At midnight on New Year's Eve, the S.S. POSEIDON, en route from New York to Athens, met with disaster and was lost. There were only a handful of survivors. This is their story..."}

I

The second time I saw The Poseidon Adventure, I was so frightened after the first half hour that I had to call my parents from a pay phone in the lobby of the movie theater and ask them to please come get me and take me home.

In the film, a luxury ocean liner gets hit by a giant tidal wave and turns upside down; ten people climb their way up through the hull in a desperate attempt at escape. Of those ten, only six survive.

I had seen the film for the first time without any serious problems several weeks before (this was in 1972; I was nine), and though shaken, I had emerged all in one piece from the darkness of the movie theater into the dreary light of a Sunday afternoon in December, with my fourteen-year-old sister, Suzanne—much like the handful of exhausted survivors in the film when, after hours of tortuous climbing, crawling, and swimming, they are lifted out of the capsized wreck of the Poseidon into the blinding, anomie-inducing light of day. That night I couldn't sleep for visions of tidal waves and windows shattering; for a day or two after, the sound of a toilet flushing made me dash out of the bathroom
for fear that something was chasing me or that somehow I'd get sucked down into the hole. But it was my first PG film, and I had survived it.

The second time around, however, *The Poseidon Adventure* was a different story. I knew as soon as the lights went down in the movie theater that I had made a big mistake. I trembled at the sight of the ship unknowingly, inexorably making its way through the rough ocean waters. The names of the actors, as they spanned the screen one after another, seemed like the roll call of the dead: GENE HACKMAN, ERNEST BORGnine, RED BUTTONS, CAROL LYNLEY, RODDY McDOWALL, STELLA STEVENS, SHELLEY WINTERS, and on and on. As each character was introduced during the first half hour of the film, before disaster would strike, I hated to think of what lay in store for them; and yet I had no choice. Now I knew everything, and the knowledge was unbearable. I knew how Reverend Scott (Gene Hackman) would take it upon himself to lead a handful of passengers through the twisted wreckage of the capsized ship but would die at the last minute before the final escape. I knew how teenage Susan (Pamela Sue Martin) would develop a crush on Reverend Scott and then have to live the rest of her life with the memory of his horrible death, which happened right before her eyes. I knew that Mrs. Rosen (Shelley Winters) would reluctantly join Reverend Scott's band of adventurers, lighten the atmosphere with her warm sense of humor (while climbing the Christmas tree as a means of escape from the dining saloon, she quips, "Mrs. Peter Pan I'm not!", and everyone in the audience laughed, grateful for a moment's relief from the terrible suspense), but in the end suffer a heart attack and die. I knew that for all his fastidious health consciousness, the middle-aged bachelor and haberdasher, Mr. Martin (Red Buttons), would have to roll up his sleeves and use his muscle and act like a man if he intended to save his life (at New Year's Eve dinner, he explains to his dinner companions the Rosens, "I'd like to be married . . . I just can't seem to find the time. I mean, I get down at the shop at eight, I open at nine, I close at seven, and I go home at eight. Except on Wednesdays and Fridays, and I go home at ten"—none of which would amount to a hill of beans when the ship turned over). I knew that, despite the way Mike Rogo (Ernest Borgnine), the cop, and his wife, Linda (Stella Stevens), the former prostitute, liked to argue, they really cared for each other, and so when Linda suddenly gets thrown off a catwalk into a pool of fire and dies, Mike is devastated and momentarily blames Reverend Scott, as if Reverend Scott's insistence that people keep moving and try to save themselves, that they not look back and dwell on the dead, could in fact be interpreted as cruel and insensitive. *I liked* Linda Rogo! *I liked* Mrs. Rosen! I didn't want them to die!
And not only did I like all of these characters; I could identify with nearly every one of them at some point during the film. For example, I was the precocious preadolescent boy, Robin Shelby (Eric Shea), when he feels both ignored and infantilized by his older sister, Susan (fig. 12):

ROBIN: [reading a book] Hey, did you know this? The engines on this ship have more total horsepower than all the cavalry Napoleon used to conquer Europe. How 'bout that?

SUSAN: [looking at herself in her mirror while combing her hair; bored] That's heavy, Robin. Real heavy.

[A knock is heard at the door.]

ROBIN: The ship's generators create enough electricity to light Charleston, South Carolina and Atlanta, Georgia.

STEWARD: [enters with a telegram] Shelby?

SUSAN: That's right.

STEWARD: Cable.

SUSAN: Thank you.

ROBIN: Hey, it's my turn to open the cable!

SUSAN: Don't be so childish. "Mother and I waiting impatiently your ar-
Like Susan and Robin, whose always-simmering antagonism toward each other boils over at the prospect of parental dispensation (here, the telegram bestowing affection and good wishes), my siblings and I were always vying with each other in different combinations for my parents’ attention. We fought a lot (fig. 13). But my brother and sisters’ motto was, “whenever there’s a fight in the house, it’s always between Patrick and somebody else”; they thought that only I was spoiled, that only I wanted attention. They needed me to play a predictable role in family squabbles (as in different ways each of them did), so I became known as “the Screamer.” And my brother, John, repeatedly told me, “if my friends’ younger brothers mouthed off to them the way you mouth off to me, they would kick their teeth in!” Susan Shelby could never threaten Robin with physical violence the way John threatened me, but I found her scoldings all too familiar.

At the same time, I identified with Susan when she scolded Robin. I spent hours, like Susan, staring at myself in the mirror, pretending I was an actress, wrapping my head in a towel to make me look more like a girl with long hair, like my sister Suzanne, or like a nun; I resented my effemininity and hated the masculine entitlement other men and boys seemed to flaunt at my expense. Smart-mouthed boys like Robin were always making my life (like Susan’s) miserable: they said vulgar and insulting things (“you faggot!”) and were completely insensitive to their power to hurt me. I sought revenge in being an excellent student, and I comforted myself by playing the piano with aching sensitivity. But in the tough world of boys and masculinity, those things counted for almost
nothing. Likewise, with no apparent interests of her own (or no interests that counted as worth representing in the film), and with no occupation other than her prescribed familial role as "the older sister," Susan had every reason to be furious with Robin, who at the very least got to read interesting books (the brochure describing the ship) and enjoyed a degree of mobility (he bounces rambunctiously on the bed and has an invitation to go sight-seeing in the engine room). Susan's verbal abuse of Robin ("Don't be so childish"; "Why couldn't I have had a brother that's a little easier to live with?") and her power to thwart his desires ("You can see the propeller shaft later!") are only the signs of her own more profound disempowerment by the familial, social, and cinematic regimes that reduce her full humanity to an abject stereotype of sexual vulnera-
bility (Robin says to her, “Why don’t you just shove it?”) and banish her to her mirror, narcissistically combing her hair, thinking nothing.

