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opening extract from

The Death-defying Pepper Roux

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ONE

Birthday Boy

On the morning of his fourteenth birthday, Pepper had been awake for fully two minutes before realizing it was the day he must die. His heart cannoned like a billiard ball off some soft green wall of his innards. This had to be the day everyone had been waiting for—and he was terrified he would disappoint them, make a poor showing, let people down.

His mother's face, when he entered the breakfast room, was ashen. He could not bring himself to meet her big-eyed, tear-brimming gaze, though he felt it follow him to the scrambled eggs and the cold ham. She never kissed him in the mornings. In fact she never kissed him at all. Aunt Mireille had said his parents should not become too fond of '*le pauvre*', if they were to cope with the grief of losing him.

His name was Paul, but when he was small and people asked him, he told them it was 'Pauvre'. After all, it was the name his mother had always used. 'Get dressed, *mon pauvre*.' 'Eat up, *mon pauvre*.' 'Say goodbye, *pauvre petit*.' His little comrades at school were confused and called him '*poivre*', and their mothers asked, 'Pepper? Why is the child called "Pepper"?'

It was all Aunt Mireille's fault. Unmarried Aunt Mireille lodged with her married sister. So when Madame Roux gave birth to a lovely little boy, Aunt Mireille was first to be introduced. Leaning over the cot, she sucked on her big yellow teeth and said, with a tremor in her voice, 'To think he'll be dead by fourteen, *le pauvre*.'

'*No!*' exclaimed the poor mother. '*Why would you say such a thing?*'

'It is the Lord's will, I'm afraid, dear,' whispered the devout Aunt Mireille. 'Saint Constance told me so in a dream last night.' She dropped this bad news into the crib like a teething ring. And there it lodged—a little christening gift: Pepper would be dead before he was full-grown.

With the man of the house away at sea, the women leaned against each other and complained at the unfairness of life. In fact the two of them leaned in against Pepper's childhood like a pair of book-ends—big, ponderous women and so full of tragedy that they could barely make their corsets hook up. For his first birthday, Aunt Mireille bought '*le pauvre*' a charming little plot in the churchyard just the right size for a small grave.

Pepper did not question his doom, any more than he would have questioned having asthma or knock-knees. Saint Constance knew, and he accepted it. He was a sturdy, healthy boy, but his mother treated him like an invalid, feeding him calf's-foot jelly from a spoon and tea brewed from weeds in the garden. Instead of finger rhymes, his auntie taught him the Last Rites, tugging each of his tiny fingers where the responses should come. Instead of lullabies, she taught him psalms about the Valley of the Shadow of Death.

The only taste he got of manliness was when his father came home fleetingly between voyages. Captain Roux served the boy glasses of neat rum (then drank them himself), and took Pepper to see unsuitable melodramas. He brought home the seeds of exotic foreign fruits, and together father and son planted them outside the north-facing windows. The seeds (like Pepper) were not really expected to grow to any size before they died.

An expensive education seemed pointless. Besides, his mother wanted to make the most of him, so after primary school had taught him to read and write, she kept him at home, where the estate hands thought the young master must be feeble-minded and were very sorry (but not for Pepper).

He stood on tiptoe to reach down as much education as he could from his father's bookshelves, which were particularly rich in pirates, knots, and things nautical. So he brightened the dullness of his days with imaginary trips to the Roaring Forties, the Caribbees, and the Barbary Coast. His pretend ship was the family winepress. It rarely held anything but leftover wine fumes, and he climbed out, head reeling, feeling quite as sick as if he had really been to sea. But since the only people he ever met were pious, proper visitors to the house, he supposed even pirates must be pious and proper too. The ones in his imagination took tea in the afternoon.

And never got killed.

The days clattered down like rows of dominoes. Pepper's voice broke and so did his mother's heart, knowing 'The Time' must be near. She bit her lip and prayed for her boy's end to come painlessly, without suffering. Aunt Mireille, though, was more

practical. She rehearsed him in what to say when he reached Paradise: greetings and messages for him to deliver when he met up with the Blessed Dead. When he failed to learn them, she took to pushing slips of paper into his pockets, and up the cuffs of his nightshirt. 'Now be sure to give this to Aunt Félice, won't you, child? And this to Père Michel.' There would be others, when he went up to bed, pinned to his bedhead with sewing needles or brooches:

'Kindly pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death. Your obedient servant, Mireille Lepont (Miss).'

