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The Witch of November: A Story of the Edmund Fitzgerald

By

VIDAS BARZDUKAS

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(THE WITCH OF NOVEMBER:
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The world premiere of *The Witch of November: A Story of the Edmund Fitzgerald* was presented by the Abbey Theater of Dublin (Dublin, Ohio) on Nov. 7, 2025.

CAST:

ERNEST MCSORLEY Tom Holliday
JOHN “JACK” MCCARTHY Rusty Wummel
EUGENE “RED” O’BRIEN..... Sean Taylor
RANSOM “RAY” CUNDY..... Todd Covert
NELLIE MCSORLEY..... Josie Merkle
JESSIE “BERNIE” COOPER..... Dave Morgan

PRODUCTION:

Director Joe Bishara
Co-Director Daniel Rodriguez Hijo
Sound and Video Engineer..... David Crone
Media Designer.....CG Ryan
Lighting Designer Iz Nichols
CostumerAlexa Rybinski
Production Manager..... Jim Ziolkowski
Stage Manager Grace Galli

The Witch of November

A Story of the Edmund Fitzgerald

CHARACTERS

ERNEST MCSORLEY: Captain of the *Edmund Fitzgerald*, 63.

JOHN “JACK” MCCARTHY: First mate, 62.

EUGENE “RED” O’BRIEN: Wheelsman, 50.

RANSOM “RAY” CUNDY: Watchman, 53.

NELLIE MCSORLEY: Wife of Ernest McSorley, 65.

JESSIE “BERNIE” COOPER: Captain of the *Arthur M. Anderson*, 56.

HISTORICAL NOTE

On the morning of Sunday, Nov. 9, 1975, the *Edmund Fitzgerald*, loaded with 26,000 tons of taconite pellets, left Superior, Wisc., for a routine voyage across Lake Superior to a steel mill near Detroit, Mich. The captain of the *Fitzgerald* was Ernest McSorley, a seasoned Great Lakes mariner. Joining the *Fitzgerald* was another enormous ore carrier, the *Arthur M. Anderson*, piloted by Captain Bernie Cooper.

By early evening of the next day, the *Fitzgerald* and *Anderson* battled their way through a violent, historic storm that included hurricane-force winds of 75 knots coupled with rain, snow and 35-foot seas. At approximately 3:00 p.m., the *Fitzgerald* sailed past Six Fathom Shoal, a treacherous reef near Michipicoten and Caribou Islands. Shortly after, McSorley radioed the *Anderson* and reported that he had taken a “bad list.” Around 7:10 p.m., the *Anderson* asked the crew of the *Fitzgerald* how they were making out with their problem.

“We are holding our own,” McSorley responded.

McSorley’s words were the last that anyone would hear from the crew of the *Fitzgerald*.

Minutes later, the *Fitzgerald* disappeared from radar as the floundering ship plunged into the depths of the frigid waters of Lake Superior. All 29 men on board the *Fitzgerald* were lost.

There are several theories about the cause of the sinking of the *Edmund Fitzgerald*. Some believe that the boat struck a shoal and sustained fatal damage below the waterline. Others believe she had broken apart in the violent storm. The Coast Guard, in a highly controversial report, concluded that the *Fitzgerald* had lost buoyancy due to defective or poorly fastened hatch covers that allowed lake water to flood into the cargo hold. The cause of the sinking of the *Fitzgerald* remains a mystery.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

“The Witch of November” is the name mariners have given to the brutal storms that rage across the Great Lakes every autumn. The violent events occur when the descending frigid arctic air north of the Great Lakes meets the ascending warmer fronts from the Gulf of Mexico, creating rough weather that can include hail, sleet, snow and hurricane-force winds.

The Witch of November is a work of fiction. The characters, timeline of the storm and certain events are based on fact. However, the characters' personalities and relationships are of the author's own imagination.

PRODUCTION NOTES

The set should suggest the pilothouse of the *Edmund Fitzgerald*, but no literal representation should be made. The pilothouse may include a helm station with wheel and a separate area for the chart table, but overall the setting should be simple and flexible for the memory sequences that take place. However, the set should include hand properties such as a radiotelephone and phone used by crew of both the *Edmund Fitzgerald* and *Arthur M. Anderson*. In addition, the set should include a separate section for the sequences involving Nellie as well as an area for Cooper's parts.