And I was Acres (Roddy McDowall), the young waiter, staring half-absently at Nonnie (Carol Lynley), the singer, and her band as they rehearse one of their numbers, “The Morning After”:

NONNIE: [sings; looks lovingly at the guitarist, her brother] “There’s got to be a morning after. . .”
WAITER: [looking askance at Acres as he, Acres, looks at Nonnie and her band]
Where’d that lot come from?
ACRES: They boarded at Gibraltar. They’re on their way to Sicily—a free trip for free music. They’re going to a jazz festival.
WAITER: [in a mocking, singsong tone of voice] “Morning after”—oh, I can’t take this stuff. Give me a Strauss waltz anytime.
ACRES: I rather fancy it.
WAITER: You? You’d even fancy bagpipes.

Like Acres, I could be mesmerized for hours listening to my Barbra Streisand records (which, to certain of my siblings, might as well have been bagpipes). Unconsciously, I understood that when Acres looked at Nonnie, he wasn’t feeling the conventional kind of love for her; his wasn’t the classic cinematic male gaze. He was probably thinking about himself—some boy he was in love with; he may even have identified with Nonnie as she sang sweetly and ruffled her brother’s long, pretty, brown hair.

I definitely had a strong identification with Nonnie. She frightened me perhaps most of all the characters. She seemed the least equipped to handle catastrophe, to face the future; all she had, it seemed, was her brother, and now he was gone. She was always ready to retreat, to stay back and let the others go on ahead. I could feel all of her fragility and incomprehension, later in the film, when she is reminded that her brother, Teddy, is dead, while she must remain among the living:

NONNIE: My brother, Teddy, has lovely hair. He’s really dead, isn’t he? [she lies down, cuddling herself] I can’t go on without him. I can’t.
MR. MARTIN: Nonnie, you will go on. We do, you know. We have to. At first we don’t think it’s possible, but in time—believe me, in time, you’ll find other things—other people—someone else to care for you, you’ll see.

Despite Mr. Martin’s kind assurances, the thought of living without my parents and siblings terrified me and made me, like Nonnie, whose name meant, essentially, “nothing,” want to curl up like a baby and stay that way forever.
It's true, despite my strong feelings for all the characters, I craved to see again the tumultuous spectacle of the ship's rolling over, the tidal wave engulfing everything, sending cups, plates, forks, champagne bottles, tables, chairs, pianos, and bodies flying through the air. But there were other things I just couldn't face again—like the hideous corpse sitting upright in the ship's galley with his face charred and blood-covered, the hair half burned off of his head, his eyes ghoulishly open; poor Susan Shelby wept at the mere sight of it! The second time I saw *The Poseidon Adventure*, I knew that every minute I spent with the characters would only mean one minute closer to the hour of their darkest night. Everything they said and did, every meaningless gesture, every trite comment, every careless expression of affection or disdain, now radiated within the shadow of their final fate. No longer could I live life never thinking of tomorrow. (My mom always said you should never go to bed angry with someone because you could wake up the next morning and they could be gone.) It was bad enough to love someone and never to know, Will they be alive tomorrow? Bad enough to wonder, Will I live to see my sixteenth birthday? Will I be married someday? Will I ever have children? Will I live in a nice house? What will I do with the rest of my life? Will I be happy? Oh God, will I die a painless death? Please let it be painless. Let me die in my sleep, let me *not* die from fire or ice. But if I have to choose between the two, which will I choose? It's such an awful choice. I would choose freezing to death over burning to death. All of this was bad enough, but it was altogether worse to have to live your life in the full awareness of everything that was to come. *The Poseidon Adventure*, at that point, became unbearable.

Once the ship turned over, I knew I had to get out. As I rose from my seat in the dark and walked up the inclined aisle of the movie theater toward the doors at the back—the doors with round porthole windows like the windows in the cabins of the SS *Poseidon!*—as I rushed (but not so quickly and nervously as to conjure up in my mind the ghost of that corpse from the horrific galley scene pursuing me) to the pay phones to call home and ask to be rescued, I felt as if I were walking the slanted decks of the *Poseidon*, as though the floor were moving beneath me. I thought the floor was actually tilting—tipping—up!—making my escape more difficult!—as I struggled to get out through the back doors.

The incident, however, only increased my fascination with *The Poseidon Adventure*. Yet rather than attempting to see the film a third time, I confined myself to meditating upon the movie poster, which, because the movie was showing at our local mall, was easily accessible to me. The image on the poster helped me reexperience in my head what I'd seen
on the screen: "HELL, UPSIDE DOWN" the poster bellowed in all-capital letters! The picture is less a scene from the film than a fantastic composite of several different scenes synthesized into one mind-blowing image (fig. 14). We see the grand ballroom of the capsized Poseidon full of terrified passengers running hysterically in every direction because the sea has just exploded like a bomb through the back wall of the room (in the film itself, it comes gushing through a floor-to-ceiling smoked-glass window, but the poster makes everything look more pumped up and fast paced). A powerful, sharply delineated starburst of white water hurls people through the air, some of them rear-end first, toward the viewer, while in the foreground Gene Hackman, Ernest Borgnine, and Stella Stevens struggle to run clear of it. Behind them, Red Buttons appears to be reaching down to help Shelley Winters to her feet, Eric Shea and Pamela Sue Martin emerge from the wreckage of dead bodies and overturned tables, Carol Lynley frantically reaches out her arm as if to grab hold of something steady, and Byron Webster (who plays the ship’s purser) and an unidentifiable actor cry out in pain. On the ceiling, people hang and in some cases fall from tables that, when the ship was right side up, had been bolted to the floor.

I was particularly intrigued by this picture because it gave you some sense of the lavish architecture of the ballroom, which I was always trying to resurrect in my mind. The main attractions of the room, of course, were the huge, art nouveau, oval-shaped, stained-glass windows in the ceiling. I say "of course" because it was impossible to forget the scene when, during the capsizing of the ship, some poor son of a bitch crashes through one of these windows, flat on his back, causing an electrical shortage. But I’d either forgotten or just never realized from seeing the film that (as the poster image revealed) the ballroom was divided like a cathedral by rows of widely spaced pillars into three airy sections, one larger central space with two narrower spaces, one on each side of it. Also, the picture suggested that both the floor and ceiling were carved up by interesting level changes (this reminded me of the complicated interior design of the Harmonia Gardens Restaurant).

On the one hand, The Poseidon Adventure satisfied my appetite for images of carnage, destruction, and familial and social disarray. On the other, it dwelled on the scenes of individual and collective reconstruction that follow and redeem those moments of calamity. For example, in June of 1972, Hurricane Agnes blew into Reading and flooded our basement with six inches of water. Whatever my parents felt, I was only too happy to see the red shag carpet completely ruined, to help move the furniture, to throw out the stacks of books sopping wet, and to spend two
Figure 14. Poster for The Poseidon Adventure.
whole days with all of my siblings taking turns sweeping out the water and repairing the damage. Not only could I experience the thrill of seeing Home and Family disarranged, but I could reinsert myself into those structures in a new, nonstereotypic way that made me feel, for a change, needed and equal, not impertinent and a failure (fig. 15).

