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The Cat's Table



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Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Ondaatje, Michael, 1943–

The cat's table / Michael Ondaatje.

ISBN 978-0-7710-6864-5

I. Title.

PS8529.N283C38 2011 C813'.54 C2011-901855-1

We acknowledge the financial support of the Government of Canada through the Book Publishing Industry Development Program and that of the Government of Ontario through the Ontario Media Development Corporation's Ontario Book Initiative. We further acknowledge the support of the Canada Council for the Arts and the Ontario Arts Council for our publishing program.

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Published in the United States by Alfred A. Knopf, a division of Random House, Inc., and in the United Kingdom by Jonathan Cape, a division of the Random House Group Limited, London.

Typeset in Fairfield by Scribe

Printed and bound in Canada

McClelland & Stewart Ltd.

75 Sherbourne Street

Toronto, Ontario

M5A 2P9

www.mcclelland.com

1 2 3 4 5 15 14 13 12 11



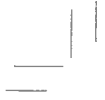
For Quintin, Griffin, Kristin, and Esta

For Anthony and for Constance



*And this is how I see the East. . . . I see it always
from a small boat—not a light, not a stir, not
a sound. We conversed in low whispers, as if
afraid to wake up the land. . . . It is all in that
moment when I opened my young eyes on it.
I came upon it from a tussle with the sea.*

—JOSEPH CONRAD, "YOUTH"



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HE WASN'T TALKING. He was looking from the window of the car all the way. Two adults in the front seat spoke quietly under their breath. He could have listened if he wanted to, but he didn't. For a while, at the section of the road where the river sometimes flooded, he could hear the spray of water at the wheels. They entered the Fort and the car slipped silently past the post office building and the clock tower. At this hour of the night there was barely any traffic in Colombo. They drove out along Reclamation Road, passed St. Anthony's Church, and after that he saw the last of the food stalls, each lit with a single bulb. Then they entered a vast open space that was the harbour, with only a string of lights in the distance along the pier. He got out and stood by the warmth of the car.

He could hear the stray dogs that lived on the quays barking out of the darkness. Nearly everything around him was invisible, save for what could be seen under the spray of a few sulphur lanterns—watersiders pulling a procession of baggage wagons, some families huddled together. They were all beginning to walk towards the ship.

He was eleven years old that night when, green as he could be about the world, he climbed aboard the first and only ship of

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his life. It felt as if a city had been added to the coast, better lit than any town or village. He went up the gangplank, watching only the path of his feet—nothing ahead of him existed—and continued till he faced the dark harbour and sea. There were outlines of other ships farther out, beginning to turn on lights. He stood alone, smelling everything, then came back through the noise and the crowd to the side that faced land. A yellow glow over the city. Already it felt there was a wall between him and what took place there. Stewards began handing out food and cordials. He ate several sandwiches, and after that he made his way down to his cabin, undressed, and slipped into the narrow bunk. He'd never slept under a blanket before, save once in Nuwara Eliya. He was wide awake. The cabin was below the level of the waves, so there was no porthole. He found a switch beside the bed and when he pressed it his head and pillow were suddenly lit by a cone of light.

He did not go back up on deck for a last look, or to wave at his relatives who had brought him to the harbour. He could hear singing and imagined the slow and then eager parting of families taking place in the thrilling night air. I do not know, even now, why he chose this solitude. Had whoever brought him onto the *Oronsay* already left? In films people tear themselves away from one another weeping, and the ship separates from land while the departed hold on to those disappearing faces until all distinction is lost.

I try to imagine who the boy on the ship was. Perhaps a sense of self is not even there in his nervous stillness in the narrow bunk, in this green grasshopper or little cricket, as if he has been smuggled away accidentally, with no knowledge of the act, into the future.

* * *

He woke up, hearing passengers running along the corridor. So he got back into his clothes and left the cabin. Something was happening. Drunken yells filled the night, shouted down by officials. In the middle of B Deck, sailors were attempting to grab hold of the harbour pilot. Having guided the ship meticulously out of the harbour (there were many routes to be avoided because of submerged wrecks and an earlier breakwater), he had gone on to have too many drinks to celebrate his achievement. Now, apparently, he simply did not wish to leave. Not just yet. Perhaps another hour or two with the ship. But the *Oronsay* was eager to depart on the stroke of midnight and the pilot's tug waited at the waterline. The crew had been struggling to force him down the rope ladder, however as there was a danger of his falling to his death, they were now capturing him fishlike in a net, and in this way they lowered him down safely. It seemed to be in no way an embarrassment to the man, but the episode clearly was to the officials of the Orient Line who were on the bridge, furious in their white uniforms. The passengers cheered as the tug broke away. Then there was the sound of the two-stroke and the pilot's weary singing as the tug disappeared into the night.

Departure

WHAT HAD THERE BEEN BEFORE such a ship in my life? A dugout canoe on a river journey? A launch in Trincomalee harbour? There were always fishing boats on our horizon. But I could never have imagined the grandeur of this castle that was to cross the sea. The longest journeys I had made were car rides to Nuwara Eliya and Horton Plains, or the train to Jaffna, which we boarded at seven a.m. and disembarked from in the late afternoon. We made that journey with our egg sandwiches, some *thalagulies*, a pack of cards, and a small Boy's Own adventure.

But now it had been arranged I would be travelling to England by ship, and that I would be making the journey alone. No mention was made that this might be an unusual experience or that it could be exciting or dangerous, so I did not approach it with any joy or fear. I was not forewarned that the ship would have seven levels, hold more than six hundred people including a captain, nine cooks, engineers, a veterinarian, and that it would contain a small jail and chlorinated pools that would actually sail with us over two oceans. The departure date was marked casually on the calendar by my aunt, who had notified the school that I would be leaving at the end of the term. The fact of my being at sea for twenty-one days was spoken of as having not much significance,

so I was surprised my relatives were even bothering to accompany me to the harbour. I had assumed I would be taking a bus by myself and then change onto another at Borella Junction.

There had been just one attempt to introduce me to the situation of the journey. A lady named Flavia Prins, whose husband knew my uncle, turned out to be making the same journey and was invited to tea one afternoon to meet with me. She would be travelling in First Class but promised to keep an eye on me. I shook her hand carefully, as it was covered with rings and bangles, and she then turned away to continue the conversation I had interrupted. I spent most of the hour listening to a few uncles and counting how many of the trimmed sandwiches they ate.

On my last day, I found an empty school examination booklet, a pencil, a pencil sharpener, a traced map of the world, and put them into my small suitcase. I went outside and said good-bye to the generator, and dug up the pieces of the radio I had once taken apart and, being unable to put them back together, had buried under the lawn. I said good-bye to Narayan, and good-bye to Gunepala.

As I got into the car, it was explained to me that after I'd crossed the Indian Ocean and the Arabian Sea and the Red Sea, and gone through the Suez Canal into the Mediterranean, I would arrive one morning on a small pier in England and my mother would meet me there. It was not the magic or the scale of the journey that was of concern to me, but that detail of how my mother could know when exactly I would arrive in that other country.

And if she would be there.