

# Mothership

*Mik Johnson*

## **The main deck on a cruise ship is a carnival of a place.**

Colors, lights, martinis, mocktails. Bikini body babes sprawl over slatted lawn chairs, their hot-pink nails thumbing through paperback beach reads. Over-bellied men fill their plates with queso and chips at the taco bar, while under-muscled teens ride kneeboards and surfboards on the wave simulator. Tennis-shoed grandmas jog laps around the track. Hawaiian-shirted grandpas rub their arms with suntan lotion. Families with younger children splash in the kiddie pool, while families with older children race each other down the tube slides. Sunglasses. Smiles. Sunscreen. Surfing. On the main deck, it's always summer. On the main deck, it's always a party.

Running along the perimeter of the main deck is a bulwark—steel bars, white paint, smooth wood. The sturdy build and sleek finish make this railing a lovely place to lean on, watch the sunset, and snap a few pictures. As I lean against it, though, I think about how I could slip over the bulwark if I lean too far. If I slip over the bulwark, I'll fall into the ocean. If I fall into the ocean, they'll call, "man overboard." They'll call, "man overboard," but only if they see me. If they don't see me, I'll never party on the main deck again, and my whole world will be the water until I drown.

The first time I walked along the main deck on a cruise ship was eleven months before you were born. In those days, I only dreamed of you: the thought of a baby filling my heart with cotton warmth. I didn't understand, back then, what it's like to be a bulwark—what it's like to make sure you have a good life, what it's like to make sure you don't fall in.

## **When I go to Walmart, eight months pregnant, strawberries are all that I can buy.**

My belly's an anchor, shoving my hips out of socket, tethering me earthward. Shocks of icicle pain shoot up and down my legs each time a foot leaves the floor. "Wait until the baby comes," my OB says. "Displaced pelvises suck back into place during postpartum recovery." Every step counts, hurts—I can barely move. Gather/checkout/hobble/car. It takes me three minutes to ease into the driver's seat, the zing of homeless bones shouting from my hips.

I pull out of the parking lot. At the corner, a man smiles with crooked teeth, his cardboard sign asking for anything. I study his grisly beard, dirt-stained wrinkles, and cobalt eyes. *That's somebody's baby.* Your toes press tight against my ribs, your heels bobbing against my uterine wall. Wincing, I lean over the passenger seat, crank down the scrolly window, and urge myself to forget the painful steps of the grocery store. "Here," I say, passing the carton into his hands, our fingertips brushing against each other. His hands are rough against mine, and I wish he were tiny and soft again so that I could wrap him in my arms and give him gentleness.

I ask him: "Do you like strawberries?"

What I want to ask him: "Where is your mother? Why couldn't she protect you from this life? What can I do differently for my own baby? Is it wrong for me to judge you this way? Am I a bad mother already?"

## **The day I nearly bled to death is the day I met you, darling.**

Sticky from your birth sack, you nestle soft against my bare chest, your skin on my skin, the smell of you like fresh earth and autumn mornings. Spit bubbles bob against your lips, each of them a docked boat bumping against a soft jetty. I know you from all those times you wiggled inside me; I know you by your daddy's nose; I know you by my ruddy cheeks, yet here you are, a new creature, and I marvel.

Interrupting our wonder—a whirlpool roils inside my body.

"Something's wrong!"—the nurse.

"She's hemorrhaging!"—the doctor.

Thick red inlets spool from my body, and as they do, your button eyes meet mine. Daddy lifts you away from me, and as my own eyes cloud over with blackness, I'm grateful that I met you because I'm sure that I will die, and since all lives end on a moment, at least this is the moment I'm ending on.

What I don't know, as I lie dying, is that I'll live. What I don't know, as I lie dying, is that in thirteen months' time, I'll choose to carry a baby

again, notwithstanding the risk of blood death. What I don't know, as I lie dying, is that the second baby is another boy, a feisty boy, your brother.

What I *do* know, as I lie dying, is that every risk to my physical body is worthwhile if it gives you life and keeps you safe.

### **It's the middle of the night,**

and it's the fourteenth time, but the voices in my mind won't quiet down until I check (just one more time) that every window is shut, that every door is locked, that every light is off, and that you and your brother are breathing, your chests falling softly, up and down, below my palms. Can I really begrudge them, though? Those voices in my mind? Depriving me of any sleep? Telling me to check on you over and over again? When, in the end, they always lead me to this moment, where all the world is like water without whitecaps, the gentle undulations of your lungs pulsing beneath my hand.

Inside my pocket, inside my phone, inside my browser, six web searches are open.

1. How likely is a four-month-old to die of SIDS?
2. How did Elizabeth Smart's abductor enter the home?
3. How many children are the right number for a happy family?
4. Am I having a heart attack or a panic attack?
5. Is it normal to feel relief when I think about dying?
6. Can postpartum anxiety and depression become long-term anxiety and depression?

I never sailed through questions like these before I became a mother.

How much rain and wind and seawater can a bulwark take before it breaks from the hull? I don't want to know.

### **There's bubbles**

in your hair, down your arms, and across your back, the tub swathing your body in clean, soapy water. At your feet, a yellow toy wobbles through the foam. Seated on the lip of the tub, I lean over and scrub your scalp. Beside you, your brother asks, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" And you, your teeth bright and ivory, your lashes and brows flecked in dew drops, say, "A trash man."

I give you a nod, a smile. As I rinse my hands, my heart gives a prick. Why do I feel the need to protect you from something that isn't harmful, like a trash man job—a job that isn't harmful except in terms of social status, but I thought I didn't care about that stuff anyway?

Am I protecting you from the wrong things?