Likewise in *The Poseidon Adventure*, disaster united and gave purpose to an otherwise fragmented group of people (fig. 16). The passengers, who
just prior to the moment of catastrophe were heedlessly ringing in the new year in the ship's grand, three-story-high dining room, now quarrel bitterly over whether they should wait to be rescued from the outside or whether they should try to save themselves. Reverend Scott insists on the latter: they must climb upward through the overturned ship toward the portion of the hull that, young Robin assures him, is only six inches thick. But the door that leads from the dining room to the galley, and hence farther into the hull, is now three flights above them on the "floor" of the dining room. To reach it, they must upend the huge, steel Christmas tree, which had fallen soon after the ship's capsizing, and climb its green branches. Like Jesus dragging his cross to Calvary, Reverend Scott lifts the heavy trunk of the tree and, with the concerted help of several other men, carries it forward. The surrounding, awe-struck assemblage of passengers parts, like the waters of the Red Sea, as Reverend Scott and company shoulder the tree through their midst and, mustering all their strength, slowly and precariously raise it once more.
The Wreck of the Family

The sequence is unforgettable for several reasons. First, references to the New and Old Testaments commingle here (as elsewhere) and saturate the film's text; this too obviously overdetermined Biblical allusiveness gives the sheer impression of significance, whatever specific interpretation we might proffer. We are made to feel, these scenes must mean something! Second, its heroism is endorsed by the film's swelling, Wagnerian score. Third, our bird's-eye view gives us the full benefit of its gargantuan physicality and irresistible suspense. Fourth, and most importantly, we witness, as in every other disaster film of the 1970s beginning with Airport but in few Hollywood films since, the dramatic interconnectedness of an entire society of ordinary people (or its synecdochic equivalent) as it responds to a crisis.²

Once the tree is in place, Reverend Scott nominates Robin, the smallest and most fleet-footed of the passengers, to be the first to climb the tree. When Robin reaches the top, he shouts triumphantly, flush with the pride of having made a significant contribution to the collective survival, "It's a cinch!"

Around this same time, my two-year-old cousin Rebecca was ill with spinal meningitis. I secretly hoped that she would die, since that would surely create the kind of excitement around the house I'd come to associate with The Poseidon Adventure; and I was relieved when she did. (Whenever I'd be up in a room by myself, I would bend over and look at it upside down and try to imagine what it would look like with all the furniture falling down onto the ceiling; this was fun, but it wasn't as thrilling as having real problems!) And when my Uncle Tom died unexpectedly, my Aunt Peggy packed up her five kids and flew down from Boston to our house for Christmas that year. It was the most chaotic holiday I'd ever experienced. My parents were so busy consoling and accommodating people that they didn't even have time to wrap our presents.

The Poseidon Adventure was like that—innocent people got killed, holidays turned into funerals, heterosexual couples got torn apart. But then new alliances formed (Mr. Martin promises Nonnie he isn't going anywhere without her), and the death of one ensured the life of someone else (though she hasn't swum in years and is too fat to risk trying now, Belle Rosen heroically saves Reverend Scott from drowning, only to suffer a fatal heart attack herself from the strain of doing so—Mrs. Rosen it was who "cried for a week when they tore down the Third Avenue El," as her husband Manny reminds her near the beginning of the film, and somehow she was like that gloriously rickety late-nineteenth-century dinosaur: charming, inefficient, neighborly. And when the El had finally been torn down, the New York Times headline read, "Third
Avenue Blossoms As El Disappears” [Stetler 116]). As a preadolescent spectator of the film and participant in the real-life catastrophes that befell my family, I was free to explore what seemed an unusually wide range of identifications, just as, within the film, catastrophe makes people free to discover capacities within themselves that were, until then, unimaginable.3

Despite her debilitating grief over the death of her husband and the strain it inevitably put on our relationship, my Aunt Peggy and I did share one euphoric moment when, having finally managed, after several failed and increasingly comical attempts, to light the fuse on the miniature rocket I got for Christmas, together we raced frantically across the snow-covered lawn, away from the rocket’s threatening blast, laughing triumphantly, hysterically, tears coming to our eyes, as the rocket shot with a loud whoooooosh! into the cold white sky.

II

When my mother brought me home from the movie theater after my second, aborted viewing of The Poseidon Adventure, she asked me worriedly, “What’s the matter?”

She had a way of asking “what’s the matter” that let you know (or so it seemed to me) that she was asking mainly because she was forced to ask because of the drama of your tears or because of your towering silence. She preferred not to know, it seemed, the answer to the question, but hoped that the whole thing would be quick and painless and something she could smooth over with a few words about how “we all feel those things once in a while and it’s really nothing to get all bent out of shape about.” Apart from her general aversion to the apparently unquietable turmoil of my inner life, my mother did have good reasons for being suspicious about my emotional involvement with this film. Besides wishing I hadn’t gone to see it a second time, she was confused by my attraction to The Poseidon Adventure because she knew that my grand passion during these years was musical comedy—to the exclusion, it seemed, of everything else.

My five favorite films in 1973 were (1) The Sound of Music; (2) Hello, Dolly!; (3) Funny Girl; (4) My Fair Lady; (5) The Wizard of Oz. I kept a running list (secret of course) that could be modified only with great fanfare and difficulty; I was open to the possibility that a new film could conceivably come along and disturb the ranking, although it certainly would have to be a very special film, as, for example, Mame, in 1974, turned out to be. In that year, Mame displaced My Fair Lady for the number 4 spot,
putting *My Fair Lady* at the still-respectable number 5 (anyway, there was something about Audrey Hepburn as Eliza Doolittle that turned me off—I didn’t like her voice, which was dubbed, and her body was too much like a boy’s, or so my mother always said, although that was one of the things she loved about Audrey Hepburn). I decided that by then I had really outgrown *The Wizard of Oz* (or at least I was asked so often by my parents and siblings “Aren’t you sick of that movie yet!” that I used my mature age—eleven—as an excuse for demoting it), so I put it at number 10, a kind of “honorable mention.” The next year things got even more complicated with the release of *Funny Lady*, and the year after that I saw *Cabaret* for the first time on TV—two films whose eligibility for one of the top five spots had to be given deep consideration. Actually, *The Sound of Music* and *Hello, Dolly!* were, barring catastrophe, untouchable in the number 1 and number 2 positions (but what kind of catastrophe could ever be so mind-altering?), so all we were really talking about here were the number 3, 4, and 5 spots. Not incidentally, I was so moved by *The Poseidon Adventure* that it eventually became the one and only nonmusical film in my top-ten count. I was a builder of canons.