Pepper himself took to climbing to the top of anything tall—hills, trees, roofs—to see if Death was riding towards him on a white horse, under a black banner, or preceded by a pillar of fire. He scanned the sky for angels sitting on the clouds fishing for souls with perch rods; for fiery chariots descending to kidnap him. Heights did not frighten him. After years of wondering how he would die—comparing the options, as it were—he had decided that Falling would be best: it would feel quite like flying on the way down, and the pain would be quickly over. Not that he would get to choose. Childhood was a gin trap from which he could never expect to escape. The world was something happening to other people—people with destinations other than a plot in the graveyard. So Pepper perched, like a migratory bird on a twig, waiting for winter.

But winter did not come.

His aunt treated him more and more coldly, like a guest who has outstayed his welcome. Even his father found him a sort of

embarrassment—'What, you still here, boy?'—when he came home between voyages.

'I'm sorry, Papa.'

'Are you sure you didn't mis-hear, Mireille?' the captain snapped at his sister-in-law. 'Mistake fourteen for forty? Easy mistake. Fourteen. Forty.'

Pepper was so taken with this idea that he leapt upright in his chair and knocked over a glass of water that swamped his aunt's bread plate.

No, Mireille assured them, poking her wetted bread disgustedly with a fork: Saint Constance had very good diction and formed all her words beautifully. She had definitely said Pepper would be dead by the time he was fourteen. 'In fact . . . ' said Mireille, remembering to mention it for the first time, 'in fact, she has repeated it to me on several occasions. FOURTEEN.'

To escape their reproach, Pepper took himself off into the fields and shot inanimate objects with his father's pistol. He had no taste for shooting live things, like rats or pigeons: he felt too much in common with them, being short-lived and a bit of a nuisance himself. He would have liked to shoot all the wretched rooks that were plaguing the estate. Aunt Mireille promised that birds-of-ill-omen would 'gather overhead when The Hour has come'. But he supposed it was unkind to shoot the rooks just because they wore funeral black.

'We thought a trip to church and then a walk as far as the river,' said Auntie, as Pepper sat down to his last breakfast.

'I went to confession yesterday,' he said.

‘Can we go on our knees too often before the throne of God?’ enquired Mireille in a whisper, as though she were already in church. Pepper was tempted to say that yes, he thought one probably could. His kneecaps had large ugly calluses on them from kneeling to pray. What maiden would ever look kindly upon such kneecaps? Aunt Mireille frequently told him to loathe his mortal flesh. But Pepper could only manage to loathe his knees. The rest of him he was secretly rather fond of. Like a beautiful watch, it might not go for long without stopping, but it was pretty even so.

A silence fell then over the breakfast table; a silence so intense that Pepper was embarrassed by the sound of his chewing and felt obliged to stop. His stomach gurgled cheerfully, showing too little respect for the occasion. His mother unfolded a letter and was going to read it aloud when she suddenly rounded her shoulders and started weeping. It did not matter. He knew the letter already; she had read it to him many times before. It was his father’s farewell.

‘Let go ropes, then. Raise sail. Fair winds. Safe harbours. There are worse things happen to others. These things are sent to test us. Bear up. Do not reproach yourself on my account. It could not be helped, I dare say. The world goes along. I am not a carping man. I remain . . .’

Yes, you do, don’t you, thought Pepper with uncharacteristic bitterness. You remain.

‘Your loving Father, Gilbert Roux (Captain).’

'I was hoping your dear father would be here!' his mother sobbed. 'Pray God he has not had the misfortune to sink again! Elsewise, surely he would have come to help us through!'

Aunt Mireille snorted, partly out of contempt for Captain Roux's rather accident-prone career, partly to imply: when are men ever in the right place at the right time?

'I thought I might go into town,' said Pepper. 'Just me.'

'Oh but, son . . . !'

Aunt Mireille laid a soothing hand on her sister's arm. 'If that's what *le pauvre* wishes,' she said, as if she knew more than she was saying. Perhaps Saint Constance had revealed to her how Pepper was going to die! Something townish involving falling buildings? Pepper knew he should not try to thwart Fate, but thought he might stay at home, after all.

