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### FROM THE LOWER LEFT CORNER

The Lesser Of Two Evils  
Victoria Stoppello

The *Oregonian* headline read, "The bid to avert environmental disaster appears to succeed." That was February 12. The "bid" was the attempt to burn the *New Carissa*, stranded on a southern Oregon beach. Even if she had burned totally and things had gone as planned, I still wouldn't say that an environmental disaster was avoided. It was just a trade off, a choice between a short-term, visible disaster, and a long-term invisible problem.

Of course, I wasn't the one weighing all the factors, the threat to wildlife, the impact on fisheries, the spoiling the beaches and the Oregon coast's tourism economy. Monday morning quarterbacks like me have our theories and hindsight to aid us in making the perfect decision in an imperfect situation. I suspect we will have more impossible dilemmas like this one: What to do with a stranded ship wallowing in the surf? Let her lay, with the prospect of an oil spill, or light her afire so that 400,000 gallons of bunker oil would go up in smoke? Land and water pollution, or air pollution?

Now the coast near Coos Bay may have another landmark, a souvenir in the real sense of the word, "to remember"—that the ocean is still more powerful than human devices. As a kid I enjoyed visiting the shipwrecks that dotted the beaches on both sides of the Columbia River mouth, the graveyard of the Pacific. The *Peter Iredale* was a favorite, its metal hull rusted and barnacled in a picturesque fashion, its bowsprit reminding us that the *Iredale* was a sailing ship.

Another sailing ship went down just this year, the *Fantome*, a four-masted, 282-foot vessel, with all her crew. I'd seen her picture many times because I'm a dreamer and read the ads and scanned the brochures of the Windjammer "barefoot cruise" fleet—cruise ships that plied the Caribbean. During Hurricane Mitch, the *Fantome* deposited her passengers safely on shore, then attempted to outrun the storm, never to be seen again.

A similar problem faced the *New Carissa*, the prospect of a storm with 70 mile an hour winds. How large, how strong would the storm be? What were the chances she would break up while stranded? The *Salvage Chief* was there, ready to attempt a rescue, but not directed to do so. The *Chief* is a famous vessel in its own right. (Notice the change in pronoun—somehow a ship that goes out to sea to rescue other ships that are all "she's" must be a "he" or at least an "it"—a knight rescuing damsels in distress.) I've seen the *Chief* only once, but have heard references to its work most of my life. Here was the one combination of machine and men that might save the day, but I heard by the time the *Chief* got there, the *New Carissa* was deemed too fragile to move. The decision was to burn her before the storm hit. By burning the freighter, there wouldn't be as much oil along the coast—but an insidious, invisible impact instead, one that worries me more...because I'm concerned about the weather.

The weather this year has been alarming, not just elsewhere, but locally. Flooding in our area has been blamed on higher than typical rainfall, a third higher. Instead of 30 or some inches of rain, November through January, we got 40 plus. Ten days into February, we've received nearly the average for the whole month. If you think it's been raining a lot, you're not exaggerating. I shrug mentally and remember predictions several years ago that one of the results of global warming would be higher precipitation in the temperate zones. Maybe that's what's going on.

The international insurance industry isn't shrugging; they've decided global warming and climate change are realities. They are lobbying to reduce greenhouse gases. Money is the motivator because insurance companies have been paying out big money for storm damage along the world's coastlines and flooding along the rivers. It's been bad enough that insurers are afraid if it keeps up, they may go bankrupt.

I wonder if the people who decided to burn the *New Carissa* thought about its contribution to global warming. I doubt it, because I seldom think of it myself, when I start the car or light a fire, even though I know better. It's so easy to let the smoke go, a plume that rises and disappears, contributing its small bit to climate change, and indirectly but inexorably to difficult weather and unseasonable storms. Another ship, somewhere else, will have to cope with it.

Victoria Stoppello is a writer living in Ilwaco, at the lower left corner of Washington state.

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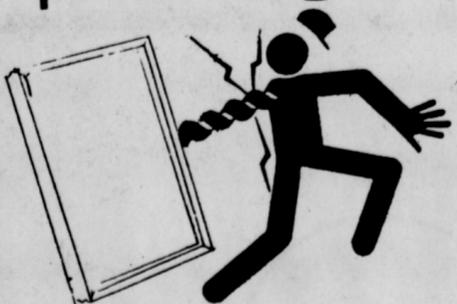
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