This was also not the first time my parents had to come rescue me from a situation that was making me unhappy, and it wouldn’t be the last. I was always a very homesick child. One of the reasons I refused to go to summer camp—apart from my dislike of the outdoors and my fear of being cooped up for any length of time with a bunch of boys—was that I hated the thought of being away from home. About a year before I saw *The Poseidon Adventure*, I went to visit Aunt Peggy and her family up in Boston. I think we all thought this was a good idea because I liked to play with my cousin John, who was a couple of years younger than me, I liked Aunt Peggy, I liked their house and their toys, and it would just be for a long weekend. But no. After the first day and night, I’d had all I could take. I imagined everyone in my aunt’s house was mad at me. I saw unfriendly looks in people’s eyes. I heard unkind words being said to me. When Aunt Peggy said “no” (it might have been, “No, you can’t eat those cookies now, we’re having dinner in fifteen minutes”), the world came crashing down around me. I missed my toys and I missed my parents and my brother and sisters and I wanted to go home. So Mom and Dad made arrangements to fly me home two days earlier than planned.

And again: In the early summer of 1985, just after I graduated college, I went to Oxford for a six-week summer school program to study modern British fiction. I decided to spend a month prior to the beginning of classes in London, where I had spent my junior year of college. I got a room in my old dormitory and tried to spend my days reading, visiting museums, and my nights going to the theater. It was a disas-
I didn’t know anyone anymore at the college, and the one or two faces that looked familiar seemed strangely off-putting instead of inviting. I’ve never been the type to strike up a conversation with strangers, so I felt adrift. To make everything worse, I was haunted by memories of my friend Ludwell, the boy I had an unrequited crush on all during my junior year in London: here we lay on the grass that unseasonably warm day in March, while our friends threw a Frisbee and Ludwell and I listened to Glenn Gould playing Bach’s Goldberg Variations on my roommate Al’s boombox; there, across the path, I watched Ludwell talking and laughing with Ian, and I felt jealous, certain there was something going on between the two of them. I couldn’t stand being here again and reliving the whole cycle of hope and dejection day after day. So after three days in London, I called my parents and asked them to bring me home—I would still go to summer school in Oxford in three weeks, but in the meantime I would stay at home with my parents in a place that felt safe and far, far away from my feelings about Ludwell. Bewildered (for I couldn’t tell them the real reason I needed to leave London now), weary from trying to understand my emotional ups and downs, they said, yes, of course, if it’s what you want. We want you to do whatever will make you happy.

“So, what happened?” my mother asked when she picked me up from the movie theater. “Was it something Tommy did?”

I had gone to see The Poseidon Adventure this second time with a younger boy, Tommy Wagner, who was about seven or eight, and some of his friends and siblings. Probably my mother and I were both embarrassed (I know I was) that only I, among the oldest of the group, and a boy, had to be taken home in the middle of the film. But we couldn’t openly acknowledge that to each other. One source of constant tension between my parents and I all during my childhood years was the kinds of people I chose for friends and their presumed effect on my gender socialization. Either I played with girls, which meant that I was growing up to be more like a girl than like a boy; or with cousins, which seemed like incest; or with younger boys, which, I take it, smacked of pederasty—though my parents’ persistent wish that I find a boy of my own age and with like interests to play with now seems as homophilic as any desire I might have been nursing for little Tommy. I think the ideal boy for me, as far as my parents were concerned, would have been someone like Robin Shelby in The Poseidon Adventure: normal, boyish, about my own age, maybe not so athletic, a little nerdy perhaps, but normal (and only once in the film—when Reverend Scott dies—does he cry). So Tommy Wagner fell into the third category of friends I had that were unacceptable—he was too young for me.
When my mother asked me what was wrong, why I couldn’t watch The Poseidon Adventure straight through, I began to cry. They were crocodile tears—or at least I thought they were, because I had learned to think of my own feelings as fake. Tommy did have something to do with my reaction to the film. He wasn’t paying much attention to me that night, for one thing, what with the excitement of the film and the other friends who came along. And then there was his sister, Julie, who was my age or a year younger at the most—Julie, who my siblings sometimes liked to pretend I had a crush on: “Patrick, I saw Julie Wagner today!” And they would drag out the syllables of her name to suggest that I liked her. But I couldn’t talk to my mom about my mixed feelings for Tommy and Julie.

Nor could I have explained then, though it seems plausible now, that I was having a hard time articulating my response to the film because the film itself permits virtually no catharsis and, therefore, encourages little self-reflection: no sooner do the six survivors exit through the ship’s hull and board the rescue helicopter awaiting them, than the film abruptly cuts to the final credits, seen against a flat, blue background; we get no detached outsider’s view of the upside down ship, no good taste of the characters’ deliverance, and no vision of what their relationships with each other might consist of now that they’re free, all safely huddled together in that helicopter bound for—we never know where.

My tears probably confirmed my mother’s suspicion all along that The Poseidon Adventure would be too intense for me. I already had a history of being traumatized by scary TV shows. There was an episode of Dark Shadows that gave me nightmares for months afterward in which a veil was torn from a woman’s face only to reveal the hideousness and bloody distortion underneath. And there was a similar episode of Mannix called “The Deadly Madonna” in which a grotesque face would be seen suddenly peering into someone’s living room window and the poor unsuspecting person inside would see the face at the window and scream! Sometimes even the merest preview for a TV program sent me into hysterics. One late night my mom and I were quietly watching TV when a preview for an upcoming broadcast of Dorian Gray came on, a 1970 film version of Oscar Wilde’s notorious 1890 novel, The Picture of Dorian Gray. I remember my mother groaning, “Oh that thing” not five seconds into the preview. (What did my mother know of Dorian Gray?) I was strangely, instantly drawn into the scene in which a handsome young man stares at his likeness in a painting and ponders, half absently, “How sad it is! I shall grow old, and horrible, and dreadful. But this picture will remain always young. It will never be older than this particular day of June. . . . If it were only the other way! If it were I who was to be always young, and the picture that was to grow old! For that—for that—I
would give everything! Yes, there is nothing in the whole world I would not give! I would give my soul for that!" (Wilde 26) If anything, the dismissive tone of my mother’s voice (“Oh that thing . . .”) gave me a false sense of security in watching the commercial. For I knew that tone of voice well. It was the tone my parents used in order to pooh-pooh anything they didn’t approve of—it might be a risqué sitcom like Love American Style or Maude (they had a fit over the episode where Maude gets an abortion), or an adults-only variety show like Saturday Night Live or Monty Python’s Flying Circus. They would say things like, “You kids may want to watch this, you may even think it’s entertaining, but we don’t want that kind of crap on in our house. You’ll either watch something else that’s more suitable or you won’t watch anything at all, is that clear?” My siblings and I used to joke that my parents could find something objectionable in The Waltons if they wanted to.