If possible, a screen or scrim should be placed across the back of the stage, where images of Lake Superior and the storm could be projected when noted in the story. The images of the storm should grow in intensity during the story as described in the play.

In addition to the visuals, the sounds of the storm should increase in intensity as the story progresses. The inside of a pilothouse is loud during a storm on the lake, and every attempt should be made to suggest the cacophony of noise.

If the use of images is not possible, sound and lighting can be used to show the intensity of the storm.

The weather reports could be prerecorded and played when indicated in the story or read by the actor playing Cooper. In addition, the weather reports in the play are repeated once. For realism, once the information is read or spoken the first time, the weather reports can decrease in volume as the actors speak and respond to the report.

The crew should wear the working clothes worn on a Great Lakes freighter circa November 1975. In addition, McCarthy is the only crewmember who wears glasses, and “Red” O’Brien’s nickname is due to his red hair.

Multimedia elements created for the original production are available for purchase from CG Ryan at <http://cgryan.com/portfolio/>.

To the crew of the *Edmund Fitzgerald*

To my own crew—Tracie, Vida and Lija

The Witch of November

A Story of the Edmund Fitzgerald

PROLOGUE

(Darkness. We hear the sounds of an approaching storm, accompanied by howling winds and crashing waves. The storm grows steadily louder.

Images of Lake Superior slowly materialize. The images are of a storm: black sky; high, rolling waves; snow squalls; thick, icy spray. The images fill the entirety of the stage.

A date appears on the screen: November 10, 1975.

In the center, the image of a large boat slowly materializes. It is the Edmund Fitzgerald.

We hear the following radio conversation through heavy static. The sound of the storm can be heard in the background.)

MCSORLEY (*V.O., radio*). Anderson, this is the Fitzgerald.

I have sustained some topside damage. I have a fence rail down, two vents lost or damaged, and a list. I'm checking down. Will you stay with me till I get to Whitefish?

COOPER (*V.O., radio*). Charlie on that, Fitzgerald. Do you have your pumps going?

MCSORLEY (*V.O., radio*). Yes. Both of them.

(The storm continues. The sounds continue to build.

We hear the following radio conversation as the storm rages in the background.)

COOPER (*V.O., radio*). Fitzgerald, this is the Anderson. Have you checked down?

MCSORLEY (*V.O., radio*). Yes, we have.

COOPER (*V.O., radio*). Fitzgerald, we are about ten miles behind you and gaining about one and a half miles per hour. There is a target nineteen miles ahead of us. So the target would be nine miles ahead of you.

MCSORLEY (*V.O., radio*). Well, am I going to clear?

COOPER (*V.O., radio*). Yes. He is going to pass to the west of you.

MCSORLEY (*V.O., radio*). Well, fine.

COOPER (*V.O., radio*). By the way, how are you making out with your problem?

(Long beat. The storm fills the silence.)

MCSORLEY (*V.O., radio*). We are holding our own.

(The images of the storm and waves flicker, causing a feeling of confusion and violence. In the center, the image of the Fitzgerald remains. The sound of the howling wind continues to build.

Slowly, the image of the Fitzgerald begins to fade, but the images of the storm remain. At the same time, the sound of the wind grows louder and louder until it reaches a deafening, almost uncomfortable level.

Suddenly, the sound of the wind abruptly stops. The images vanish. Black.)

SCENE 1

(Lighting change. The In-Between.)

A pool of light reveals CAPTAIN ERNEST MCSORLEY. MCSORLEY opens his eyes and gasps once. He begins to shiver as he takes in his surroundings.)

MCSORLEY (*cont'd*). Jack? Where are ... (*Looks upward toward the light; long beat.*) That ... that light. Jack, do you see it? (*Beat.*) Jesus, I'm so cold.

(Softer pools of light reveal JOHN "JACK" MCCARTHY, EUGENE "RED" O'BRIEN and RANSOM "RAY" CUNDY. MCSORLEY does not notice them at first. MCSORLEY staggers and falls to his knees.)

