

For Thalia McGrath, her life's voyage begins in 1965, when she departs Australia on an ocean liner bound for life in the US and Europe, and ends in 2005 in Brussels, Belgium.

Now is the Hour

By Patricia Bragdon

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NOW IS THE HOUR

A scenic landscape featuring a large body of water with a white wake leading towards a range of mountains under a blue sky with a bird in flight.

PATRICIA BRAGDON

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Chapter One

Sailing from Sydney, 1965

The great ocean liner *Oriana*, newest of the P&O fleet, trembled a little as the engines throbbed quietly in preparation for the midnight departure from Sydney on her long maiden voyage around the world. Or was it Thalia who was trembling? It was her maiden voyage too. She could feel the movement in her body, in her bones, her hands, the ends of her hair. Was she afraid? She couldn't tell. Did she love this man she was going to marry at the end of this journey? Again, she couldn't tell. She liked him, she knew that much, liked his steadiness and resolve, his curiosity, and his sense of humor. He is handsome, if that's important. He says he loves me.

"All Visitors Ashore!" came the stern command over the loudspeakers, repeated for the third time. "Final Notice. All Ashore That's Going Ashore", and at last the excited crowd began to move to the gangways leading to the wharf below. Last hugs, tears, promises to write--no, I won't forget, have a good time, say hello to the Pope when you get to Rome, don't forget to ring Uncle Arthur when you're in London, don't do anything I wouldn't do! HaHa! Give the Queen my love, be safe, love you, love, kisses, hugs, hurry up or we'll be stowaways.

Running to the rail, Thalia groped in her raincoat pocket for the red bandanna and the rolls of streamers that her family had given her, with instructions: "When you see us on the wharf, wave the red hankie so we can pick you out, then throw a streamer as hard as you can so we can catch it and hold onto it." Everyone here has a red hankie, she thought, they'll never pick me out.

Her last conversation with her mother came back to her: "Mum! He'll be there in Vancouver, I know he will. I trust him completely. You don't know him, you think I'm stupid and silly, but I'm not. I'm 25 years old, an adult. It's going to be all right, you'll see."

"Well, that's just lovely, missy, but what if he's not there? How will you get home again? Why didn't he come back to Australia to get married? Why are you getting married in Canada? And you're leaving the Church--why?"

"Which question do you want me to answer first? If he's not there, I don't know. I can find a job in Canada, work for a while to earn enough money to come home. I've never had a problem getting a job before. But he will be there. And he didn't come back because we couldn't afford the fares--round trip across the Pacific for him, plus a single for me isn't cheap, you know. And we need to get married before we can apply for an immigrant visa for me, that's why."

“And what about your faith? Why leave the Church?”

“Because he’s not a Catholic and we don’t want a mixed marriage! And anyway, neither of us believes that stuff any more. It’s 1965, the world’s changing, the war’s really over, and long past. Life’s better for us all, and besides--admit that you don’t believe in religion either. Be honest, at least.”

As her mother's voice faded from her mind, she could see her people down below, all together--young brother James wearing one of his fancy Italian sweaters, Mum, waving wildly to catch Thalia's attention. And, hanging back a bit, not entirely comfortable with the emotion of the occasion, her lifelong friend Pam, Rose Red to Thalia's Snow White, beloved confidante, partner in mischief, annoyance to nuns, competitor sometimes, but always there.

Pam, practical to the soles of her feet and tips of her fingers, had asked her the other day, "Tally, why? Is it some romantic idea of sailing on the midnight tide, meeting your lover in a faraway country, being the mysterious foreigner--a kind of wistful daydream?" Thalia hadn't answered, just smiled dreamily and turned away, as Pam, exasperated, said, "Oh, you were such a bookworm when we were kids, I think you read too much. Come down to earth."

Throwing the paper streamers one after the other--white, yellow, green, blue, pink, watching some of them caught by strangers, but others successfully connecting her with those she loved--diverted Thalia for a few minutes. The gangways were up now, the heavy ropes holding the ship against the land were cast off, and *Oriana* began to move majestically from the wharf as the band began to play the "Maori Farewell" and the crowd joined in singing the well-loved words:

*Now is the hour
When we must say goodbye
Soon you'll be sailing far across the sea
While you're away,
Oh, please remember me*

The streamers grew taut, Thalia reached out to give them more play, but as the ship moved from the quay, they snapped--the slender paper streamers seeming to symbolize the umbilical nourishments of mother, family, duty, and country broke under the strain and Thalia began to cry. She was alone. She felt nervous tension, sadness, uncertainty, but also hope and yearning and the youthful need for her own experiences, her own decisions, even her own mistakes.

