entrée was, and we all regarded this as just one of those perfunctory waiter-questions and all perfunctorily smiled and cleared our mouths and said Fine, Fine — and Tibor finally stopped and looked down at us all with a pained expression and changed his timbre slightly so it was clear he was addressing the whole table: "Please. I ask each: is excellent? Please. If excellent, you say, and I am happy. If not excellent, please: do not say excellent. Let me fix. Please." There was no hauteur or pedantry as he addressed us. He just meant what he said. His expression was babe-naked, and we heard him, and nothing was perfunctory again.

Good old Wojtek, the towering bespectacled Pole, age 22 and at least 6'8", Table 64's busboy — in charge of water, bread supply, crumb-removal, and using a big tower of a mill to put pepper on pretty much anything you don't lean forward and cover with your upper body — good old Wojtek works exclusively with Tibor, and they have an involved minuet of service that's choreographed down to the last pivot, and they speak quietly to each other in a Slavized German pidgin you can tell they've evolved through countless quiet professional exchanges; and you can tell Wojtek reveres Tibor as much as the rest of us do.

This morning The Tibster wears a red bow tie and smells faintly of sandalwood. Early Seating Breakfast is the best time to be around him, because he's not very busy and can be initiated into chitchat without looking pained at neglecting his duties. He doesn't know I'm on the *Nadir* as a pseudojournalist. I'm not sure why I haven't told him — somehow I think it might make things hard for him. During E.S.B. chitchat I never ask him anything about Celebrity Cruises or the *Nadir*,⁹² not out of deference to Mr. Dermatitis's pissy injunctions but because I feel like I'd just about die if Tibor got into trouble on my account.

⁹² (except for precise descriptions of whatever dorsal fins he's seen)

Tibor's ambition is someday to return to Budapest⁹³ for good and with his *Nadir*-savings open a sort of newspaper-and-beret-type sidewalk cafe that specializes in something called Cherry Soup. With this in mind, two days from now in Ft. Lauderdale I'm going to tip The Tibster way, way more than the suggested \$3.00 U.S./diem,⁹⁴ balancing out total expenses by radically undertipping both the liplessly sinister maître d' and our sommelier, an unctuously creepy Ceylonese guy the whole table has christened The Velvet Vulture.

0815h.: Catholic Mass is celebrated with Father DeSandre, Location: Rainbow Room, Deck 8.⁹⁵

There's no chapel per se on the *Nadir*. The Father sets up a kind of folding credence table in the Rainbow Room, the most aftward of the Fantasy Deck lounges, done in salmon and sere yellow with dados of polished bronze. Genuflecting at sea turns out to be a tricky business. There are about a dozen people here. The Father's backlit by a big port window, and his homily is mercifully free of nautical puns or references to life being a voyage. The communal beverage is a choice of either wine or Welch's-brand unsweetened grape juice. Even the *Nadir*'s daily mass's communion wafers are unusually yummy, biscuitier than your normal host and with a sweet tinge to the pulp it becomes in your teeth.⁹⁶ Cynical observations about how appropriate it is that a 7NC Luxury Cruise's daily worship is held in an overdecorated bar seem too easy to take up space on. Just how a diocesan priest gets a 7NC Megacruiser as a parish — whether Celebrity maybe has clerics on retainer, sort of like the army, and they get assigned to different ships in rotation, and whether the R.C. Church gets paid just like the other vendors who provide

⁹³ (he pronounces the "-pest" part of this "-persht")

⁹⁴ The last night's *ND* breaks the news about tipping and gives tactful "suggestions" on going rates.

⁹⁵ All boldface stuff is verbatim and *sic* from today's *Nadir Daily*.

⁹⁶ If Pepperidge Farm made communion wafers, these would be them.

service and entertainment personnel, etc. — will I'm afraid be forever unclear: Father DeSandre explains he has no time after the recessional for professional queries, because of

0900h.: **Wedding Vow Renewal with Father DeSandre.** Same venue, same porta-altar setup. No married couples show up to renew their wedding vows, though. There's me and Captain Video and maybe a dozen other *Nadirites* sitting around in salmon chairs, and a beverage waitress makes a couple circuits with her visor and pad, and Father DeS. stands patiently in his cassock and white cope till 0920, but no older-type couples appear or step forward to renew. A few of the people in the R.R. sit in proximities and attitudes that show they're couples, but they sort of apologetically tell the Father they're not even married; the surprisingly cool and laid back Father DeS.'s invitation to make use of the setup and twin candles and priest w/ sacramentary *Book of Rites* opened to just the right page produces some shy laughter from the couples, but no takers. I don't know what to make of the W.V.R.'s no-shows in terms of death/despair/pampering/insatiability issues.