But their “tsk tsk” was sometimes hard to read. For example, they regularly groaned and sucked their teeth over the nightly news, but they weren’t simply disturbed by what was happening in Philadelphia (corruption in city government, a public transit strike) or around the country (Watergate, the Patty Hearst kidnapping, campaigns for the Equal Rights Amendment); they also seemed to disapprove of the fact that those things were being talked about on TV in the first place. And yet that never stopped them from watching Action News on channel six every night.

When my mother muttered “Oh that thing” as the preview for Dorian Gray came on, if anything I thought, “oh, I’m probably gonna like this! This is probably gonna be for me! Oh yeah, look at that pretty boy and that pretty painting and the pretty room with all the old furniture and the purple drapes with the thick chords holding them in place and the chandelier—wow, it’s really great!” But when the announcer continued, “while day by day the portrait grows more and more hideous as his vices become more and more unspeakable,” and then the image of the horrible, oozing, ragged face flashed suddenly upon the screen, just like the face of the corpse sitting bolt upright in the awful galley scene in The Poseidon Adventure, I gasped, buried my face in my hands, and burst into tears!

Finally, when my mother asked me what scared me so much this time about The Poseidon Adventure, I said that it was because I couldn’t bear to see all of those people dying.

“Oh but Patrick, it’s just a movie! It’s not real. All those people are actors. They don’t really die in the movie! I mean, they die in the movie but they don’t die in real life. They’re all still alive today. They make
those movies in Hollywood!" She looked at me with incredulity. "Why, you know that ... don't you?"

No, I didn't really know that, I said.

My mother was annoyed with my histrionics and wanted to withdraw herself from me—partly, I imagine, out of fear, for she often experienced her children's pain as her own, and there's only so much pain you can bear as the mother of six, let alone of one like me whose emotional needs seemed so great and so unpredictable; I felt rejected (both by Tommy and my mother), confused, and alone. Our discussion of The Poseidon Adventure didn't go much further that night.

III

At some point in the late 1980s, my mother called to tell me that a friend of our family, Brad Mayer, died of AIDS. I hadn't thought about him in years.

The Mayers were among the first people my parents became friendly with when they moved from their small two-bedroom house to the larger, four-bedroom house where I grew up. We all belonged to the same church, Caroline Mayer became one of my mom's best friends, Dr. Mayer and my dad played tennis together, and the Mayer boys—Reggie, Randy, Brad, and Kevin—would sometimes join us at the beach during our annual summer vacation in Ocean City. Kevin was the one we got to know the best. He baby-sat for us on occasion, and whenever he did, something wild would happen. One night he filled a bucket with chemicals and exploded it in the backyard; another time, he let me stay up until dawn to watch the milkman pull up in his truck. Kevin played a really strange game called "Uncle" in which he would contact the spirit of his mysterious dead uncle. He would sit in a corner, cross his legs, close his eyes, and sit very still and quiet, and then he would start to hum and then moan and then he would start shaking until his entire body was convulsing and he was shrieking and it was supposed to be the spirit of his uncle now entering his body. Suddenly he would jump up and race downstairs to the basement and grab one of the ping pong balls and—here's where my memory gets fuzzy—either he would put the ping pong ball in his mouth and his eyes would roll back in his head, or he would talk to the ping pong ball and the ping pong ball would talk back. Somehow, he would receive a message from his uncle, and the message was usually a command to play Parcheesi or Twister or some other kind of game next.

Kevin gave all of us nicknames that my siblings never tired of teas-
ing each other with, even years after Kevin had gone off and married and had kids of his own. I don't remember all of our names, but one of the girls was “Wednesday” (after Wednesday on *The Addams Family*), my brother, John, was “Jean-Claude” (after Jean-Claude Killy, the famous downhill skier), and for reasons I never understood (although everyone else seemed to get the joke), I was “The Hunter,” which had to be pronounced in an ostentatious, mock-Oriental accent.

Although I liked Kevin, often the games we played when he was around would end up in a fight or, more likely, with me in tears. One time he taught us a game called “Scissors,” in which you sat on the floor and passed a pair of vegetable scissors around from person to person in a circle, and when it was your turn to pass it, you had to say, “I, Patrick” or “I, Kevin”—“I [so-and-so]—receive the scissors from [the name of the person who passed them to you],” and now you had to say either “crossed” or “uncrossed,” and then you would say, “and I pass them to [so-and-so] ‘crossed’ or ‘uncrossed.’” Now the trick was figuring out what “crossed” and “uncrossed” meant. Naturally, I thought “crossed” meant that the scissors were open and “uncrossed” that they were closed, because when they were open they did sort of look like a cross or an X. But sometimes somebody would pass the open scissors to their neighbor and say, “I pass the scissors uncrossed,” and other times they would pass them closed and say, “I pass the scissors crossed,” and sometimes (this was really confusing) they would say that they received them crossed and then they would hand them onto the next person in the same position but say that they were uncrossed! Well, I didn't get it. Soon everybody started laughing and telling me that they were trying to make it as obvious for me as possible. I noticed that they were doing stupid things with their arms and legs—and I wasn't sure if maybe the joke had something to do with their eyes as well—but I just couldn't figure it out. Eventually I got so frustrated and angry that I ran out of the room crying. Somebody—I forget who, probably Mary Jo—had to come and tell me that it had nothing to do with the scissors; it all depended on whether or not you crossed your legs. (Oh *brother!*)

Then there was “Killer,” a game whose rules I at least understood even though I wasn’t very good at it. We all sat at the kitchen table, which was big and round, and we turned out all the lights except for a single candle in the middle of the table. Everybody was dealt a playing card, and the one with the Ace of Spades was the “killer.” The killer's job was to wink at somebody on the circle without being seen doing so by anyone else. So you had to be a quick and subtle winker. Really, you had to be able to just blink with one eye. (I could never do tricky stuff like that—I couldn’t snap my fingers or whistle or blow big bubbles, al-
though I could curl my tongue into a perfect U.) If the killer winked at you, you had to wait a few seconds and then say "I'm dead." I forget the exact object of the game, but the fun of it for me was getting to sit in the dark with all my siblings and with Kevin (like we were all in this together—like the band of survivors in *The Poseidon Adventure*), knowing that even though we were pretending to kill each other and were sitting in the dark, really there was nothing to be afraid of.

Kevin taught us tricks we could do with our bodies. Like sitting in the lotus position and then pulling one leg up behind your neck. (None of us could do it, but he could.) Or turning your eyelids inside out. (That was so gross, we never wanted to try it, but we always wanted him to do it.) Or, he taught us to stand in a doorway and push out really hard on the door frame for about three minutes and then come out of the door frame with your arms down at your sides, and then watch what happens: your arms rise all by themselves without your having to lift them! (How did it do that?!) Kevin liked to tease my brother, John, which was a nice change of pace for me since I was usually the one to get picked on. One summer at the beach, John had fallen asleep on a chair in the living room and while he was sleeping, Kevin inserted Monopoly playing pieces in between his toes, put an unlit cigarette in his mouth, and took photographs of him that way. (Although he tried to hide it from my parents, Kevin smoked cigarettes openly around us kids.)

