

# The Hours

## Stories from a Pandemic

Bruce Meyer





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What matters in life is not what happens to you but what you remember and how you remember it.

Gabriel Garcia Marquez

*For Kerry, Katie, Margaret, and Carolyn*

## CONTENTS

Yellow Jack	1
The Island	17
The Hours	33
Zoom	49
The Dolphin	65
Our Love Is Here to Stay	79



## YELLOW JACK

If a national flag is flown upside down, it is flashing the international signal of distress. If the national flag happens to be the same upside down as right side up, a ship can signal its peril by raising a Yellow Jack, the other banner that signifies a call for help. Emilio, our server in the Bourbon Room, explained that to me early on in the cruise, when we were still receiving our meals in one of the two grand dining rooms on board the *Tarantella*. I jokingly asked him what the French, Irish, and Italians would do if they were in trouble. He looked at me, puzzled, before he went away, spoke with another waiter, and came back to tell me he'd be sharing the good joke with others.

As our liner pulled away from our last port of call in Montevideo, where no one had been permitted to disembark, Emily and I watched from our cabin balcony as five crewmen of the Fiesta Line removed the ship's national colours from the stern and raised instead the international banner of quarantine, the Yellow Jack. We sailed north in search of a country that would take us in. No one wanted us. That was months ago, in the second week of March.

Since then, we have sailed under the Yellow Jack. That flag of distress is composed of four squares: two black, and two yellow, set in opposing diagonals. The colours

remind me of a hornet, and perhaps that's what the *Tarantella* has become. Until yesterday, when the captain announced that we were out of fuel and down to our final rations of food and water, I thought we were going to get out of this plague ship with only a good, though long story to tell our friends. We should have known the worst was coming. A tender driver from Kiev leapt overboard two days ago. Emily saw that and screamed. By the time someone arrived at our door, with a bottle of wine wrapped in a linen towel, it was too late to turn the ship around.

The sun was setting over the Leeward Islands. It was a beautiful night. The sea was darkening to a deep blue. It was, my wife said as she finished the last drop of our Argentine Merlot, a beautiful and sad way to end one's life. The Ukrainian never bobbed to the surface. I held Emily as she looked to put the experience into words.

“He was a dot on a map one minute, and a place that no longer existed the next.”

Emilio brought our tray. The delicately seared steaks of the Bourbon Room had given way to the canned fish the crew ate. I felt a kind of kinship with Emilio and the other waiters. We were all stuck in the same boat, as the cliché goes. But this ship was different. Whereas Emily and I had a balcony to lean on and watch the world vanish each night into the sunset, Emilio was trapped below decks with five

other crewmembers in a tiny cabin. He sat down two nights ago opposite our stateroom door, slumped on the floor, his shoulders heaving as he cried. He lifted his barman's towel – everyone should have been wearing masks, but like lifeboats on the *Titanic*, they were reserved for the first class passengers – and broke the code he'd been sworn to obey. He lit a cigarette.

“Did you know, we live above the engine room near the stern?” he asked. I told him I had sort of figured that out. “There were five guys in the Ukrainian’s bunk, in a room about the quarter the size of what you have. They were all crammed in on top of each other. They worked the Hanoverian Dining Room.”

Throughout the cruise, competitive activities on the *Tarantella* were composed of two teams, and which team a person was on depended on which dining room they’d been assigned to. The Bourbons versus the Hanoverians had made me think of the Seven Years War, carried over into the glitzy strip-lighted world of smoky mirrors and polished brass staircases that were the Fiesta line’s idea of elegance.

“Those guys in the Ukrainian’s cabin,” Emilio sobbed, “they all died. He woke up on the last morning of his life to find his shipmates dead around him. You know what the Purser did? He locked the door. He just shut them in. And we kept sailing north.”

Emilio took a long drag on his cigarette.

“If they catch me smoking in the halls, they’ll throw me overboard. I hope they catch me.”

“Is there any word of who will take us in?”