NELLIE MCSORLEY enters, dressed in a nightgown.)

NELLIE. Honey?

MCSORLEY (*noticing NELLIE, confused*). Nellie?

NELLIE. What are you doing up?

MCSORLEY (*confused*). Nellie, I'm ... I'm falling. No, I'm being pulled. I'm so cold—

NELLIE. I just had the strangest dream—

MCSORLEY. Yes. This is a dream—

NELLIE. I was fast asleep when I was suddenly awakened by the sound of the *Fitzgerald's* horn. I looked for you, but ... I was alone.

MCSORLEY (*pointing*). There's a light, Nellie. Do you see it?

NELLIE. It was night, and I was on the shore. And there was a storm.

MCSORLEY. It's shining around the edges—

NELLIE. The sky was as black as oil and the wind howled and I could hear the waves roaring across the surface with the voice of thunder. The storm seemed ... alive. Lashing out. She was so ... angry.

MCSORLEY. Why am I so cold—

NELLIE. Then in the darkness I heard the horn again, and this time I heard your voice along with it, and you were calling to me. You sounded so sad, Ernie.

MCSORLEY (*rising, pointing*). Nellie, there's a light. It's right there—

NELLIE. And in my mind, I saw your boat. The boat was long, impossibly long, with a red bottom and towering decks that rose high in the sky—

MCSORLEY. But it's getting smaller.

NELLIE. And I watched as the waves battered at its sides, beating at the steel hull with their fists. And then the boat sailed away into the darkness and was gone ... and then all I could hear was your voice calling to me until it, too, faded away. (*Beat. She smiles sadly.*) Like I said, it was a strange dream ...

MCSORLEY. Nellie. The light ...

NELLIE. What, honey? What about the light?

(*NELLIE and MCSORLEY stare at each other. Long beat.*)

MCSORLEY. What is it?

MCCARTHY. The surface.

(*MCSORLEY notices the crew. NELLIE turns and exits.*)

MCSORLEY. Jack? (*To NELLIE.*) Nellie, come back. Nellie!

MCCARTHY. She's going to be all right, Mac.

MCSORLEY. What's happening?

MCCARTHY (*calmly*). There was an accident.

MCSORLEY. What?

MCCARTHY. There was an accident, Mac. With the *Fitz*.

CUNDY. Right now the first mate on the *Anderson's* trying to reach us on the radio.

O'BRIEN. But all he's getting is static and dead air.

MCCARTHY. And that storm's still up there tearing across the skies.

MCSORLEY. No, that's not ... we was close ... (*Beat.*)
Where are we? We was in the pilothouse—

MCCARTHY. We ain't in the pilothouse anymore, Mac. And neither are you.

MCSORLEY. Then where are we?

(*Long beat.*)

MCCARTHY. It's all right, Mac. It took us a while, too.

MCSORLEY. What do you mean? (*Beat.*) Tell me what the hell's going on!

MCCARTHY. Mac, we told you—

MCSORLEY. Goddamn it ... Jack, you ... you was at the chart table, and Red, you ... you was at the wheel, and Ray ... you was on watch. We was in a storm ...

MCCARTHY. One of the worst you've ever seen.

MCSORLEY (*confused*). I'm trying to remember. We had taken a list ...

O'BRIEN. A bad one.

MCSORLEY. We had the pumps going. But then the storm ...

MCCARTHY. That's right, Mac. What happened?

O'BRIEN. What happened in the storm, Mac?

(Beat as MCSORLEY stares at the crew. Then a rumble sounds overhead. MCSORLEY looks skyward toward the noise.)

MCCARTHY. That's the *Anderson*. Captain Cooper's turned around to look for us. Right now his crew's scanning the waters with her searchlights.

CUNDY. But they won't find anything today.

O'BRIEN. Later they'll find an oil slick. A smashed lifeboat about nine miles east of here. Some life preservers.

CUNDY. But there won't be nobody in them.

MCSORLEY. You don't know what the hell you're talking about.

CUNDY. We've seen things, Mac.