Next Thursday, when the trash collector climbs down from his truck to open the dumpster gate, his thick cheeks covered in rough black stubble, will I wave? When our eyes meet, will I smile? Will I ever stop to learn his name and become friends with him, thanking him for hauling our crap across the county so that we can live in a nice, clean, tidy-style place, and hey, we both love Hubert's lemonade and watching that one wilderness survival show that's pretty cool?

In twenty years, if you take your turn in the seat behind that massive brown wheel doing this massive brown job, will people ever stop to learn your name too?

### **After hours on my knees,**

“God—” I plead. You and your brother sleep, your eyelids flickering to and fro in the dance of dreams, your breath as soft as inlet water smoothing onto sand, your cheeks as supple and untouched as the skin on June peaches. “Give them my frizzy hair, yes. And Dad’s gout feet, sure. Grandma’s nearsighted eyes, and Great-Grandfather’s meatless arms. Give them our upset bellies and heart disease and cancer guts and stout little frames and minds that remember too much and mouths that say too much. Give it to them, God, give it all, except this—do not give them our depression. Protect them from the worst of it.”

### **Little boy, your sickness came as blood in pee.**

It filled the bowl with scarlet, like Moses filled the Nile. Five days pass, a fever dream. Needles/doctors/phone calls/weeping/hemoglobin/too low/too low. Four a.m., I hold you, your breath whistling against my neck, tubes twirling into your veins. Blood bags, hanging soft and plastic from a metal cross, drip liquid rubies. I imagine a woman, rolling up her sleeve yesterday, scrolling through Instagram, crushing a stress ball. A phlebotomist circles her skin with waves of iodine. Does the donor know that, besides me, she’s the only other to give you life?

Can it be that there are others on our voyage protecting you too?

### **The sky is like spilled sugar on dark velvet; stars sprawl overhead**

while we sing our songs and roast our marshmallows. This isn’t your first camping trip, but still, I sit too close, ready to catch you if you fall towards the flames. You sing-yell, “down by the bay” while you turn the roaster stick, squealing with delight when the mallow catches fire. “Blow it out, Mom, blow it out!”

I do as you ask, lay the marshmallow on a piece of chocolate, press it all between graham crackers, and pass it into your dirty hands. You stuff the lot into your mouth. Between bites, you look up at me, eyes twinkling. “Can we do this again sometime?”

Your joy is contagious, and I smile. “Yes, baby. Of course.”

Maybe, I start to realize, I’m meant to protect you *and* enjoy you.

### **In my faith,**

teenagers recite this scripture during their studies in high school seminary class: “Adam fell that men might be; and men are, that they might have joy” (2 Ne. 2:25). In my faith, we share the story of creation—God’s breath of life, Adam’s borrowed rib, a tempter sly as a serpent, the tree of forbidden fruit. In my faith, we celebrate Eve, who left paradise for the fallen world because the fallen world had children.

### **There was no one to protect before you were born.**

I drove cars past one hundred miles per hour. Broke boys’ hearts. Had my heart broken. Kept less than \$1,000 in the bank at all times. Moved to South America, no problem.

It’s strange, remembering the woman I was before I had you. I felt I would swim no matter the storm, that I was as fierce as a shark and as clever as an octopus and as sturdy as a whale.

Or perhaps, it’s that there was no water in my life then? Nothing to sail on? Nothing to sink into?

What I know now: I’d choose the ocean over the dry land every single time, now that I’ve sailed here. Now that I’m a mother, there’s no going back, not even if it were possible.

### **Joy—fat and soft—wraps around my heart like a bulwark wraps around her passengers**

as I wrap you and your brother against me. You, five years old, pull away to join the kindergarten lineup. Your brother, three years old, shouts, “Wait! I forgot to give you a Spider-Man high five!”

The two of you make your fingers into Spidey shapes while the mother to my left says, “Your boys are the cutest!” And the mother to my right says, “I can’t help thinking you’ll announce a third one soon!” The two of you smack hands, cheering. The two mothers drift their separate ways. A shock of water—depression, doubt—slaps over my joy.

You sail inside, giddy to join your classmates, while your brother buries his face in my neck, asking to watch *Bluey* when we get home.

My arms wrap around him—my two arms that just a moment ago were holding the two of you—two, because there’s just enough of me to hold both of you. But what if there was a third child?

As I buckle your brother into his car seat, my mind backpedals to what that second mother said. It was none of her business, but even so, I can’t deny that I’ve wondered about a third baby. Often. Would it be a wonderful thing to have another child? Another child for me to wipe and dry and tickle and cuddle? Another child to fill my heart to bursting?

Bursting. Would the deck be too full then, with three of you bumping against the rails, bumping until one of you bursts over the bulwark and plunges into the waters below? Maybe you would fall into the water, but then, I would pull you out again. Maybe a little water is good for you. Not a lot, but a little. Just enough to help you learn to swim on your own.

I kiss your brother’s forehead, then close the car door, pressing my hand against the window. I make a face at him through the glass, blowing up my puffer fish cheeks, sticking out my eel’s tongue. He squeals, points, claps for more. Joy comes surging up again, a sea at high tide.

I put the key in the ignition, and we drive home. As I pull into the carport, a thought settles like driftwood in my mind. I am the bulwark, yes; I have known this from the start—I’ll do anything, everything, to keep you and your brother safe. But I am a cruise deck, too, and an anchor. I am rudder, keel, bowsprit, stern, galley, cabin, and helm. I am life vest and life ring and life boat and my life—all of it, the mothership—will sail for you, with you, to you, through all of life’s oceans, whether joy or sorrow, whether pleasure or pain.

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