

FLOATING

a short play by Steven Dietz

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A SHIP'S HORN BLOWS, LOUD, as –

JANET drags one end of a HUGE BANNER across the full width of the stage. This takes a while. We cannot (yet) see what is written on the banner.

JANET wears old shorts and a worn t-shirt. She is barefoot. She looks bereft.

The SOUNDS OF THE SEA are heard, throughout – persistent and endless.

JANET drops the end of the banner to the ground. She speaks to the audience.

JANET

I dream of floating.
Constantly floating.
I am constantly dreaming it.

I am sleeping twenty hours a day.
Sleeping and dreaming twenty hours a day.
And in every dream I am floating.
Who can do this much sleeping and dreaming?
Who can do this much floating?

There is no one to answer my question because I am
always in the dream alone.
I am always floating alone.

I have memories of other people being in my dream –
early on – when the dream was sweet – when I was busy
doing things in what I used to call my life – things
other than sleeping and dreaming and floating.

But now there is no one but me.
And the sea.
And the floating.

A light rises on ERICA. She is professionally attired. She wears a lab coat. She holds a clipboard.

*She watches, as JANET stands - arms
folded around herself, eyes closed,
rocking back and forth along with
the waves.*

ERICA

I can tell you about Janet.
I can tell you about her dreams.

But first:

Will you let me sit close to you?
How close to you will you let me sit?
Only that close? Really?
How about a little closer?

Okay.
Thank you.

Here we go.

This is Janet.

ERICA turns and watches JANET.

JANET

The experts have theories.
The experts always have a lot of theories.
They have theories about our dreams.
Theories about how our dreams have changed during
lockdown.
Theories about a kind "omniscient global dream" -
generated by the pandemic, and taking hold in the
sleeping minds of the world.

I always thought this was nonsense.

ERICA

I am one of those experts that Janet is referring to.
It's true that the findings of many experts have proven
to be nonsense.

I am not one of those experts.

JANET

The experts say other things, too.

The experts say you can "program" your dreams.
They believe you can "seed" your pre-sleep imagination
with certain thoughts and images - with a photo you keep
near your bed and look at right before you close your
eyes.

ERICA

A photo of a bird will lead to dreams of flying.

JANET

For months, I have tried this.

ERICA

A photo of a friend will lead to dreams of companionship.

JANET

I have tried "seeding" my dreams this way.

ERICA

A photo of a tennis court or chess board will lead to dreams of competition.

JANET

But nothing worked.

ERICA

A photo of me will lead to dreams of me.
Would you like a photo of me?
Let me know.

JANET

No matter what I did, I was floating on the sea.
In my life.
In my sleep.
In my dreams.

ERICA

I want to tell you more about Janet.

But first: can I have a drink from your glass?
Can I take your water glass and put my mouth on it?
Can I drink from it and swallow the liquid and then give it back to you and watch you drink from it, too?

You decide.
I'll wait.

Okay. Good. Thank you.

I like the taste of your water.

Where were we?
Oh, yes.

I've been in contact with Janet for several months now. Her cell phone reception aboard the cruise ship varies, day by day, but we have talked as regularly as we can.

Janet works for a Cruise Line.
I'm not allowed to use their name.
Janet has now been trapped on her cruise ship for nine weeks. Even after all the passengers were released, the ship was not allowed to dock.
The crew and staff was not allowed to leave.

There is nothing for Janet to do.
Literally: nothing.
Nothing but float and dream.

JANET

I miss the kids.

ERICA

In better times, Janet organized events and activities for the children of the Cruise Line passengers. She handed out balloons and stickers. She gave out bright t-shirts and funny hats.

One of the most popular t-shirts said "Me and the Sea" - in a really cute font.

JANET

I loved the kids on the ship.
I don't really love kids that much on land.
In fact, Land Kids kind of make me crazy.
But here - on the ship - the kids were pretty special.

I remember a little girl, on vacation with her family. She always had a dab of chocolate ice cream on her nose. She called me the Boat Lady. She'd say "Boat Lady, can we play sharks?" "Boat Lady can we play horses?" And we'd play Sharks and Horses and lots of Hide 'n Seek. The ship is a great place to hide.

What I loved most is that when this little girl got tired - when she'd laughed and run and played for hours and really needed a nap - she'd look up at me with her big blue eyes and say:

"No more, please, Boat Lady. No more please today."

ERICA

Janet lives in a one hundred square foot room on the "B" deck of the ship. This deck is below the water line. Every day Janet climbs the stairs to one of the abandoned upper decks. From there, she looks out at the sea.

JANET

I want to dream of land.
I want to dream that I am looking at my feet.
And my feet are on land.
Just ... LAND ... as far as I can see.
And no matter which direction my feet go, there is MORE LAND underneath them.

Why can't I dream that?

ERICA

Janet has tried everything to put an end to this.
Can I tell you all the things she's tried?
I'm glad to.

But, I'm going to need something from you first.

You knew that, didn't you?

(MORE)

ERICA (cont'd)

I'm going to need you to take off your mask.
Just for a minute.

It's okay.
Really.

I wonder what you look like under there.

Will you show me?

You're not sure.
I get it.
I'm not sure, either.
I don't know you.
There's no way I can be sure about you.
Especially now that you tell me you're not even sure
about yourself.
We are in a pickle here.

So, I guess I'd ask: *what is it you are sure of?*
No, really.
Like a list.
Like if you had to make a list.
And maybe we do.
Maybe now - more than ever - *we need to make a list of
what we are sure of.*

Maybe you should do it right now.
Go ahead.
I'll wait.
Make as long a list as you can.