0930h.: **The Library is open for check-out of games, cards, and books, Location: Library,⁹⁷ Deck 7.**

The *Nadir's* Library is a little glassed-in salon set obliquely off Deck 7's Rendez-Vous Lounge. The Library's all good wood and leather and three-way lamping, an extremely pleasant place, but it's open only at weird and inconvenient times. Only one wall is even shelved, and most of the books are the sorts of books you see on the coffeetables of older people who live in condominiums near unchallenging golf courses: folio-sized, color-plated, with titles like *Great Villas of Italy* and *Famous Tea Sets of the Modern World*, etc. But it's a great place to just hang around and moss out, the Library. Plus this is where the chess sets are. This week also features an unbelievably large and involved jigsaw puzzle that sits about half-done on an oak table in

⁹⁷ Duh.

the corner, which all sorts of different old people come in and work on in shifts. There's also a seemingly endless game of contract bridge always going on in the Card Room right next door, and the bridge players' motionless silhouettes are always there through the frosted glass between Library and C.R. when I'm mousing out and playing with the chess sets.

The *Nadir's* Library's got cheapo Parker Brothers chess sets with hollow plastic pieces, which any good chess player has got to like.⁹⁸ I'm not nearly as good at chess as I am at Ping-Pong, but I'm pretty good. Most of the time on the *Nadir* I play chess with myself (not as dull as it may sound), for I have determined that — no offense — the sorts of people who go on 7NC Megacruises tend not to be very good chess players.

Today, however, is the day I am mated in 23 moves by a nine-year-old girl. Let's not spend a lot of time on this. The girl's name is Deirdre. She's one of very few little kids on board not tucked out of sight in Deck 4's Daycare Grotto.⁹⁹ Deirdre's mom never leaves her in the Grotto but also never leaves her side, and has the lipless and flinty-eyed look of a parent whose kid is preternaturally good at something.

I probably should have seen this and certain other signs of impending humiliation as the kid first comes over as I'm sitting there trying a scenario where both sides of the board deploy a Queen's Indian and tugs on my sleeve and asks if I'd maybe like to play. She really does tug on my sleeve, and calls me Mister, and her eyes are roughly the size of sandwich plates. In retrospect it occurs to me that this girl was a little *tall* for nine, and worn-looking, slump-shouldered, the way usually only much older girls get — a kind of poor psychic posture. However good she may be at chess, this is not a happy little girl. I don't suppose that's germane.

⁹⁸ Heavy expensive art-carved sets are for dorks.

⁹⁹ This is something else Mr. Dermatitis declined to let me see, but by all reports the daycare on these Megaships is phenomenal, w/squads of nurturing and hyperkinetic young daycare ladies keeping the kids manically stimulated for up to ten-hour stretches via an endless number of incredibly well-structured activities, so tuckering the kids out that they collapse mutely into bed at 2000h. and leave their parents free to plunge into the ship's nightlife and Do It All.

Deirdre pulls up a chair and says she usually likes to be black and informs me that in lots of cultures black isn't thanatotic or morbid but is the spiritual equivalent of what white is in the U.S. and that in these other cultures it's *white* that's morbid. I tell her I already know all that. We start. I push some pawns and Deirdre develops a knight. Deirdre's mom watches the whole game from a standing position behind the kid's seat,¹⁰⁰ motionless except for her eyes. I know within seconds that I despise this mom. She's like some kind of stage-mother of chess. Deirdre seems like an OK type, though — I've played precocious kids before, and at least Deirdre doesn't hoot or smirk. If anything, she seems a little sad that I don't turn out to be more of a stretch for her.

My first inkling of trouble is on the fourth move, when I fianchetto and Deirdre knows what I'm doing is fianchettoing and uses the term correctly, again calling me Mister. The second ominous clue is the way her little hand keeps flailing out to the side of the board after she moves, a sign that she's used to a speed clock. She swoops in with her developed QK and forks my queen on the twelfth move and after that it's only a matter of time. It doesn't really matter. I didn't even *start* playing chess until my late twenties. On move 17 three desperately old and related-looking people at the jigsaw puzzle table kind of totter over and watch as I hang my rook and the serious carnage starts. It doesn't really matter. Neither Deirdre nor the hideous mom smiles when it's over; I smile enough for everybody. None of us says anything about maybe playing again tomorrow.