“Hell if I know,” our waiter said, taking one final draw from the cigarette and putting it out with his heel on the carpet. “We are supposed to rendezvous with another Fiesta ship, the *Rumba*, tomorrow. I don’t want to give you hope. The *Rumba* was able to disembark passengers in Monroeville a week ago. People got off the ship, but from what I’ve heard they couldn’t get a flight out.”

“That’s Liberia,” I said, and realized I was sounding informative when it didn’t matter.

“Yes. Africa. They’re all stuck in Africa. We were hoping to make it to Miami, but Miami doesn’t want us. None of the Easy Money Islands will have us either.”

I knew he was talking about the old East Caribbean Community.

“You ever been in the Easy Money Islands? St. Lucia’s the best. We passed it an hour ago. Castries nixed us as well. Grenada, no go. Guadeloupe, Saint Maarten, Martinique. Who wants a plague ship? You never told me why you and your wife took this cruise.”

“It’s our fortieth anniversary. I surprised her.”

“When was your anniversary, Mr. Hall?”

“The night we sailed. February 28. It is the end of May now. This party doesn’t know when to end.”

Emilio laughed, stood up, brushed the grey ashes from his black trousers and the sleeve of his white server’s jacket. “You’ll get home,” he said. “I pray every night to the Virgin and she tells me you and Mrs. Hall will get home. She’s pretty good at keeping her promises.”

“I hope the same goes for you, Emilio. You told me home is Manila.”

“We’re all from Manila. I’m from a village outside Manila, way outside. What else is there for us? We sign on. We agree to do an entire year on board the ship. We don’t get days off. When we’re in port, we’re busy loading supplies into the freezers and the larders, and when we’re at sea, we serve meals. In between, we get to eat and sleep. The worst job, Mr. Hall, is for the guys who draw the all-night buffet shift once every four weeks. No one sleeps on that shift. People come and they eat. This whole ship is one big floating restaurant. When it is in port, it looks like someone tilted a luxury high rise on its side. Two thousand, two hundred and seventy-three passengers. That’s like keeping a small city going. The money is well, money. It’s the work that can kill you. Most people aren’t nice. They think we’re servants, and we are servants, but not slaves. You and your missus have been kind to me and I won’t forget that.”

“How are the other passengers holding up?” I asked him. The captain, during his daily announcements, wouldn’t comment on the health of the passengers.

“Eighty dead.”

“Eighty? That’s horrific.”

“As the food has run low in the freezers, we’ve replaced the stores with bodies. The doctor, you know the Dutch guy who comes around to check your temperature every other day? He tried to blow his brains out with a flare gun. It didn’t work. He left the safety on. It’s going to be murder to unload all the dead if we ever get to dock anywhere. Have a good night, Mr. Hall. Stay well.”

The sun had set by the time I wished Emilio goodnight and stay safe. Emily had dozed off on the bed. More than anything, the boredom was getting to her. I write travel articles for a living. I was keeping a diary. I was absorbing every word Emilio said. To be transparent, Emilio isn’t his real name. The name I coined for him was inspired by my wife’s name. It’s like that old detective show I used to watch as a kid. ‘The names have been changed to protect the innocent’. There were many servers.

When the cruise began, the crew seemed to be everywhere. And maybe Emilio isn’t just one person. Maybe he’s several. Maybe he’s the entire crew from the servers, to the invisible cleaning staff, to the bellhops and baggage

handlers, the launderers and loaders, all rolled into one person. We were on board one of the many ships that were trapped at sea when the pandemic spread around the globe. The *Tarantella* could have been any ship that had nowhere to go, and may never get there because no one will welcome us. As we passed the shores of countless nations, I kept looking into the blue-grey outline of the mountains and wondering whether anyone saw us passing, or cared where we were going.