MCCARTHY. Like we're standing in a dark room and someone flicks on the lights, just for a second.

O'BRIEN. But it's long enough.

CUNDY. We was on our way. But we wanted to wait for you.

O'BRIEN. You was our captain, Mac.

CUNDY. It was the four of us in the pilothouse at the end.

MCCARTHY. And we was all friends. We wanted to go together. I don't know ... it seemed right. *(Beat.)* Come on, Mac. It's time.

(MCCARTHY extends his hand. MCSORLEY stares at it. Finally, MCSORLEY turns away.)

CUNDY. There ain't no reason to be afraid, Mac.

O'BRIEN. It's a trip we're all gonna take at some point.

MCSORLEY. This can't be happening—

MCCARTHY. Mac, we don't have a lot of time. This ... door or hatch or whatever you want to call it ... it won't be open for long. We gotta go.

O'BRIEN. The next world is calling to us, Mac. We're being pulled. Like the tide.

CUNDY. Folks are waiting for us. And I want to see my daughter again.

MCSORLEY (*softly*). But I promised I'd take care of her ...

(MCSORLEY falls to his knees. MCCARTHY, CUNDY and O'BRIEN stand around him.)

MCCARTHY. Something's holding him back. He ain't ready to go.

CUNDY. Give him some time, Jack. He lost his boat.

MCCARTHY. Nah. It ain't that. It's something else.

O'BRIEN. Maybe he don't believe what happened.

MCCARTHY. Well, he better start.

O'BRIEN. Or else?

(MCCARTHY, O'BRIEN and CUNDY look at one another. Long beat.)

CUNDY. It would be something awful to leave him alone like that, Jack.

MCCARTHY. I know. But he won't come with us until he accepts what happened. He's gotta get there on his own, like we did. And to accept what happened, he needs to remember.

O'BRIEN. We don't have a lot of time.

MCCARTHY. We got enough. (*To MCSORLEY.*) Come on, Mac. Let us help. We'll start yesterday, late afternoon, aboard the *Edmund Fitzgerald*.

SCENE 2

(Lighting change. Pilothouse of the Edmund Fitzgerald.

Images of Lake Superior in the late afternoon appear. The lake is calm.

A date appears on the screen: November 9, 1975.

MCCARTHY, O'BRIEN and CUNDY move around the pilothouse. As the men talk, they work their way to their posts.)

MCCARTHY. "The Mighty Fitz" we call her.

CUNDY. She's your boat, Mac. You're the captain of the flagship of the whole Columbia fleet.

O'BRIEN. One of the largest lake freighters to ever sail on the Great Lakes.

MCCARTHY. We've been setting tonnage records year after year.

CUNDY. We even broke our own record a couple times.

O'BRIEN. Today we're hauling 26,000 long tons of taconite pellets.

CUNDY. That's enough to build over 7,000 cars.

MCCARTHY. This is our last run of the year.

O'BRIEN. After this trip, she's going in for repairs.

MCCARTHY. She's home to twenty-nine souls. The oldest is sixty-three. The youngest, twenty.

CUNDY *(to MCSORLEY)*. One of them old geezers is you, Mac.

MCCARTHY. We're an experienced crew.

O'BRIEN. Some of the best of the fleet.

MCCARTHY *(to MCSORLEY)*. Especially you, Mac. At thirty-one, you was the youngest to hold a Master's rating.

CUNDY. You're professional. Reliable. A perfect record.

MCCARTHY. This is gonna be your last season.

CUNDY. In fact, you're gonna retire after this last run.

O'BRIEN. For us, this was just another routine day on the lake.

(By this time, MCCARTHY stands at the chart table. O'BRIEN stands behind the wheel. CUNDY stands DR. They work at their stations.

MCSORLEY rises. He walks into the pilothouse.)

MCSORLEY. Captain has the conn.

MCCARTHY. Captain has the conn. We're heading east across Superior. Speed at fourteen knots. We're coming up on Devil's Island on our starboard beam.

MCSORLEY. Right.

MCCARTHY. Deckhands are dogging the hatch clamps. They're getting ready to hose down the decks.