When he baby-sat for us, Kevin would often bring his guitar along and sing Rolling Stones songs and even a few songs he made up himself, like "Flockanicka": "I got a girl named Flock-a-nick-a, / She's so beautiful, she's so fine, / She's six-foot-three with lips like wine”—stuff like that.

When Kevin baby-sat, we knew we were going to have fun (so much fun that eventually my parents stopped asking him to baby-sit). When his older brother Brad baby-sat for us, however, the atmosphere was different. Whereas Kevin was generous and outgoing and zany, Brad was aloof, cool, hard to interpret. One night I remember noticing the way Brad listened. He was sitting at the kitchen table with his face resting in the cup of his hands, his fingers making a double-V pattern across his face, listening, expressionless, as someone was talking—it might have been Mom or Dad or one of their priest friends visiting from out of town. It was the blank but steady look in Brad's eyes that impressed me. I had never before seen that kind of expression on anyone's face when they listened; I'd never even thought about listening as a discreet thing. It never occurred to me that there were different ways to listen, or that some people listened and some people didn't. You couldn't exactly tell what he was thinking when he listened (though I suspected that he
didn't agree with or didn't like most of what he heard), but you could tell he was taking it all in.

Brad told stories that hung in the air and left you with an uneasy feeling. He had just taken a trip to Mexico, he told us—I don't remember now why he went there or with whom. It was wonderful, he said. There was a school—a village full of children—and one day he and all the children and all the grownups went swimming, and no one had a bathing suit. They just took off all their clothes and went naked—there wasn’t a swimming pool, just a pond—and everyone was dirt poor. They stripped on the shore and dove right in. The thought of going naked in public with other people around—other boys—was beyond anything I’d ever imagined. All I could think was, I could never do that. And: you could see their penises?! (And: you could see Brad’s penis . . .)

Brad was a movie buff. One night as we sat around the kitchen table eating popcorn with too much melted butter on it, he told us the story of The Thing, one of his favorite horror movies from the 1950s (I didn’t realize that other people had “favorite” movies too and that it was OK to have favorite movies). It took place in the North Pole or some place frozen like that, and there was a team of scientists who discover a creature frozen solid in a block of ice (I’d never been particularly frightened by cold weather, but somehow Brad made it sound worse than hell). So one night, one of the scientists is sitting in the greenhouse where they kept the monster to thaw out, and he’s reading a book or the comics or maybe the weather statistics. He’s reading by candlelight, and the camera closes in on the page that he’s reading, with the light of the candle casting shadows across the page (Brad noticed things like that in a movie—camera angles and compositions of shadows and light), when gradually another shadow creeps across the page. For a second the scientist wonders—looks puzzled—then—Oh my God! It’s the monster! It’s alive! Standing up behind him! Reaching out its horrible, long, bony fingers!

Brad’s hands were long and slender. Everything about him was like that—he had long, pretty, straight brown hair, parted in the middle like a girl’s. Sometimes he wore it in a ponytail, sometimes in a bandana. He was tall, nearly six feet. And for some reason, he always smelled like chemicals.

Another night while my parents were away, Brad told us in excruciating detail about a new film he had just seen in which a luxury cruise ship gets hit by a giant tidal wave and turns upside down! I was spellbound. Brad knew all about ships and the disasters they met with at sea. Over the years, he built a series of incredibly beautiful models of the Titanic, he hung over his bed a framed reproduction of a 1912 news clipping about the famous disaster, and he turned his basement (which Hurri-
cane Agnes would later flood recklessly to the ceiling) into a photography studio where he made simulated photographs of the sinking of the ship: first, he spread a large, green garbage bag over a table top; next, he applied shaving cream to look like choppy waves and sea spray, then cut up chunks of white Styrofoam to look like pieces of the iceberg. He would position his \textit{Titanic} on blocks behind one end of the table so that, looking at the ship from the other end of the table, it appeared to be "floating" on the water. There were tiny lights inside the ship that he turned on, and he turned off all of the basement lights: nighttime. To the endless sound of George Harrison singing "While My Guitar Gently Weeps," he took a series of snapshots with the nose of the ship pointed deeper and deeper into the water (behind the table). These black-and-white pictures looked uncannily like the real thing—as if Brad had actually been out there on the ocean with his camera that tragic night in 1912 when suddenly he saw the \textit{Titanic}, not two hundred yards away, go plunging down into the freezing Atlantic.

During the years that Brad and Kevin baby-sat for us, the two oldest Mayer boys, the twins Reggie and Randy, got drafted into the Vietnam War. Dr. Mayer was against the war and was prepared to move his family to Canada if it ever came to that. I remember hearing something about how Reggie and Randy starved themselves in order to fail their physical examinations. Recently my dad told me that around the same time, Brad announced that he was going to enlist in the navy. He was eighteen and old enough to do what he wanted, he said, and what he wanted was to go out to sea. Dr. Mayer tried to dissuade him, but Brad was determined. My dad says now that Dr. Mayer and Brad were always fighting, always on opposite sides of every debate; Dr. Mayer loved all of his boys, Dad says, but he and Brad were like day and night. So Dr. Mayer asked my dad if he would talk to Brad (it seems that people were always turning to my parents in times of crisis—they still do). Accordingly, Dad took Brad out for breakfast one morning and talked with the boy. He has never told me the details of their conversation, but I imagine it went something like:

"Now Brad, why do you want to go and join the navy?"

"I want to go, I want to get away, I want to get out of here."

"Brad do you know what it means to enlist in the armed forces? When I was your age I enlisted in the Korean War, my brother Dick and I, and they sent us to boot camp down in South Carolina, and I tell you Brad, we were lucky because neither of us went into combat—we both were given desk jobs. But do you realize that you might have to fight, and if you fight, Brad, you might get killed? Now you don't want to put your life in danger for no reason, do you?"

"I want to get away from here."
“Brad, do you know that your parents love you very much? And the last thing in the world they want is for something to happen to one of you boys. I know you and your father don’t see eye to eye on a lot of things, and I’m not here to say who’s right and who’s wrong—that’s none of my business, and you’ll work that out with your dad someday, in your own way, in your own time. But one thing I do know for sure, and that is that if anything ever happened to you, your mom and dad would be crushed. They would do anything in the world for you, Brad. They would sooner lay down their own lives than see you get hurt. I know because I would do the same thing for any one of my children. Your mom and dad love you dearly, Brad, I promise you.”

