

ANTICIPATION

I was twelve years old when our family boarded an ocean-going liner to return to the UK after three years in South America. Exploring the ship, my sister and I, close in years and closer in mischief, spied on crew and passengers. We followed a steward as he knocked on a cabin door. The door flung wide open revealing a young blonde woman with an hourglass figure barely contained by her lacy underwear. The rattling tray was set down and the steward fled in blushing confusion. Cornering the steward later, we found out that her name was Claudette, a frequent passenger on the ship and well known to all the crew.

Gleefully we spent the next few days following her to see what would happen next. Her catwalk was the sundeck where she paraded in the smallest of swimsuits. Her ample bosoms briefly, yet surprisingly frequently, loosened their moorings before being anchored back into place. Young men showed off idiotically. Married men, glancing sideways, pretended not to notice. All were hoping and dreading to be the one selected to swab Claudette's plump back and shoulders with suntan oil.

This was the 1970's and our small ship had few of the facilities of the cruise ships of today. The food was good, cocktails flowed, but organised entertainment was minimal. After a few days at sea, water, water everywhere, nothing to do and less to see, cabin fever had set in. Sunbathing and the pool was all there was. Claudette was lying on her front on a sun lounger, bikini top tantalisingly unhooked to avoid tan lines. The ship's engines thrummed, masking all other sounds. White noise, white heat, her courtiers taut as rigging around her. We watched from behind a stack of deckchairs. A movement rippled across the deck. Claudette was on the move, hooking up her top. Stretching ostentatiously, she headed towards the flight of steps leading to the pool on the deck below. Casually, slowly, the men moved to the railings overlooking the pool, jostling at the last minute for a good view. She swam breaststroke at first, her blonde hair floating behind. Lazily she rolled over onto her back and pushed off from the side. A collective yesssss! escaped from the men as they mentally fist-pumped the air. Claudette's bikini top had given up its unequal struggle and cast itself adrift, forlorn flotsam no longer the focus of attention. Seemingly oblivious, Claudette continued swimming the length of the pool to the shallows where she rose demurely, covering her modesty like Aphrodite stepping naked from the sea. Silence. Then a spatter of self-conscious coughing from the railings above and the siren spell was broken.

A loud blast from the ship's funnel signalled we had crossed the equator. The men ebbed and disappeared like sea foam on sand. Wide-eyed, my sister and I looked down at our flat chests and wondered what was in store.