It's not very long, is it?
I know.
Neither is mine.
I always thought my list of the things I was sure of
would be pretty long.
It's not.

But you're on it now.
You're on my list.
Yes.
I've put you on it.
I've made the decision to be sure about you.

Do you want to put me on your list?
Do you want to decide to be sure about me?
It's up to you.

A quiet moment. ERICA smiles.

Oh my goodness ... look at you ... look at your
beautiful face.

Didn't that feel good?

Yes, I know.

Breathe.

(MORE)

ERICA (cont'd)

Really breathe.

Amazing, right?
Breathing without obstruction.
It's thrilling.
Even a little *mischievous*.

Who knew it could be so fun to not be sure?

You can move your chair closer.
C'mon.
Just a little closer.
It's okay - we're sure about each other now, remember?

Good.

We are very close together now.
And your mask is off.
I can see your nose.
Your mouth.
Your smile, your lips, your teeth.

Isn't that nice?

But I'm still a little thirsty.
Your water looks good.
May I?
Just once more?
I don't need much.

Oh, that was good.

And here we are.

I promised to tell you the things Janet has tried.

JANET

I miss my old life. Before the floating.

ERICA

Janet has tried to escape.
When the ship dropped off its final group of passengers,
Janet rushed through a gate and ran for an exit.
She was caught and cuffed.
She was put back on the ship by the Authorities.

JANET

I miss my little apartment. On land.

ERICA

Janet has tried to have herself arrested.
She destroyed public property right in front of a Coast
Guard deployment, hoping they would arrest her.
They reported her to the Cruise Line.
And the Cruise Line fined her.
Yes. They fined her.
First, they confined her to the ship for the duration of
the pandemic.
Then, they fined her for unlawful behavior.

JANET

I miss my neighbor, Mrs. Torkelson.

ERICA

Janet has tried shame.
Janet has made big signs to show to the news
helicopters. Signs that say "Help Me!" and "Trapped!"
and "Prisoner of the Pandemic!".

JANET

I miss my friend Jeremy, even though he never calls.

ERICA

Janet has called CNN and Fox News and Rachel Maddow and
Tucker Carlson and John Oliver and all sorts of other
journalists she'd never even heard of before.
She has told the world the story of her imprisonment.
Because that's what it is, she tells them:
Imprisonment.

Janet has been tested three times.
Each test was negative.
Janet is virus-free.
She is completely healthy.
And she remains imprisoned on the sea.

JANET

I miss my cat. I hope Mrs. Torkelson is still feeding
my cat.

ERICA

The Cruise Line blames the CDC.
The CDC blames the Coast Guard.
The Coast Guard blames the Cruise Line.
Everyone blames the Media.

And a young woman remains on a boat.
A boat trapped on the water.
And the thing is:

JANET

Nobody cares.

ERICA

Nobody cares.
Or, if they care, they have no power.
And if they have no power, all they have is just a lot
of caring.
And a lot of caring makes a lot of people feel pretty
damn good.

But it doesn't get a young woman off a ship.

JANET

The only person I hear from now is this woman named
Erica.
She's a sleep expert.
She says she is studying me.
I tell her about my dreams.

(MORE)

JANET (cont'd)

I guess she makes notes.
I don't even know what she looks like.
I tried to Google her but nothing came up.

ERICA

I heard about Janet's case on the news.
I reached out to her right away.

JANET

I probably shouldn't be talking to her.
I should be talking to lawyers - so I can sue the hell
out of everyone that did this to me ...

ERICA

I knew I could help.
Just like I can help you.

JANET

... but it's hard to be mad - no, sorry - it's hard to
STAY mad when you are floating.
Something happens as you rock on the water.
The edges of your anger get rounded off.
The rage slowly ebbs away.

I told this to Erica.
She told me I was an insightful person.

ERICA

As a test subject, Janet is the perfect specimen.
She is in a quarantined setting.
She is part of a discrete control group.
I thank my lucky stars that I found her.

JANET

Today I was walking around the ship.
I stepped into a little alcove on the promenade deck.
This is one of the places where the little girl with the
chocolate nose used to hide, when we played.
I looked down and saw a little bracelet.
It had come apart and fallen to the ground - probably
without her knowing it.

She had made the bracelet herself - stringing together
the little beaded letters, one by one.
Her bracelet spelled out this phrase:

"Me and Janet and the Sea"

I hope she's safe and well.

I hope my cat is, too.

*JANET attaches one end of the
BANNER to a tall pole. She walks
toward the other end of the BANNER.*

ERICA

Janet doesn't just dream of floating.
She dreams of me.

(MORE)

ERICA (cont'd)

Just like you do.

Don't you wonder why you're dreaming about me?
Why you allowed me to show up uninvited as you were
watching a play about Janet?

You're dreaming about me for the same reason Janet is.

Because you are on the sea.
Because you are no longer tethered to things you can be
sure of.

And you don't know when it will end.

It's not all bad, really.
In fact, it's pretty amazing how well we can accommodate
something so monstrous.

*JANET attaches the other end of the
BANNER to a pole, opposite. We can
read the HUGE LETTERS on the BANNER
for the first time:*

"NO _____ MORE _____ PLEASE _____ TODAY"

But sometimes ... sometimes when there is no land in
sight ... no end in sight ... no hand to hold ... no
lips to kiss ...

Sometimes when there is nothing but time and sky and
water ...

Sometimes ...

All you can do is float.

JANET stares at the SEA.

The BANNER ripples in the wind.

*The SHIP'S HORN BLOWS, LONG and
LOUD.*

End of Play