Oriana pulled away at midnight; led by the harbor pilot, she swung her bow to face the outbound channel. The band played "Waltzing Matilda", the faces on the wharf

diminished until they were dots, unrecognizable, as the tugs led the great ship under the Harbor Bridge, down Port Jackson past the warships at Garden Island, past Bennelong Point and Rose Bay, and safely out into deep water. The ferries, familiar to Thalia as prosaic everyday transportation, flashed like scarabs in the darkness as they stood away from the procession of tugs and liner.

As the ship sailed out between the rocky headlands which mark Port Jackson's exit to the ocean, the harbor pilot was dropped off and the ship's band packed up their instruments while the crew cleaned up the torn streamers. The lights on the decks were extinguished as they left the land behind. It's dark out there on the Pacific Ocean when the land falls away. But for the ship's navigation lights, there is no light except what comes from the moon and stars, and there are no sounds but the throb of the engines and the susurrations of the ship's progress through the dark water. You have fallen into a void, and even with the confidence and ignorance of twenty-five, it was hard for Thalia not to feel some doubt about what she was doing.

Her fiancé Douglas, the American man she had met a year ago in Melbourne, had written and proposed marriage after his return to the US. Would he really be waiting for her in Vancouver? Her mother's voice came back to her. What if her mother was right? She could still turn back at Auckland, face the embarrassment, settle for

Patricia Bragdon

the known and safe, obey the Church and her family like a good Catholic girl. Should she? Suddenly chilled, she turned and went below to find her cabin.

Chapter Two

The Albatross

As she had expected, the cabin was spartan. And tiny. Two bunks, an upper and a lower, with her luggage on the lower one and no indication of any other occupant, implying that perhaps she would have it to herself at least until Auckland. A single chair and two small dressers provided the remainder of the furniture; the floor was linoleum, and there was no bathroom, just a washbasin in the corner. Presumably the bathroom was down the hall--she corrected herself mentally--the gangway. But the cabin was hers alone, at least for the next few days.

She kept hearing her mother's voice in her head. "Thalia, are you sure? Maybe you could talk to Father O'Brien one more time? You were such a devout little girl, I always thought you would be a nun, but..." Now that the emotion of parting was over, she could hear more clearly the love and concern in it. Her mother, like all Thalia's family, had very little use for the outward expression of feelings. Shaped by hard times and personal misfortune, they were practical people, Irish Catholic, "lace curtain Irish", who put a high value on respectability and religion.

"Mum! I would never be a nun! That was all acting. I liked the blue cloaks the Children of Mary wore, the Latin, the

incense, and it made the nuns nicer to me than they were to 'naughty' girls. Did you really think that?"

"Oh, I don't know--yes, I suppose I did. What about talking to Sister Mary Rita? You always liked her, and maybe she can convince you..."

"I am not going to talk to anyone else. I've listened to everyone, and it won't make any difference. You all have to stop this--Auntie Sheila, Gran, everybody. Every time I answer the phone, it's someone else. The pope hasn't rung me up yet. I wonder why not?"

The voices went on and on in her head. Mother, aunts, priest, even her young brother, although his voice was more sympathetic. "Tally, I think I understand, It's hard to get away from family round here. But we--well I--will miss you a lot." Tired now, worn out by the roller coaster of emotions, Thalia moved the luggage off the bunk and lay down, pulling the cotton bedspread over her and hoping to sleep. When she turned out the light, the tiny room was as black as the inside of your pocket. There was no window, no porthole, nothing to indicate that there was a windy world four decks above. Suddenly, she craved fresh air and the dark sea with its limitless expanse; turning the light back on, she jumped up and ran out of the room, slamming the door behind her and heading up the stairs toward the open deck.

Thalia had travelled by sea on several of the ships that served the coastal capitals of Australia, and had learned to enjoy the creaking of the vessel as it flexed and rolled with the motion of the waves. Tonight there was little movement; the sea seemed very calm, or perhaps the highly-publicized modern stabilizing equipment of this P&O liner was in use. When she reached the open deck, she turned aft and saw in front of her a wide curved space, open to the sky. As she came closer, she realized that it was a dimly-lit outdoor lounge overlooking the stern. She stood at the rail, fascinated by the turbulent white wake that followed the ship. There was no moon, but the Magellanic Cloud, blazing along the Milky Way, provided a mysterious and shadowless light to which her eyes accustomed themselves quickly.

