

## OCEAN GOING

The first time I knew something was wrong was when they drained the swimming pool on the upper deck.

"Why are they doing that?" I asked Lewis the steward as he made his way through a maze of deck chairs and sunbeds with a tray of drinks.

He shook his head.

"Never seen them do that when we're at sea," he said, then grinned. It wasn't pleasant: Lewis had teeth like a bombed terrace.

"Must be a dead body," he said.

"That's not funny," I said.

"Sorry," said Lewis, although he didn't look it.

The second time was when I went to give my talk in the ship's auditorium. I was used to low attendances – why go and see some boring film writer wheel out his party piece (*Rank Starlets I Have Known*) in a stuffy theatre when there's bingo and cabaret and movies featuring living stars? – but this was something else. There were three people there, and two of them were coughing in rhythm so that when one stopped, the other went off again, and vice versa.

After the fifth fusillade, I could actually feel the germs making their way up to the stage. I ended the talk halfway through a not very good story about Liz Fraser and told everyone present to go to bed.

The third time was the one nobody on the ship could have missed. I was collecting my buffet lunch in the restaurant when the ship's PA came on and the voice of the captain told us that we would not be docking in Madeira, the first stop on our cruise.

There was what I can only describe as a collective *low* from everyone in the restaurant – the unhappy sound of the retired rich, used to getting their own way, releasing the great British emotion of resentment against an unspecified target. "Typical," I heard several people mutter, though typical of what nobody said.

I sat down at a small table on my own, knowing my place as neither crew member nor passenger, and ate my meal to a soundtrack of tutting.

"What's going on?" I asked Lewis when I met him in the corridor later.

"We're not allowed into port is all I know," he said.

"Is it us? Or them?"

"Dunno," said Lewis, then doubled over like a penknife.

"Shit," he said. The fist he'd raised to his mouth was dotted with thick red spots like a playing card.

"You'd better get to the doc," I said.

"That's where I was going before you stopped me," Lewis said, and stomped off.

The auditorium was closed when I went the next afternoon, as I suspected it would be. No surprise or even disappointment – I'd heard my talk hundreds of times - but it did leave me with a lot of time on my hands. With my talk suspended indefinitely I literally had nothing to look forward to other than meals and strolls around the deck. I had no friends

among the passengers, only Lewis among the crew spoke to me and I was hardly the kind of person to go in for “activities”.

Not looking forward to days, or more likely weeks, of forced stagnation, I went back to my cabin and turned on my laptop. The internet was down as usual – it was reputed to work properly only in on the first class decks - but the ship had its own intranet, an internal network full of faux-ritzy self-advertisement and daily bulletins so jaunty that they verged on the psychotic. I skipped past these as they contained nothing but the skimpiest mentions of our change of plan and went instead to the cruise company’s own site, which was vague to the point of being poetic. But after some close examination, I was able to establish that not only was Madeira off the cards as a destination, but so were our next ports of call, Tunis and Sardinia.

I clicked on the little map of the sea that was supposed to indicate where the company’s ships were at any moment. There was our ship, a white, unrealistically large blob somewhere in the Atlantic. Were we near Madeira? I wasn’t sure: my knowledge of maritime geography would have shamed a desert nomad.

I closed the laptop and looked out of what I still called the window. The glass in the porthole was scratched and misted up. I decided it was time to get some fresh air so I left my cabin and headed outside. The sky was dark now, and cold Atlantic winds were rolling straight across the deck. I thought about calling home – my mother, perhaps, or one of my few friends in England – but decided against it, because Mum would be worried and my friends wouldn’t care. So instead I walked around aimlessly, not looking where I was going, until a woman’s voice said, “Careful!”

I stopped and she said, “You were about to walk straight into the pool.”

“What?” I said.

“They drained it, remember. God knows why.”

I stopped and looked down at my feet. My toes were less than six inches from the lip of the empty pool. At least, I presumed it was empty, as I couldn’t see anything below me but thick blackness like the inside of a giant mouth.

“Thanks,” I said, and the woman stepped forward into the light. She had a brilliant smile, which almost immediately turned into a frown.

“I was going to come to your talk tonight,” she said accusingly.

“I’m sorry.”