When our cruise began, we sailed from Miami. She did a circuit of the Caribbean, then swung south along the coast of South America. Our eventual destination was San Francisco, via Tierra del Fuego, Valparaiso, Lima, and several Mexican cities. We watched a tremendous thunderstorm light up the night sky and the outline of the Cuban mountains off the starboard side of the afterdeck one night. The Americans went to sleep awfully early and they woke up at ungodly hours in the morning, shouting up and down the halls. They haven't been shouting lately. But that night off Cuba, the air was hot and humid and a breeze came from the shore, carrying the sweet smell of land. Emily and I had the afterdeck to ourselves. I put my arm around her, as we leaned on the oak rail and watched the light show. That was magical. I won't forget it.

It should have donned on me, however, that the

cruise on that particular ship was not the best idea I've ever had. The more I think about the name of the ship, the more I am reminded of Sir John Franklin's fated expedition to find the Northwest Passage on board his two Royal Navy ships – the Erebus and the Terror. Erebus is the darkest part of hell, and we've all known our own terrors of some sort. When I say the names of those two ships, I see the survivors of Franklin's expedition struggling through the darkness of an Arctic night, the snow driven hard at their faces by an unrelenting wind. The thought of that sickens me. It sickens me almost as much as the name of our cruise ship, the *Tarantella*.

Before the captain shut down the WIFI so we'd only receive news he wanted us to hear, I researched the word 'tarantella'. Sure, it carries a 'fiesta' connotation, a sense of a party, a dance, and a celebration. However, it is a celebratory dance that spins the dancer into the darkest places of the human spirit, like a compass needle out of control and circling the quadrants, or sucked into the vortex of a maelstrom. In Italy, around the time the Yellow Jack was invented by the Venetians to signal incoming vessels that a hazardous ship was in 'quarantina,' an ancient dance was practiced in southern Italy that mimicked the symptoms of a poisonous spider bite. Those who had been bitten by a wolf spider were said to first fall into a stupor and then, as if

possessed, rise up and dance madly, spinning as if to fling off the toxins. Those who suffered from ‘tarantism’, the ‘tarantolati,’ danced until they dropped from paralysis. When the dances were imitated for performance, they were accompanied by music that grew faster and faster until the tune became impossible to follow. In other words, we were on board a ship that was named for a death dance.

Rather than whirl out of control, however, we slowed. The captain announced he was decreasing his speed, so we could save fuel while we searched the Atlantic for a suitable port. The cruise had become a voyage of the damned. The longer we sailed, the more I thought of poems such as Coleridge’s “Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner” or Wagner’s opera *Der Fliegende Holländer*. I wondered to myself what sin against nature had been committed by the crew or passengers of the ship to be condemned to sail the ocean forever.

The next morning before Emily awoke, I stood on the balcony of our stateroom. Breathing in the sea air was just about the one pleasure we were afforded, and the one thing I had paid for that I felt I was getting out of my ticket. A point of arrival, Miami, had also been part of the ticket, but that was becoming less and less of a possibility as the hours passed. We were dead in the water. Out of the fog, I watched the profile of another ship take shape until it was less than a hundred yards abreast of us. I could read the word *Rumba* on

her bow. The sea was beginning to swell around us, and I felt we were too close. A man on a balcony almost identical to ours was waving a white bath towel, signaling madly. I am not sure what he was trying to communicate. And then, as if he were dancing, he began to spin. There was a sense of absurd, almost wild celebration about him. He held a bath towel in each hand and might have fit right in at a Greek wedding.

Emilio knocked on the door with our breakfast.

“Tomorrow, Mr. Hall, you will have fruit. The *Rumba* was able to pick up some fresh goods in Monroeville. And good news! She refueled in Liberia! Now she will be taking us under tow. I have heard, and you mustn’t tell anyone, but I have heard we were running on fumes.”

Within the hour, a towline had been sent across from the *Rumba*, and we began to pick up speed again. Though, by early afternoon the *Tarantella* was rolling in the swell. When Emilio brought our dinner tray, he cautioned us to stay seated throughout the evening. Perhaps lie in bed and watch one of the movies on the ship’s entertainment network that we’d seen at least seven times.

