

After Guzman and Partee fell off the *Grand Princess* (in Galveston March 31), passengers spent hours trying to spot them in the water. "I thought we were looking for dead bodies," says Cheryl Graham. "But when we heard those first cries, we started to have hope."



TWO SPRING-BREAKERS FELL OFF A CRUISE SHIP IN THE DEAD OF NIGHT—AND VANISHED FOR FOUR HOURS—BEFORE THE SHIP'S CAPTAIN PULLED OFF AN EXTRAORDINARY HIGH SEAS RESCUE

OVERBOARD

Photograph by MICHAEL STRAVATO

He said it like the worst thing that happened was running out of margarita mix. “The cruise was great,” a grinning Ernesto Guzman told PEOPLE just moments after walking off the *Grand Princess* in the port of Galveston on March 31. “It was awesome.”

Yeah, if by awesome you mean terrifying, death-defying and more than a little mystifying. For it was Guzman, 22, along with fellow passenger Clarice Partee, 20, who on the festive first night of a seven-day spring break cruise through the Caribbean somehow tumbled over a balcony railing and plunged more than 50 ft. into the ink-black waters of the

Gulf of Mexico on March 25, triggering an emotional four-hour rescue that left passengers in tears. Guzman, a U.S. Air Force Academy cadet, and Partee, a sophomore sociology major at the University of Colorado at Boulder, “are just extremely lucky,” says Coast Guard spokesman James Harless. “Being able to survive with no flotation devices for four hours, and then to be found in pitch dark—man, it’s a miracle.”

A chilling night full of eerie scenes straight out of *Titanic* began harmlessly, if loudly, with the debut of the “Man Crew”—the nickname given by passengers to the athletic Guzman and a hearty group



BOARD!

“ We were all screaming, ‘Hang on, don’t go under,’ kicking though, and the rescue boat threw out a

of his fellow cadets. “They were pretty hard to miss,” says Charlene Davies, 22, who was on board with friends. “They were loud and boisterous, but they weren’t obnoxious. They were just these really buff, muscular, good-looking guys, and they were always surrounded by girls.”

Clarice Partee, a pretty, petite debutante whose parents are prominent in Arkansas society, was one of those girls. On the first night of the cruise, she and a friend invited a group of people, including Guzman and his pals, to their room. “It seemed that it was a crazy party,” says Kim McCue, 48, on board with her husband and their two children. “The crew said afterward that the room was trashed.” Around 1 a.m., though, the party ended abruptly. “The lady in the room above them told us that she heard a great big thud, like a table or large chair had fallen over,” says passenger Megan Toole-Teckmeyer, 37. “There was a pause, and then screams.” Not much later, the rest of the 2,800 passengers learned something was wrong when they

jump and as she tried to land on his back, she did a leapfrog forward. He grabbed her leg to try to save her, and the momentum pulled him in after her.”

Thanks to Guzman’s buddies, who instantly alerted ship officials, the *Princess*’s veteran captain Ed Perrin was able to order crew members to throw buoys into the water to mark their position, then turn the 109,000-ton boat around in just 10 minutes. After Perrin announced that two people were missing and a rescue was underway, “the first thing we did was run and check on our sons in their cabin,” says James Moy, 52. “I think everybody on the boat did that.”

Hundreds of passengers hustled to their own balconies to peer through a dense fog for any sign of a swimmer in the dark, choppy waters. But at night, “it was like looking for two needles in a haystack,” says Candy Sauer, 54, who like many passengers spent the next few hours staring at the sea. Two Coast Guard boats and a helicopter were soon on



CLARICE PARTEE

“She wasn’t a daredevil or a risk-taker,” a former high school classmate says of Partee, whose parents let her go on the cruise because they thought it would be safer than other spring break options. Karin Bowker says that Partee’s roommate on the cruise told passengers that after her rescue, Partee “just kept saying, ‘I knew I was gonna die, I knew I was gonna die.’ She was pretty freaked out.” When the ship docked in Costa Maya (left), Partee refused a stretcher, was taken off in a wheelchair and driven to a hospital. She is now recovering.

heard the captain’s stunning announcement: “Man overboard.”

So what happened, exactly? How did Guzman and Partee fall over her room’s 4-ft.-high balcony railing and plummet into the sea some 150 miles off the coast of Texas? Industry officials say that accidentally falling off a cruise ship is difficult—statistics show fewer than one in every million passengers disappears during a cruise. In the days after the incident, the *Princess* buzzed with rumors that Guzman and Partee had been dancing on a table, or perhaps even reenacting the “King of the World!” scene from *Titanic*. But Guzman and his friends told several passengers that he had merely been standing next to the railing when Partee “came out of the room and jumped on him piggyback,” says McCue, who heard this version from a ship casino blackjack dealer who spoke at length with Guzman. “He said she took a running

the scene, but by 5 a.m. no one had been spotted.