And so, presumably, went the conversation. Eventually my dad talked Brad out of enlisting and, instead, arranged for him to spend a long weekend retreat with Father Mike. “He was just a kid,” Dad tells me, “and he was angry, and he was hurt. I’m sure there were a lot of hard times in that family. Dr. Mayer was a rigid man in many ways, but a good man. He could be tough on those boys. But what a mistake it would have been if Brad had gone into the navy. He was just a dreamy kid. He didn’t know anything about the navy. He would have been eaten alive.

“You know, Pat, those were tough years for everybody. This country was in a state of upheaval and you didn’t know who or what to believe. I don’t know if I ever told you this, but your mother and I were in San Francisco, it must have been in 1967 or ’68, and we were riding one of those trolley cars, and all of a sudden a whole group of—hippies, I guess that’s what we called them—just came rushing onto the trolley and they were shouting at us and giving up buttons or stickers—I don’t know if they were peace signs—but that’s what it was like. And we were a little frightened ’cause you didn’t know what they were gonna do next. And they looked at us and thought we were ‘squares’, I’m sure that’s what they thought we were. But, you know, one day I was sitting out in George McDonald’s backyard—all you kids were there, you were playing together, we were having a big cookout; you know, we used to get together with the McDonalds about once every month. And George and I were talking about the hippies and the war, and I said to him, ‘George, we’ve been dumb. These kids’—and I was referring to the hippies—‘these kids are right. We’ve been offended by the wrong thing.’ We didn’t like their long hair and their bad manners and their filthy language, ‘but so what!’ I said. ‘We have no business being in Vietnam!’ And the kids were right. I give them credit for that.”

When my mother called to tell me that Brad had died, I felt the way I always did during the late eighties whenever she would mention any-
thing having to do with AIDS (it might be the prospect of a new vaccine; or an ACT UP demonstration she happened to see on the news, and was I in it? And was I in danger of getting arrested?). I felt angry and defensive. I felt what she really wanted to say, but didn’t know how, was, “I know that your life and your choices are different from mine . . . but . . . I am thinking about you . . . I worry about you . . . I miss you . . . I love . . . I need . . .”

We had already gotten into a huge argument a couple of months earlier over an editorial in *Time* magazine in which the writer argued that AIDS activists had unfairly monopolized the media’s attention, and so other worthy causes—like cancer research—were being ignored. This came in the mail with a Post-it from my mom that said, “I found this very interesting.” “Interesting”? I wondered. What was she trying to tell me? She knew that I was involved with ACT UP at the time and that I felt strongly that direct action was the only way to shock the system into paying attention to AIDS and to the way that homophobia was preventing people from responding intelligently and compassionately to the epidemic. When she wrote that she found the article “interesting,” was she saying that she agreed with it? Did she want to know what I thought of it? Did she honestly think I would feel anything other than outraged and insulted at the idea that *too much* time and money were being spent on AIDS? I thought about it for a few days and decided to ignore it and not respond and to just let it drop rather than getting into a fight over it. But when she called me several weeks later and asked if I’d gotten the article, I said curtly, “Yes, and I really didn’t appreciate it.”

“What didn’t you appreciate?” she asked.

“I’ve heard that argument before, that AIDS has become this celebrity cause and that it’s really not as bad as AIDS activists make it out to be. I find that really offensive. And I didn’t like having you shove it in my face out of nowhere.”

“I didn’t shove it in your face, I sent it to you because I thought it was an interesting argument.”

“What are you talking about, ‘interesting’? What’s interesting about an argument that’s basically saying that people like me shouldn’t be doing what we’re doing and that we’re selfish and that we’re trying to promote our ‘gay agenda’ under the guise of AIDS activism? Don’t you find that offensive? I do! As if homophobia has nothing to do with the AIDS crisis!”

“Well, I don’t know about the part about the gay agenda, I merely thought—”

“Well if you don’t know about it, then why are you sending me articles about it?”
"I thought we could have a dialogue about—"
"You know, I would never send you an article advocating abortion, because I know that it's not something that you're open to discussing. I think it was really insensitive of you to send me this article."
"Well you know something? I do think these AIDS activists can sometimes go too far."
"What do you mean 'these AIDS activists'? Mom, you're talking to one! I'm an AIDS activist!"
"So what you're telling me is that you're not open to discussing what you do."
"It's not that I'm not open to discussing it, it's just that I don't think you have any idea of what we're trying to do, and I really don't think you have any idea of what it's like to be a gay man and live through all the bullshit that people say about AIDS and about gay men and how they deserve it and—" I was starting to cry and trying to pull myself back.
"Patrick, I never said that gay men deserve to get AIDS and you know it! Don't you put words in my mouth! Every time I say something you jump down my throat. I'm trying to understand ACT UP, but you won't even give me a chance."
"Oh, so this is your way of trying to understand—sending me a hostile article about—"
"It wasn't a hostile article! I merely thought it made a good point and I wanted to know what you thought about it, that's all. You are free to agree or disagree, and I'm open to hearing whatever it is you have to say. But not when you yell at me and accuse me of things. You know, sometimes I think I'm your whipping boy. I'm not perfect and there's a lot of things I don't understand, and I don't understand a lot of things about the homosexual community, I freely admit that."
"You know, a couple of years ago, I suggested that you and Dad attend one of those Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays meetings and you—"
"Patrick, we don't need to go to a meeting for parents of lesbians and gays."
"I think it would really help you—"
"Patrick, we don't need any help. We're fine. We don't have any problem with your being gay, and you know that. We're fine."
"What are you afraid of?"
"Afraid?! What are you talking about?"
"It's like you're embarrassed to go because—"
"Patrick, your father and I don't need to get up in front of a whole group of people and talk about having a gay son. We don't have anything
to say about it. We're fine. And that doesn’t mean that we’re ashamed of it. We aren’t the kind of people who join groups like that. I think it’s you who have the problem.”

“Me!” I shouted. “What problem do I have?”

“You’re so angry, would you just listen to yourself? No one can talk to you. I think we should just end this conversation right now.”

“Oh great, just run away as soon as we really get to something important.”

“I’m not running away. You can’t be civil, and I won’t have you speak to me that way. So, I’m sorry I sent the article. You can be sure I’ll never send you another article about AIDS again.”

I was still fuming.

“I’m saying good-bye now.”

I hoped we could avoid an argument this time. We were silent for a moment, dwelling on the double thrust of the news: Brad died of AIDS; Brad was a gay man. My mother broke the silence by mentioning, “he was with a Jesuit when he died. I’m thankful for that. I know that makes his mother and father feel better. You know he never quite found himself when he left home—he just wandered. It’s tragic.”