“There is a storm ahead and we don’t have the speed to go around it, so we’ll be going through it. I’m sorry.”

“What do you have to be sorry about?” I asked. “It’s not your fault. We’ll be fine. But how are things below decks with the crew?” I could tell Emilio still wanted to charm me

the way he put on the charm the night we sat down at his table in the Bourbon Room. His eyes wanted to smile above, but the corners fell.

“Seven more. We are still safe in our quarters. The Virgin is looking out for us. We are praying to her at every opportunity. But, oh, Mr. Hall, seven last night. Four in one room and three in another. The ones who are still alive have taken to sleeping in the corridors. They won’t go back to their quarters. How is Mrs. Hall?”

I looked over at the bed. “She’s fine. She hasn’t slept this much in ages, though I have the feeling she’s not going to be feeling well tonight if there’s a storm.”

“Be safe, Mr. Hall. Be safe. Stay well.”

Emily was ill all night. As the ship tossed, she clutched her stomach. By now, we should have become accustomed to the hardships of sea travel without the use of Gravol. “After all,” I told her one day after she’d questioned how her ancestors had made it across the Atlantic in the Eighteenth century, “this is how pioneers got to the New World. This is an experience straight out of the past.”

“Go to hell,” she said as she looked up from the toilet.

There hadn’t been any seasickness medicine for the past month and a half. Some of the passengers with forethought (I was among them) cleared out the Duty Free

Shop's supply of Rum. When I was studying in London, a friend had joined me for the Christmas Break. He had family in Dublin and he had read James Joyce, who declared near the end of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, "The shortest way to Tara is via Holyhead." We decided to travel from London to Dublin by train as far as Anglesey, and then take the ferry to Dun Laoghire. The Irish Sea during that crossing was wild. The ferry pitched and rolled. A group of nuns traveling together were on their knees praying in the passenger lounge, before one toppled over and cut her head open. There wasn't a doctor on board. The poor woman needed stitches and bled all over her habit. My friend and I were fine. As the seas grew rough, he produced a bottle of Jameson. After we emptied it, we were the only ones on board who weren't sick on the carpet. I still had half a bottle of rum left. I used it for both seasickness and as hand sanitizer, if the cleaners tried to swab our sink or door handle.

We were headed north. In Buenos Aires, on the way south, I'd purchased a boy scout compass from a kid who was selling trinkets at the dock. I don't know what possessed me to buy it. Maybe I had a premonition it might come in handy. I pictured Emily and I using it on a wilderness hike through a state or provincial park back home, the sort of useful souvenir that would remind me of our happy anniversary cruise. Now, it was handy. I could chart our

course.

Every night, in the Captain's final series of announcements, the second last thing he said before telling us all to stay in our staterooms, was the speed the *Tarantella* was making or would be making. Using a *National Geographic* map of the Atlantic, I was able to determine, albeit roughly, our position. By midday, perhaps earlier, with the storm pushing us north as the *Rumba* held us under tow, we'd be entering the Gulf Stream where the weather, at this time of year, is supposedly sedate.

When I woke the next morning, the *Tarantella* was pitching wildly. Emily was moaning in bed, clutching at her stomach, begging me to do something to get her out of the hell we were in. I offered her a shot of rum.

“It will calm your gut,” I said.

“No way. I don't want to be hung-over and seasick at the same time.”

“It will help settle things.”

“Do you have any idea where we are?” she asked as she squinted at me. I opened the balcony drapes. The sliding doors were running in rain and sea water. Waves were rising up and licking our railings.

“We're in a storm.”

“Where is the storm? And don't say ‘at sea’.”

I checked my compass. We weren't pointed north.

We'd been headed east. I thought we'd be off the coast of Florida by now and that maybe they'd have sent a medivac helicopter out for the sick. Possibly, they'd also send a relief ship with food that would take us off. The *Rumba* was nowhere to be seen. The towline had snapped in the night, and she'd sailed on without realizing we were gone. We were at the mercy of the storm.