0945–1000h.: Back briefly for psychic recharging in good old 1009E.P., I eat four pieces of some type of fruit that's like a tiny oversweetened tangerine and watch, for the fifth time this week, the Velociraptors-stalk-precocious-children-in-gleaming-institutional-kitchen part of *Jurassic Park*, noting an unprecedented sympathy for the Velociraptors this time around.

¹⁰⁰ The only chairs in the Library are leather wing chairs with low seats, so only Deirdre's eyes and nose clear the board's table as she sits across from me, adding a Kilroyishly surreal quality to the humiliation.

1000–1100h.: Three simultaneous venues of Managed Fun, all aft on Deck 9: **Darts Tournament, take aim and hit the bull's-eye!**; **Shuffleboard Shuffle, join your fellow guests for a morning game;** **Ping Pong Tournament, meet the Cruise Staff at the tables, Prizes to the Winners!**

Organized shuffleboard has always filled me with dread. Everything about it suggests infirm senescence and death: it's like it's a game played on the skin of a void and the rasp of the sliding puck is the sound of that skin getting abraded away bit by bit. I also have a morbid but wholly justified fear of darts, stemming from a childhood trauma too involved and hair-raising to discuss here, and as an adult I avoid darts like cholera.

What I'm here for is the Ping-Pong. I am an exceptionally good Ping-Pong player. The *ND*'s use of "Tournament" is euphemistic, though, because there are never any draw sheets or trophies in sight, and no other *Nadirites* are ever playing. The constant high winds on 9-Aft may account for Ping-Pong's light turnout. Today three tables are set up (well off to the side of the Darts Tournament, which given the level of darts-play over there seems judicious), and the m.v. *Nadir*'s very own Ping-Pong Pro (or "3P," as he calls himself) stands cockily by the center table, amusing himself by bouncing a ball off the paddle between his legs and behind his back. He turns when I crack my knuckles. I've come to Ping-Pong three different times already this week, and nobody's ever here except the good old 3P, whose real first name is Winston. He and I are now at the point where we greet each other with the curt nods of old and mutually respected foes.

Below the center table is an enormous box of fresh Ping-Pong balls, and apparently several more of these boxes are in the storage locker behind the Golf-Drive Net, which again seems judicious given the number of balls in each game that get smashed or blown out to sea.¹⁰¹ They also have a big peg-studded board on the bulkhead's wall with over a dozen different paddles, both the plain-wooden-grip-and-head-

¹⁰¹ I imagine it would be pretty interesting to trail a Megaship through a 7NC Cruise and just catalogue the trail of stuff that bobs in its wake.

with-thin-skin-of-cheap-pebbly-rubber kind and the fancy-wrapped-grip-and-head-with-thick-mushy-skin-of-unpebbled-rubber kind, all in Celebrity's snazzy white/navy motif.¹⁰²

I am, as I believe I may already have stated, an extraordinarily fine Ping-Pong player,¹⁰³ and it turns out that I am an even finer Ping-Pong player outdoors in tricky tropical winds; and, although Winston is certainly a good enough player to qualify as a 3P on a ship where interest in Ping-Pong is shall we say less than keen, my record against him thus far is eight wins and only one loss, with that one loss being not only a very close loss but also consequent to a number of freakish gusts and a net that Winston himself admitted later may not have been regulation I.T.T.F. height and tension. Winston is under the curious (and false) impression that we've got some kind of tacit wager going on whereby if the 3P ever beats me three games out of five he gets my full-color Spiderman hat, which hat he covets and which hat I wouldn't dream ever of playing serious Ping-Pong without.

Winston only moonlights as a 3P. His primary duty on the *Nadir* is serving as Official Cruise DeeJay in Deck 8's Scorpio Disco, where every night he stands behind an incredible array of equipment wearing hornrim sunglasses and working both the CD player and the strobes frantically till well after 0200h., which may account for a sluggish and slightly dazed quality to his A.M. Ping-Pong. He is 26 years old and, like much of the *Nadir's* Cruise and Guest Relations staff, is good-looking in the vaguely unreal way soap opera actors and models in Sears catalogues are good-looking. He has big brown Help-Me eyes and a black fade that's styled into the exact shape of a nineteenth-century blacksmith's anvil, and he plays Ping-Pong with his thick-skinned paddle's head down in the chopsticky way of people who've received professional instruction.