MCSORLEY. Tell them to move fast. Company don't like paying no overtime on Sundays.

MCCARTHY. I'll tell them to knock off for the day when they're done. *(Holds up a sheet of paper.)* I have the itinerary here—

MCSORLEY. Let's hear it.

MCCARTHY. Let's see ... *(Reading.)* Berth to berth: Leave Superior, Wisconsin. Take the shipping lane east across Lake Superior. South into Whitefish, then through the Sault Ste. Marie locks. Arrive in Zug Island in Detroit at five o'clock on Tuesday.

MCSORLEY. Well, fine.

MCCARTHY. And I don't know if you saw it, but we're getting some rough weather later—

MCSORLEY. Yeah, I saw it—

MCCARTHY. But it should pass south of the lake by tomorrow morning.

(MCSORLEY grabs binoculars and looks through them at a spot ahead.)

MCSORLEY. Who's that?

MCCARTHY. That's the *Anderson*.

(MCSORLEY positions himself DL and stares out.)

CUNDY. Keep that window down, Red. Man, that's a nice breeze.

O'BRIEN. The guy on the radio said the golf courses are packed today.

CUNDY. Folks are trying to sneak one last game in before the snow.

O'BRIEN. Weather's perfect for it.

MCCARTHY. How's your golf game, Ray?

CUNDY. Same as my poker game.

MCCARTHY. That bad, huh?

CUNDY *(indicating O'BRIEN)*. The "Great Lakes Gambler" struck again. Red cleaned me out last night.

O'BRIEN. You went all in with a pair of twos.

CUNDY. Yeah, but they was both red. *(Pointing offstage.)* Geez, willya look at that. Usually those trees around the lake are covered in fog.

O'BRIEN. They will be tomorrow morning.

MCCARTHY. Some days it's like you can see the cold stretching across the lake. It's enough to make you feel alone.

(Beat.)

CUNDY. Yeah.

(Beat.)

CUNDY. Say, how many days till Thanksgiving?

O'BRIEN. Seventeen? Eighteen?

MCCARTHY. I think it's eighteen. (To CUNDY.) You seeing Cotton over the holidays, Ray?

CUNDY. Yeah. I was thinking about taking the grandkids shopping. I'll buy the oldest a bike. Maybe tricycles for the younger ones.

MCCARTHY. Boy, that'll be nice. I'm sure they'll like that.

O'BRIEN. You buying Mary anything nice for Christmas, Jack?

MCCARTHY. Well, seeing that my wife's the handy one in the family, I thought I'd buy her a new set of pliers.

O'BRIEN. You're all romance.

CUNDY. Didn't you buy her a lawn mower last year?

MCCARTHY. That was for our anniversary.

CUNDY (to O'BRIEN). What about you, Red? You buying everyone a deck of cards?

O'BRIEN. I was thinking about taking John to Vegas for a few days. Check out the MGM.

CUNDY. Heard she's a beaut. (Looks R through his binoculars.) We got some pleasure boats around the Apostle Islands.

O'BRIEN. We're gonna clear, right?

CUNDY. We're clear. How many islands do you think are over there?

MCCARTHY. Somebody said it's over twenty.

(Beat.)

CUNDY *(confused)*. How many apostles was there?

O'BRIEN. Maybe the settlers weren't big on math.

CUNDY. They have a pool at the MGM?

O'BRIEN. Don't know. Never checked.

CUNDY. Why not?

O'BRIEN. Can't swim.

(MCSORLEY, MCCARTHY and CUNDY look at O'BRIEN.

Beat.)

CUNDY. What do you mean you can't swim?

O'BRIEN. I can't swim.

CUNDY. How long you been working on the boats?

O'BRIEN. About thirty years, off and on.

CUNDY. And you're telling me that in all that time you never learned how to swim?

O'BRIEN. Nope. Can't even doggy paddle. Never saw a need to.

(Beat.)

CUNDY. Huh. Ain't that something.

(Long beat.)

CUNDY. Say, you guys remember that manager who sailed with us a couple years ago? From Silver Bay to Toledo? He was some bigshot from the plant or something. The one who hit golf balls off the deck?