Suddenly, something swooped low across the water, then rose into the darkness and vanished, but seconds later, it returned on a downward arc across the wake and again, disappeared. Thalia watched and again--swoop, vanish, return. A voice from one of the chairs nearby said, "It's a wandering albatross. They follow the ships in this hemisphere, sometimes for weeks. This one just picked us up an hour or so ago. Sorry if I startled you. I thought you might want to know."

Turning toward the voice, she said, "Yes, you made me jump a bit. I had no idea there was anyone here but me!" Now she could see his outline, and the glow of a

cigarette. "I did know about the albatross but thanks. I've seen them other times in the Southern Ocean, and I always find them thrilling."

The male voice, British and cultured although slightly raspy--perhaps a smoker, she thought--replied "Oh, you've travelled down in this part of the world before, then? Are you a tourist or a traveller?"

Puzzled, Thalia asked, "What's the difference? I don't understand."

"A tourist is a sightseer. A traveller is someone who has a purpose for the journey--work, a move, family matters. I'm a traveller--I've been working in Australia for a year, and it's time to go home to London. You?"

"Oh. A traveller. Well, maybe a bit of both, because it's my first time out of Australia. But what do you do that brought you to Australia for so long?" asked Thalia, then catching something theatrical in the voice--timbre, accent, careful delivery? "No, wait! Let me guess...you're an actor."

"Good guess! Yes, I've been playing theatres in Melbourne and Sydney but the play has finished its run and I'm tired. A couple of weeks of shipboard relaxation on the way home. My name's Nigel Somerville."

"How do you do?" said Thalia, "I'm Thalia McGrath, from Melbourne, and I am on my way to Vancouver to get married." She realized that it was beginning to get light, the stars were fading and now she could see the arc of the albatross's flight--wide figure eights across the wake, with a low swoop across the water each time. "Do you think the bird is feeding from the water down there?"

Nigel answered slowly, "Perhaps. They're pelagic--I looked them up. Sometimes they stay at sea for months, so I suppose they must feed somehow: small fish, plankton, microscopic creatures. I don't know. There's an encyclopedia in the library, we could look it up some more." He stood up, and there was enough light for Thalia to see him for the first time. Tall, about her own age she thought, with dark hair well-cut but a little longer than usually worn by Australian or American men, he moved gracefully, displaying none of the awkwardness often shown by tall, longboned men. Laughing, he said "I don't suppose they have much of a domestic life, spending so much time at sea. Perhaps they have seagoing affairs, casual meetings, no obligations--like shipboard romances, sweet and intense, but withering at the sight of land."

"In "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner", Coleridge says it's "the bird of good omen" for sailors." Thalia said, "In the poem, a ship had been driven into the Antarctic region of the world by a terrible wind, and the crew lost hope of

rescue, but a bird, an albatross, appeared. It led the ship northward and out of the "wondrous cold", and the sailors regained hope and were grateful. But the Ancient Mariner shot it with his crossbow, and now he must carry the dead albatross and the guilt forever. Guilt for the death of hope--a crime without atonement." She shivered, then laughed, "I need a British breakfast and a bit more sleep. Thank you for the interesting conversation, and I hope we see one another again."

Giving a little wave, she turned to leave, but, "Thalia, wait!" he called "Let's make sure we do. I want to continue our talk, and get to know you better. You haven't told me about your fiancé yet. The library at eleven?"

"Alright. See you then."

A steward appeared from within, sounding a little gong and chanting, "First call for breakfast. Serving in fifteen minutes." and Thalia headed down to her cabin to unpack and change the clothes she had been wearing for the past twenty-four hours. She had made her first acquaintance on board ship; now she had someone to talk to and not feel so out-of-place. But had this little meeting moved too quickly? The ".. get to know you better" seemed a little presumptuous. Had she maybe suggested a willingness for more than friendship with her remarks? Somewhere deep inside her mind was a flare of caution, an instinctive understanding of the need for

care in a new and potentially dangerous situation. She remembered Auntie Kath's stories of card sharps and thefts from her cabin that she had experienced on an earlier voyage. Thalia had mentally scoffed at the doubts and worries of an older generation, but some of it had stuck in her head. I will be careful, she thought, as she opened her cabin door.

Chapter Three

Douglas

When Thalia arrived in the dining room for breakfast, she found a line of passengers waiting to be given their table assignments for the voyage. A lively group of three young women joined the queue behind her and included her in their conversation.