And then... a glimpse of someone in the water. Coast Guard officials say their helicopter spotlight illuminated Guzman, and that the cruise ship’s rescue boats then raced to save him. On the way to Guzman, rescuers spotted Partee floating nearby. Around this time, Captain Perrin got on the intercom “and told the whole port side of the ship to be completely silent,” says Jean Davis, 42. “Then they turned the ship’s engines off.” In those moments of eerie stillness, with the massive cruise ship rocking gently in 6-ft. swells, passengers—who still couldn’t see Guzman or Partee—held their breath and listened for something, anything. Suddenly, “You could hear this distant, desperate cry,” says Davis. “Help me! Help me!”

It was Clarice Partee. Some passengers heard her say, “Don’t leave me!” in a weak, raspy voice; others recall the

because he kept going under the water. He kept pole for him to grab” — TAYLOR GILLHOUSE

plea, “I don’t want to die.” When the *Princess’s* rescue boat finally reached a frantic Partee, “they pulled her up and everyone was cheering,” says Barb Tesauro, 43. “Then they asked us to be quiet again so we could hear the guy.”

Again, an eerie silence; again, anxious minutes with no sign of Guzman. But around 6 a.m., half an hour after Partee had been rescued, passengers began to hear Guzman crying for help. “Then we were all screaming, ‘Hang on, don’t go under,’ because he kept going under the water,” says Taylor Gillhouse, 17. “He kept kicking though, and the rescue boat threw out a pole for him to grab.” When the boat brought Guzman aboard, “everyone erupted into cheers,” says Taylor’s father, Steve. “I got goose bumps.”

Incredibly, except for jellyfish stings, Guzman was uninjured. He was found stark naked; he later said he took off his clothes to help him swim. Yet his brush with death hardly seemed to faze him; after his rescue he was spotted danc-

hurt his chances. Neither did the mild sea conditions and water temperature (70°). But nearly everyone gives the bulk of credit for the rescue to Captain Perrin, whose quick decision to turn around and patient search efforts “showed amazing seamanship,” says the Coast Guard’s James Harless. “He’s a huge contributor to these people being alive.”

When the *Grand Princess* finally docked on March 31, Guzman still seemed upbeat. “I’m feeling great,” he told PEOPLE. “All I can say is that I’m glad everybody’s okay.” In a statement issued by the U.S. Air Force Academy on his behalf, Guzman declined any further interviews, saying he wished to “move forward from this traumatic experience.” (Partee did not respond to any requests for interviews.) Officials at Princess Cruises, too, seem to want to put the matter behind them. “We have concluded that [Guzman and Partee] going overboard was an accident,” the company said in a statement, “and we consider the matter closed.”



ERNESTO GUZMAN

He was picked up some four miles from where he went overboard. (Above, a cruise ship rescue craft.) Afterward “he seemed nonchalant, like it was no big deal,” says a passenger. Says another: “He was really happy the rest of the cruise.”



ing, gambling and even volunteering in a hypnotist’s show. “He didn’t miss a beat,” says Marty Lancaster, 28. “He was partying like there was no tomorrow.” Says Brice Collier, a member of the Man Crew: “Guzman is a rugby player. He didn’t even get hurt falling into the water. He’s doing great. But it definitely was an emotional roller coaster.”

Partee, on the other hand, suffered broken ribs and a lung contusion and was later treated in the intensive care unit of a hospital in Cancun. “She looked really worn and tired,” says Karin Bowker, 46, who saw her in the cruise ship’s infirmary. “Her roommate told me, ‘I don’t know how she stayed afloat for five hours; she’s not very athletic and she’s so tiny.’ She’s a little bitty thing.”

In fact, Partee is certified as a lifeguard, which no doubt helped. As for Guzman, his athleticism—plus standard Air Force training that includes a water survival course—didn’t

Many of those who watched the drama unfold, though, can’t stop talking about it. When Partee was rescued, “it was the most amazing, giddy moment,” says Cheryl Graham, 53. “I turned to my husband and said it was like watching a movie, but also being in it.” Only a very few passengers interviewed afterward said they felt inconvenienced or expressed any annoyance at Guzman and Partee; instead, most said the exhilarating rescues bound them all together in an unforgettable way. “That good feeling lasted the whole trip,” says Graham. “We were all just so incredibly happy to have found them alive.”

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