The Yellow Jack was still flying from our stern, flapping madly in the wind. During the night it had begun to shred, so that its fingers of black and yellow seemed to grab at the sky, reaching to hold on to what it could not seize. I am sure that over the next several days we passed many places that could have been landing spots for us, had the ports been opened. But as the storm abated, a dense fog held us in its grip and would not let go.

I leaned over the railing one morning and watched as a palm frond overtook us, spinning in the slap of the waves against our hull. I told Emily what I had seen, and that we were possibly in the Gulf Stream. The Gulf Stream, given enough time and the right conditions, would carry us all the way toward Ireland, or England, where surely someone would have mercy on us, and provide sanctuary to our coffin ship. I thought of my ancestors and how they arrived on the side of the Atlantic we call our home. They had been confined to the dark hold of a ship no one wanted. When they arrived, they

were not greeted with kindness, or with a temperature check of their foreheads. Instead, they were quarantined on a cold, damp, inhospitable island, where those suspected of sickness were confined to die in fever sheds, with only one doctor to treat the hundreds who arrived each day.

The doctor on board our ship had limited medical knowledge. His specialties were the things he had been called on board to treat: seasickness, food poisoning, a few broken bones, and inner ear disorders caused by snorkeling and scuba diving. He could not understand what he was facing now, just as none of us knew how to combat the scourge that held the world in its grip.

When I thought I caught sight of land, I looked down at the waves and saw a slab of ice knock against the side of the ship. A chill ran down my spine. We had entered the world of darkness, unprepared for the cold, the silence, and the emptiness that awaited us. I thought of Franklin's men when they realized no hope was coming for them, and my heart sank. I thought of the Flying Dutchman, of the Ancient Mariner, and of ice-caked rigging as the *Tarantella* lost power.

Emilio knocked on our stateroom door.

“Mr. Hall,” he said, “it has been a pleasure to serve you. You are a good tipper. Many are not. But I believe my voyage with you will shortly be ending.”

I became excited.

“Are we pulling into port at last?” I asked.

But as I spoke, I realized my hope was empty.

“The line has declared bankruptcy. The captain has left the ship. He took a tender off in the night. We are on our own.”

“Oh, God, no!”

Emilio slipped his bar towel off his forearm and smiled at me.

“As I said, it has been a pleasure sir.”

I set the tray down. As Emily woke, I didn’t know what to tell her. I held out hope that we’d still make it home. After all, the entire world could not turn its back on us, not if there was any sense of humanity left in anyone’s heart. But as I finished breakfast, I stepped out on the balcony. I saw Emilio standing on the after-deck where he tried to say something, but I couldn’t hear him for the wind and the mad flapping sounds of the ragged Yellow Jack. It was beginning to snow. As Emilio sat on the oak rail with his feet dangling over the edge, he pointed to the sky and began to laugh as he held out his tongue to catch a snowflake. He waved, and then, pushed himself off of the *Tarantella* to vanish in the grey waves.

## THE ISLAND

I knew Jefferies didn't smoke. He coughed and choked, and I stood back as far as I could. As Jefferies bent over hacking, Andrew grabbed a handful of serviettes from the napkin dispenser on the table and covered his nose and mouth as Jefferies made for the door, staggering out with a fresh bottle of rye in his hand. I called after him.

"You're not piloting the ferry in that shape. And stop smoking!"

Jefferies saw Andrew sitting there when he entered the shop but chose to ignore his gaffer. He saw enough of him all day as the ferry plied the waters between the island and the mainland. There was a time when Jefferies felt sorry for Andrew and gave the young man a job on the boat to the mainland.

The ice had just come off the big water. It had been an almost snowless winter, but the lake ice was as blue as ever and shoves of it crested along the shoreline as if the lake couldn't contain itself. Only a few sad and grey shoves were left now that April had come.

I looked out the shop window.

"It's getting choppy out there. Are you sure you're going to make another run today?"