The room, though, seemed to be getting smaller and smaller—shrinking to the size and shape of a coffin. The smell of the women was stronger than the breakfast kedgeree: Parma violets and lavender water. The flies in the centre of the ceiling went round and round: they ought to spread out to the cobwebbed corners, and get caught and die. Why should they escape when he could not?

He could feel himself smothering, got up and went to the door for some air. As he opened it, the sunlight came in like a battering ram. Would Death come in like that, or was it waiting for him somewhere Outside?

Pepper looked back at the two great grey women seated at the table, Tante Mireille searching in her bag for nail scissors—what for?—to cut his life's thread herself? On an impulse, he stepped

out into the yard in his shirtsleeves and walked, and kept walking until he reached the road.

He walked towards the sea.

In the trees—in every tree—the rooks were stirring, rising into the sky, but sinking back again on to their roosts. It was still too early for them to venture out on to the flat fields. So the sunny, clumping crowns of the elms swarmed with blackness, like heads teeming with lice. Their noise was horrific—a rending, ranting madness very like the feeling in Pepper's chest. Birds-of-ill-omen, of course. More than ever. They must have sent for reinforcements to help batter home his doom: '*Warned you! Warned you! Die, boy! Die!!*'

The only trees with no rookeries in them were the masts of two ships docked in the harbour. Not until Pepper reached the head of the bay could he see the coasters they belonged to, cradled in the embrace of the harbour wall. One was his father's.

At first he thought he must be mistaken—how different could one coaster look from another, after all? But no: it truly was *La Berenice*, showing all the scuffs and scars of a ship that has been too long on the water. She was aswarm with men stripping her fittings, clearing her decks.

'Refit,' said the cordwainer untangling and coiling ropes on the harbourside—and then (because he was a man of few words), 'Refitting.'

'Where's Captain Roux?' asked Pepper. 'Where's the master?'

'Get away, boy!' said the man unexpectedly. He might almost have been some old prophet warning of flood or pestilence: *Get*

away! But he simply meant that Pepper was standing on a tangle of rope, stopping him working. 'Shift yourself, lad.'

Pepper stepped back. He ran his eyes over his father's ship. Clearly *La Berenice* had been moored for days. So why had his father not appeared at home? Where had he gone instead?

'Hotel,' said the man of few words.

'Ah.'

'Find him there.'

But Pepper was content to have solved the mystery. His father had docked, but preferred not to return home until *after* his son's fatal fourteenth birthday. Did not want to be 'in at the death', so to speak.

'Get away!' said the man of few words.

Again it sounded prophetic. But it was not. The cordwainer had just glanced up at the masthead and seen a carpenter fumble his grasp on a big oak pulley. It fell now, hurtling down to land exactly where Pepper had been standing, sinking its iron hook into the rope fibres with a noise like torn gristle. The cordwainer swore, stared down at the pulley and swore again, looked up at the carpenter and swore a third time.

Pepper apologized. (The accident had clearly been meant for him, and he was sorry it had given the man such a fright.) The cordwainer, shamed by the calm of the boy, swallowed his own fright. He pointed away along the quayside to the coaster moored at the other end of the quay. It was no smarter than the *Berenice*. In fact it looked in a far worse state of repair, rusty and forlorn. 'Roux's been transferred. That's his next ship. Would've sailed today but he's waiting, seemingly. For something. Family troubles. Funeral. Something. Then he'll be off.'

'Ah,' said Pepper. Well, at least his father planned to be around for the funeral; that was something, Pepper supposed. He turned the big oak pulley over with the toe of his boot. Perhaps he would go up to the hotel, after all, and apologize for being not yet dead.

He found the captain in his shirtsleeves in the back-room bar. Gilbert Roux was so drunk that he could only open his eyes using finger and thumb. 'Who you?' he bleared.

'It's Paul,' said his son, picking up his father's uniform cap from under the table. 'Your son.'

'Gone, hazzee? At laasht. Wenza fyooneral?' said Captain Roux, his cheek smearing spilled ale around the tabletop. Then he let his eyes close again.

'Not today,' replied Pepper and, after hovering helplessly for a minute or two, tugged his father's jacket off the back of the chair.