¹⁰² Only the fear of an impromptu Fort Lauderdale Customs search and discovery keeps me from stealing one of these paddles. I confess that I did end up stealing the chamois eyeglass-cleaners from 1009's bathroom, though maybe you're meant to take those home anyway — I couldn't tell whether they fell into the Kleenex category or the towel category.

¹⁰³ I've sure never lost to any prepubescent females in fucking *Ping-Pong*, I can tell you.

Outside and aft, the *Nadir's* engines' throb is loud and always sounds weirdly lopsided. 3P Winston and I have both reached that level of almost Zen-like Ping-Pong mastery where the game kind of plays us — the lunges and pirouettes and smashes and recoveries are automatic outer instantiations of a kind of intuitive harmony between hand and eye and primal Urge To Kill — in a way that leaves our forebrains unoccupied and capable of idle chitchat as we play:

"Wicked hat. I want that hat. Boss hat."

"Can't have it."

"Wicked motherfucking hat. Spiderman be dope."¹⁰⁴

"Sentimental value. Long story behind this hat."

Inspidness notwithstanding, I've probably exchanged more total words with 3P Winston on this 7NC Luxury Cruise than I have with anybody else.¹⁰⁵ As with good old Tibor, I don't probe Winston in any serious journalistic way, although in this case it's not so much because I fear getting the 3P in trouble as because (nothing against good old Winston personally) he's not exactly the brightest bulb in the ship's intellectual chandelier, if you get my drift. E.g. Winston's favorite witticism when deejaying in the Scorpio Disco is to muff or spoonerize some simple expression and then laugh and slap himself in the head and go "Easy for me to say!" According to Mona and Alice, he's also unpopular with the younger crowd at the Scorpio Disco because he always wants to play Top-40ish homogenized rap instead of real vintage disco.¹⁰⁶

It's also not necessary to ask Winston much of anything at all, because

¹⁰⁴ Winston also sometimes seemed to suffer from the verbal delusion that he was an urban black male; I have no idea what the story is on this or what conclusions to draw from it.

¹⁰⁵ This is not counting my interfaces with Petra, which though lengthy and verbose tended of course to be one-sided except for "You are a funny thing, you."

¹⁰⁶ The single most confounding thing about the young and hip cruisers on the *Nadir* is that they seem truly to love the exact same cheesy disco music that we who were young and hip in the late '70s loathed and made fun of, boycotting Prom when Donna Summer's "MacArthur Park" was chosen Official Prom Theme, etc.

he's an incredible chatterbox when he's losing. He's been a student at the U. of South Florida for a rather mysterious seven years, and has taken this year off to "get fucking *paid* for a change for a while" on the *Nadir*. He claims to have seen all manner of sharks in these waters, but his descriptions don't inspire much real confidence or dread. We're in the middle of our second game and on our fifth ball. Winston says he's had the chance to do some serious ocean-gazing and soul-searching during his off hours these last few months and has decided to return to U.S.F. in Fall '95 and start college more or less all over, this time majoring not in Business Administration but in something he claims is called "Multimediated Production."

"They have a department in that?"

"It's this interdisciplinarian thing. It's going to be fucking *phat*, Homes. You know. CD-ROM and shit. Smart chips. Digital film and shit."

I'm up 18-12. "Sport of the future."

Winston agrees. "It's where it's all going to be at. The Highway. Interactive TV and shit. Virtual Reality. *Interactive Virtual Reality*."

"I can see it now," I say. The game's almost over. "The Cruise of the Future. The *Home Cruise*. The Caribbean Luxury Cruise you don't have to leave home for. Strap on the old goggles and electrodes and off you go."

"Word up."

"No passports. No seasickness. No wind or sunburn or insipid Cruise staff.¹⁰⁷ Total Virtual Motionless Stay-At-Home Simulated Pampering."

"Word."

¹⁰⁷ Interfacing with Winston could be kind of depressing in that the urge to make cruel sport of him was always irresistible, and he never acted offended or even indicated he knew he was being made sport of, and you went away afterward feeling like you'd just stolen coins from a blind man's cup or something.