Sometime in the late 1970s, Brad rode his bicycle out to San Diego and was hardly talked about in my family again. Now and then someone would mention something about how Brad owned a bicycle repair shop out west, but there was hardly more news than that. Not until my mother telephoned to give me the news of his death did I begin again to think about Brad, and to discover that we seem to have had much in common —our mutual fascination with disaster; our shared sexuality; our loving, uncomprehending, suffocating families of origin; our adolescent withdrawal into the consolations of culture; our search for some place else, as adults, in which to be ourselves (for Brad, I presume, it ended up being San Diego; for me, for now, it is New York City). As my mom told me what little she knew about the circumstances of Brad’s death, my mind went elsewhere. I began to wonder what Brad’s life was like in San Diego. I wondered if he had a boyfriend, a whole circle of friends and lovers. When did he know that he was gay? Did he know back when he was baby-sitting me and my siblings? What kind of relationship did he have with his brothers? What was it like for him, growing up gay in Reading?

My mother couldn’t answer any of these questions, and I couldn’t ask them. We said good-bye after one or two minutes of the routine ques-
tions: "How are you doing otherwise?" "Fine, and you?" "Fine." And
the expressions of love: "Are you eating well?" "Yes, Mom." "I love you,
Patrick." "I love you too." And the promise to write or call soon.

IV

*The Poseidon Adventure* has not (not yet) become a classic of gay male cul-
ture as have, say, certain Broadway musicals or *Mommie Dearest*. But I've
discovered that a gay affection for *The Poseidon Adventure* and other dis-
aster films is bigger than just me. In the fall of 1989, the Tunnel Bar, an
East Village gay bar in New York (now gone) hosted a "*Poseidon Adven-
ture* party" that featured an imaginative transformation of the bar into
the boiling, upside down engine room of the *Poseidon*, reenactments of
boat passengers hurtling through the air, refreshments, and repeated
showings of the film. One of the party's organizers and the Tunnel Bar's
then manager, William Bonney, told me that *The Poseidon Adventure*
is not
particularly one of his favorite films, that he prefers comedy ("it makes
me laugh") and science fiction ("I love the future; I wish I was there").
William thinks *The Poseidon Adventure* "is camp," that it "tries to be dra-
matic and isn't."

Ironically, some of the very people who show the most "queer" inter-
est in *The Poseidon Adventure* disavow that same interest. But look again:
When the ship turns over, Reverend Scott (often described in promo-
tional literature for the film and in reviews as an "activist" priest) en-
gages in a furious debate with the purser and other passengers over how
best to respond to the crisis. Read the following dialogue metaphori-
cally instead of literally—not as a debate over whether to wait for help
or to try to save yourself, but rather, in light of gay activism, as a de-
bate over the merits of coming out ("climbing out") versus assimilating
into the larger straight society ("staying here till help arrives"); or, read
it as if it were a debate among AIDS activists: should we work with the
medical establishment to lead us through the epidemic ("staying here
till help arrives") or should we try to make the establishment respond to
the epidemic on our terms?

**PURSER:** For God's sake, Reverend, what you're doing is suicide!
**SCOTT:** We're cut off from the rest of the world. They can't get to us;
maybe we can get to them. You've said enough, now get out of the way.
**PURSER:** Pray for us, but don't do this! Climbing to another deck will kill
you all!
**SCOTT:** And sitting on our butts isn't going to help us either! Maybe by
climbing out we can save ourselves. If you've got any sense you'll come with us.

[...]

SCOTT: [pointing up] That's the way out; that's our only chance.
PURSER: Don't listen to him! We've got to stay here till help arrives!
SCOTT: Help from where? From the captain? He's dead. Everyone is dead who was above us before the ship turned over, because now they're underneath us, under the water.
PURSER: That's not true!

SCOTT: Of course it's true, you pompous ass! There's nobody alive but us. And nobody's going to help us, except ourselves. It's up to each one of you. It's up to all of us. Now for God's sake, come with us.
PURSER: I order you not to go! He knows nothing about this ship!
A WOMAN: The purser's right!
A MAN: [to Reverend Scott] Why don't you mind your own business?!

SCOTT: I want to appeal to you for the last time.
ANOTHER MAN: You don't know what you're talking about!
SCOTT: I know this much: the sea's going to keep pouring in. We're going to keep settling deeper and deeper. We may even go under before we get up to the bottom to cut our way out. But it's something to try. It's a chance; we might make it. If you stay here you'll certainly die.
A THIRD MAN: We are staying with the purser.

However inadvertently, The Poseidon Adventure may appeal to gay audiences because its drama of being trapped in a vessel underwater with no guarantee of escape to the outside, without the assurance that there is even going to be any outside to escape to, and with no inkling of what lies in store on the outside should there be an escape, resonates powerfully with the life-denying experience most of us have had of growing up and living some part of our adult lives in the closet. And The Poseidon Adventure may appeal to gay audiences, living today in the midst of a global health crisis, because it dramatizes the internal dynamics (the disagreements over strategy, the fear of the unknown, the fear of death, the brief hiatuses of humor and pleasure) of a community of friends, acquaintances, lovers, and strangers shocked by catastrophe and determined against strong resistance (from within and without) to nurture itself, to survive—indeed, to flourish.

The Tunnel Bar's Poseidon Adventure party took its place in a series of more overtly queer and AIDS-activist-related events, all hosted by the bar around the same time, including: "Xmas in Outer Space"; a "Dyslexic New Year's" party; "The Death of Disco"; Rocky Horror Picture Show parties; beach parties; "Life Is Hell So Let's Drink and Fuck" parties;
and fund-raisers for God’s Love We Deliver (a food program for people with AIDS), the annual Wigstock festival (a popular drag fest and queer community-building event), and Gay Men’s Health Crisis (the first and largest AIDS service organization in the world).

V

Just before the six survivors are lifted out of the wrecked Poseidon, a close-up shot of each of them—Mike Rogo, Manny Rosen, Susan, Robin, Mr. Martin, and Nonnie—shows the mixture of grief, numbness, and relief they feel now that their journey through hell has come to an end. Mike Rogo turns to look back one last time at the flames that consumed his wife, Linda, then faces the camera again with tears in his eyes, looking up as his rescuers from the outside blowtorch a hole through the hull. He will survive, but survival has become indistinguishable from tragedy.

On the night of Gay Pride Day a few years ago, I decided to call my friend David to see how he was doing. I’d seen a close friend of his walking alone at the march—I knew that David had recently entered the hospital (again) with some kind of HIV-related brain disorder. Too afraid to face the reality of his impending death, too embarrassed by my habit of paying close attention to certain friends only when they are in trouble, I hadn’t visited David in the hospital this time around. But the spirit of Gay Pride made me feel that I had nothing to be ashamed of—David was my lovely friend, I had begun to think of him as part of my alternative, extended gay family, and I wanted to talk with him. I called, and his boyfriend, Philip, told me that David had died three weeks ago and that his ashes had been scattered on the Hudson River that afternoon. It was a nice ceremony with a few friends, Philip said. He was sorry he had to tell me this. There would be a memorial service for David at the Gay Community Center in September. Again, he said, I’m sorry to have to tell you this.

Survival.