The bartender was wiping glasses in the front bar as Pepper left. 'You're Roux's boy, aren't you?' he asked.

'No. Not me.'

Then Pepper walked back down the hill to the harbour. The jacket was far too big for him, but the cap almost fitted. (Hat sizes don't vary much with age, only destiny.) So he wore the cap and carried the jacket over his arm when he climbed the gangplank of the coaster *l'Ombrage.*

A new ship. A new crew. How would they ever know?

'Roux,' he said. 'Captain Roux,' and out of the jacket pocket produced the papers to prove it.

The sailor at the head of the gangplank looked him up and

down: this skinny, freckled boy, ears bent outwards by the rim of a merchant navy cap.

'Set sail,' Pepper said. 'Now. Right away.' Looking over his shoulder towards the hotel on the hill, he only just refrained from saying, *Please. Please hurry!*

There was a pause while the man looked around for a second opinion. Then he shouted something towards the bridge, and a head emerged, and a hand too, and someone blew the ship's whistle long and hard.

Pepper drew in his head. The muscles in his calves went rigid, ready to run. The screech of the whistle was so loud it pained his brain, and it did not stop. They must be summoning the harbour master! Or the mayor! Or his mother! Saint Constance, or the angel-with-the-fiery-two-edged-sword! The noise of running feet made him spin round.

A man had come tumbling out of the hotel bar and was pelting down the steep harbour road, heaving a bag on to his shoulder, shielding his eyes against the brightness. His ship would be setting sail without him, unless he was aboard before the whistle stopped blowing. Pepper watched him, transfixed, certain it was his father. But Gilbert Roux was still so deeply drunk in the back room of the hotel that the Last Trumpet would not have woken him.

The sailor at the head of the gangplank stepped aside with a half-hearted salute to Pepper. 'Welcome aboard, Captain,' he said.

Well, people see what they expect. Don't they?

Or do they see what they choose?

★ ★ ★

The panic in Pepper's chest grew worse when he reached deck. What kind of fool was he to attempt this? Now he would have to steer the ship out of port—rig the masts—plot a course—all those things a sea captain does! How would he ever slot the broad-beamed coaster between the narrow jaws of the harbour mouth? He would buckle its rusty bow, hole its shabby hull, sink *l'Ombrage* and cause a shipping hazard for years to come! Absurd ever to think he could pull it off.

But when he reached the bridge, the First Officer was already at the helm and too busy manoeuvring the ship to notice him. So Pepper carried on to the prow. The ship moved at walking pace towards the green and red poles marking the harbour entrance.

So it passed very close to some boys eel-fishing from the end of the mole. Seeing Pepper, one pointed his bamboo cane. An eel dangled from the woollen bait: a repulsive, puny creature still trying to wriggle out of its fate. 'It's you, right?' said the boy. 'It is, isn't it? Pepper Roux?'

'Not me,' said Pepper, turning away, setting his face at the horizon. 'Not me.'

Little by little, the sounds from the shore faded: breaking waves, the carpenters stripping *La Berenice*, the church bells . . . their noise could not leap the space between shore and ship. Did Death have a longer stride? Would it chase Pepper out to sea? Or could he truly outrun it, throw it off his scent? He had read somewhere that bloodhounds can't follow a scent across water.

He moved to the stern and watched the ship's wake plait itself into a lit fuse. A flock of seagulls swooped and quarrelled and complained overhead: strident, thwarted angels shrieking orange

hymns at him. Birds-of-ill-omen. The Hour must be nigh. He watched the sun rise towards midday—a burning glass trained on a boy of fourteen who has outstayed his welcome.

What would it be, then? A giant wave? The legendary Kraken rising, with mile-long tentacles, to drag the ship below? A maelstrom? A sandbar? A reef?

Pepper raised his face flat on to the sky and screamed back at the gulls:

'Not me! NOT ME! *NOT ME!*'

Then a hard hand fell on his shoulder.

Pepper turned guiltily. ' . . . *I'm sorry!*'—but it was not his father. Nor the harbour master, nor even the Angel of Death.