"Where are you going?" inquired a pretty blonde, in a fluting British accent, "we're going all the way to home! We've been larking around Australia for a year now, and it's time we got back to work."

"I'm going as far as Vancouver." replied Thalia. "My name's Thalia McGrath, I'm Australian, and I'm on my way to a wedding."

"A wedding! How exciting!" the group said in unison, then the fluttery blonde began to introduce them. "I'm Isabelle Sanderson, and next to me is my sister Sybil. I'm the beauty of the family," laughing as her sister rolled her eyes at her, "but she doesn't know it, and the third", indicating a slim girl, her hair pulled back into a knot low on her neck, and dressed in a pullover and trousers, "is Dorrie Magnus, she's one of the horsey Magnus's. She was hoping for a rich Aussie, one of those squatters we

all heard about--lots of money, keep racehorses, no women in their lives, and thirsting for the feminine touch in their outback mansions."

Sybil spoke up. "No romance for any of us, really! Our little fishing fleet is going home disappointed."

Dorrie, looking a bit wistful, said "I think we were misled. The only rich ones I met were fat and whiskery, and smelled of cigarette smoke and beer. Definitely no interest in the "feminine touch", unless it's in bed. And those awful Orstralian accents! How do you do, Thalia?"

A bit shocked by the casual mention of bed in this context, Thalia smiled and began to speak (carefully, trying to minimize her accent) but the steward at the desk asked for her name and cabin number, then said "Oh, you've already been assigned to Table 35. It's over in the corner." She looked in the direction he indicated and saw Nigel standing at the table waving to her, and turned back to the little feminine group, saying "It's been lovely meeting you all! Can we meet later today?"

Isabelle said, "Yes--I was going to suggest the bar on the pool deck. It's where everyone meets for drinks before lunch. And you know all about us now, so we want to quiz you about this wedding you're going to attend. See you at noon."

The dining room, deep amidships to minimize the effects of rough seas on the diners, was large and crowded. Stewards were busy bringing plates of food from the kitchen--full British breakfasts, Thalia noticed. Eggs, sausages, porridge, grilled tomatoes, toast in silver racks, silver pots of tea, with the smell of kippers and kedgerree floating in the air. Lucky the sea is calm today, thought Thalia, wondering how many people would be ordering kippers and kedgerree on a stormy day.

"I got you a good table assignment," Nigel said, as she arrived at the table where he stood. "I hope you don't mind. Please sit down and let me introduce you to my friends," as he pulled out an empty chair from the table for her and she sat down. "Everyone, this is Thalia, who knows all about albatrosses, and who is leaving Australia for the first time. She is apparently an insomniac like me. We met on the poop deck at 3 a.m."

A woman sitting at the other side of the table called out, "Hello, Thalia! Welcome to our little group. I'm Charmian, and this gentleman next to me is Julian. We are all from Nigel's theatre company, going home in a gaggle with the albatross. And is there really something called a 'poop deck'?" As she spoke, she turned a gold cigarette case over on the table, then took out a cigarette, leaning toward Julian and gesturing to him to light it for her. Her manner seemed brittle and a little abrupt to Thalia,

although Julian complied with the request with a flourish of his lighter and a mocking smile.

Julian, an imposing man with grey hair and the profile of a Roman emperor on an ancient coin, began to speak, but before he could complete a word, the woman on the other side of Charmian said, "I don't think albatrosses fly in gaggles, Charmian. Hello, Thalia. I'm Amelia, and I'm not nearly as prim as my name suggests. I can be quite shocking if I'm in the mood." Amelia, auburn-haired and no longer young, was very thin, with blade-sharp cheekbones, brown eyes, and a theatrical, British upper-class drawl. Her hand with long painted nails held a cigarette in a green holder, and she squinted a little through the smoke that was twisting in front of her. Despite the squint, her eyes were sharp and observant.

"Thalia, ignore them," said Nigel, "they're all giddy with delight that the drinks on board are really cheap, the season is over, and they got paid. Julian speaks sometimes when he's allowed, but mostly in proclamations and only when his voice is well-lubricated with good whiskey; he's played too many senior politicians and very important people." Julian mimed a little bow, inclining his head graciously.

Beginning to feel that this voyage would not be dull, Thalia said, "I am so happy to meet you all. Tell me about your play. I come from Melbourne, but I have been in

Western Australia for the past year, so I haven't seen any current theatre lately."