A tall man in rope-soled shoes and sweaty deck clothes looked him in the face, studying each feature as if he was drawing up an inventory. The scar in the corner of the man's cheek twitched. There were flakes of bread crust on his lips, and he licked them clean. If a butcher had been carving the two of them, he would have found twice as much meat on Duchesse, the captain's steward, as on the captain.

'Sun's over the yard-arm, sir. All's made ready,' said the steward, and led the way to the captain's cabin. He gave the door handle a quick wipe with his neckerchief then opened it and stood aside. 'Everything to hand, sir. Everything above board.'

Pepper sat on the bunk, hugging his knees close to his chest without realizing. A chronometer on the wall pointed out the time by chiming the half hour. A chrome speaking-tube bent his reflection out of shape. There was a smell like the inside of the wine vat at home.

'It's my birthday,' said Pepper.

'Felicitations, Captain,' said the steward, which seemed not quite to cover the disastrousness of the situation. Then he poured a full glass of something brown, and presented it to Pepper on a little round tray. When Pepper did not reach for it, Duchesse folded the boy's small ice-cold hands around the glass and held them there until the brown liquor stopped slopping over the sides. '*Santé*, Captain. Happy birthday.'

The drink scorched his throat. Perhaps it was poison. Pepper rested his head on the pillow and counted to one hundred. Maybe the Angel of Death went about in rope-soled shoes and a sweaty neckerchief.

Outside, there was a commotion, and the ancient engine slowed again. A boat thudded lightly against the hull, and there was shouting on deck. Duchesse cocked his head to listen. Pepper covered his ears and shut his eyes, all too sure who was being hauled aboard by the crew. His father must have rowed out to the ship and caught it after all.

'Roche,' said Duchesse, loosing the word like spittle. Then he gave a short laugh. 'He'll soon wish he'd missed *this* sailing, eh, sir?'

Squinting out of the porthole, Pepper could see an empty rowing boat being hauled aboard by its mooring rope, banging up the ship's side. The latecomer was offering violence to anyone who came near him. The crash of his boots came closer and closer . . . but mercifully passed by the captain's cabin.

'Never fear, dearheart,' said the steward, soothingly. 'Leave it to the Duchess. I will endeavour to keep the pig from troubling you.'

As the cabin door closed softly behind Duchesse, the sunlight

through the slatted wood sliced the room into strips of light and dark. Pepper shut his eyes.

When he opened them again, the room was grey with evening. He looked out of the porthole and saw a navy sky swagged with vast, grey wings of cloud. From horizon to horizon, the sea seemed to be netted over—like a strawberry bed—with angels. How had he ever hoped to escape? Aunt Mireille's voice rang in his ears:

If I take the wings of morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea; Even there shall thy hand hold me . . .

What would become of *l'Ombrage,* then, and its crew? Would the saints consult their pocket watches, tut-tut, and put things back on schedule? Would they plunge the entire ship to the ocean bed to ensure that Pepper met his end on time? That wasn't fair. That wasn't fair on the crew at all!

Stumbling to the door, Pepper tugged it open and ran. Best to get it over and done with. Best to leap the ship's rail like Jonah and spare his men! He would leap outwards—far and far—from the ship and the oily black of the sea would hide all noise, all panic, all second thoughts and third and fourth . . .

In the dark he tripped over a pair of legs sticking out from under the lifeboat. A figure pulled itself out into the open and rolled across him, hunchbacked with muscle and rolls of fat, to press its forehead against Pepper's, supported by hands on either side of his head. 'Look where you're going, you ★★★★,' said a mouth reeking of rum and garlic, before it bit him in the ear. 'Come dark, this here's *my* ship. Got that? Shall I teach yuh?'

Captain Pepper rolled sideways and scuttled—on hands and knees, then hands and feet, then at full tilt—'*Sorry! Sorry!*

Sorry!'—back to his cabin where he crawled under his bunk and lay wide-eyed with terror. His little heart was ready to burst with it—especially when the chronometer began to chime—on and on and on. Eight bells. *Midnight*. The last chime died away.

What? Still alive?

Was the clock in Heaven's parlour running slow? Had his mother mistaken the date fourteen years earlier? Had Saint Constance-of-the-perfect-diction put in an elegant word for him with the Angel of Death?

Or had Pepper truly stepped sideways into his father's life and out of his own?