"No, Thalia, we are tired of that boring play. We want to hear about you. Nigel says you are going to Canada to get married." said Charmian. "How exotic! Who are you marrying, and why are you going so far to tie the knot?"

"Not exotic really, just practical! Douglas, my fiancé, is a journalist, he was working in Australia for a couple of years, but he had to go back to Washington. We couldn't afford the additional fares across the Pacific for him to come back so we set things up this way."

Amelia asked, "How does your family feel about this? Are they happy that you won't be married at home?"

Thalia winced. "You've hit a sore point! No, they aren't happy, and they are sure he won't be there and I will be stranded in Canada without a penny, and I will come to a bad end."

"Well, you had better eat up, then," advised Julian in a rich baritone voice, "maybe famine ahead! I hope you ordered one of everything on offer, did you?" as the food arrived, and they began to eat and question Thalia about Douglas and their romance. Veterans of the London theatre, they were a close group among themselves and seemingly needed no-one else for amusement, leaving

Thalia wondering why Nigel had been so quick to bring her into the circle. Again, there was a little flash of caution in her mind.

The stewards served the food, and in answer to questions, Thalia said "Douglas and I met when he was doing a story on life in the outback, on the big sheep stations in Queensland and New South Wales. He needed some introductions to the squatters--the big farmers are called squatters--out there, and I know a few of their kids from boarding school in Melbourne, so I was able to arrange some meetings."

"I hear it's pretty rough," said Nigel, "heat, dust, sand and flies".

"Well, 'the green and shaded lanes of England' it's not," Thalia replied, "and in The Wet, it's mostly rain, mud, mutton and flies. But he had a great time and got a good story, and when he got back into town he rang me up to thank me, and asked me out to dinner. And here I am..." As they talked, she became aware that the ship was rolling more. Some people were leaving the dining room hurriedly. "Looks like we're heading into some weather, doesn't it? Thank you all for letting me join your group, and I think I'll go on deck now."

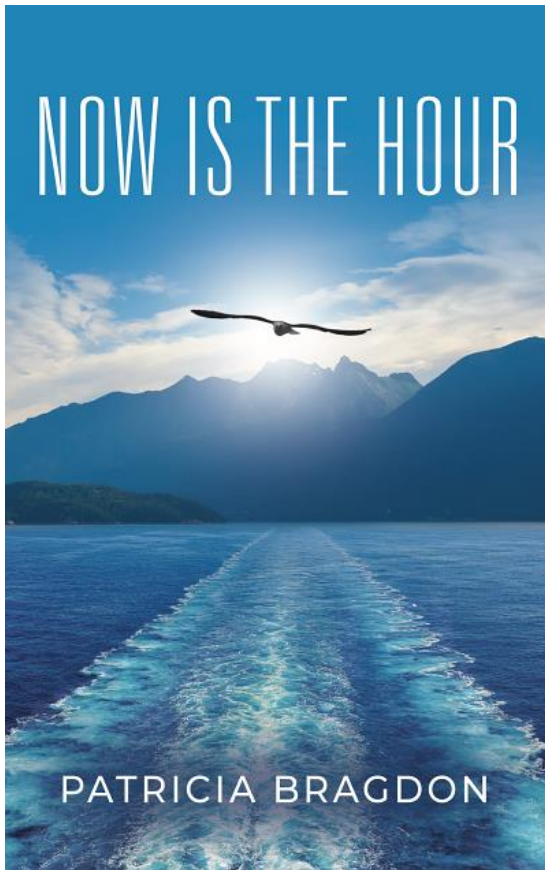
Nigel followed her as she left the dining salon, and caught up to her on the stairs to the upper deck. "I hope they

didn't intimidate you too much, Thalia. They really are good people, not nasty or mean, but they sometimes forget that other people aren't accustomed to their theatricality, their inside jokes, and so on."

"No, they're interesting, and I look forward to hearing some of the stories of theatre life. It seems really different from my suburban existence." They emerged from the stairway onto the promenade deck, a windowed space protected from the weather by glass panes washed by water from waves and rain. "The weather has really changed, hasn't it? We're in the Tasman Sea, and it's notorious for sudden storminess." Thalia said.

"If we go aft, we can probably see the wake from under cover, and see if the albatross is still with us. Thalia, I would really like to know more about you. Perhaps we can get to know one another well on the voyage, and part as real friends."

"Well, let's wait and see! Now I think I will go to the library. I need to write some letters to mail in New Zealand. I promised Douglas that I would write every day."



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