“That’s OK,” she answered. “Since I just saved your life, you can buy me a drink and tell me the highlights. My name’s Sylvia.”

The bar was empty save for a man in the corner slumped over a table with a glass still in his hand.

“He started early,” I said.

“Finished early, too,” Sylvia replied as the man got to his feet and staggered across the floor before collapsing into another chair at an identical table.

Sylvia told me she was here spending her ex-husband’s money on a dream cruise – “his dream, not mine, which makes it even better” – and she had been really looking forward to two things: going to Madeira and hearing my talk. “I like volcanic islands and I like old movies,” she told me, as we watched the drunk hurl himself at the exit like someone throwing themselves out of the bar.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I can’t give you the whole talk now if you like.”

She shook her head. "Not now, I'm exhausted. You can walk me back to my cabin, though."

I walked her back and, for want of a better plan, shook her hand.  
"Goodness," she said. "I feel like we've just signed a trade agreement."  
She kissed me on the cheek and went into her cabin.

The ship's intranet was down so I went straight to bed. The next day there was nobody else at breakfast, neither crew nor passenger. I hung around for a while in case Sylvia might turn up, but when someone did finally come through the door, it was Lewis with a face the colour of pus.

"Any news?" I called to him.  
He ignored me, took an apple, and left.

Half an hour later I knocked on Sylvia's door but there was no answer.

I went up on deck. It was deserted and covered in furniture that had blown over in the night. The pool was covered with a huge blue tarpaulin. I went over for a closer look and felt a hand on my arm. I turned expectantly, but it was only Lewis.

"I wouldn't," he said, then stood back to hawk dry air from his lungs.

"I wasn't going to do anything," I began, but Lewis yanked me away from the poolside.

"Too right, you cunt," he said, his lips strung with spit.

I walked off with Lewis alternately shouting and coughing behind me. In the distance, I could see a thick, tall column of smoke. I wished I had a telescope and then realised that, improbably, I was standing next to one, the kind that you find on piers which is normally coin-operated. This one was free and I swung it round to focus on the source of the smoke. It seemed to be coming from land, but I didn't know what land that might be because I had no idea where we were.

A few feet away was a set of stairs. It led to the crew area and then to the working parts of the ship but as there was no-one around I stepped over the plastic chain and climbed up to the next level. Without a telescope, the smoke was obviously smaller but now I had a broader view of the ocean. The column I'd seen was not the only smoke on the ocean. I couldn't see where they were coming from but all over the place there were smaller, thinner twists rising into the air.

I heard a noise behind and turned to see a man dressed in officer's whites lurch towards me and pitch forwards onto the deck with a dull metal thud. I didn't stop to help him or ask him if he was all right but instead clattered down the ladder again and ran at full pelt through the sunbeds and deckchairs back to my cabin.

I sat in the dark for several hours, the only light coming from my phone. I thought about Sylvia and going to see if she was all right, but the noises in the corridor outside made me lock my door and go to bed instead.

The next day there were no people and no food in the restaurant. Chairs and tables were upturned and a large patch of carpet was covered in bloody vomit. I found some cornflakes in a storage cupboard and ate them from the packet with my fingers.

It was sunny on deck and where there were no columns of smoke the sky was entirely blue. I righted a deckchair and sat down in it. At The blue tarp on the pool flapped like it was waving me to come over. There was an odd smell wafting across the deck, part chlorine and part something animal.

I drifted in and out of sleep. A couple of hours later, out of the corner of my eye I thought I saw someone run across the deck a few hundred yards towards the stern, but I couldn't be sure. Besides, I was getting hungry again.

Lunch was cornflakes and warm orange juice in my cabin. I found some sheets in a closet and changed the bed myself.

I knocked on Sylvia's door for several minutes and when I looked down at my hand I saw my knuckles were scraped and bleeding. I was about to start again when the corridor tipped sideways and I was thrown into the wall. As I was hurled to the ground and the ship shook and rolled, I realised something was absent that shouldn't have been: the constant hum of the ship's engine that passengers only notice when it stops. The ship was battered by waves and its own momentum as it continued to plough through the waves but I somehow managed to make my way down the corridor which fortunately hadn't flooded, presumably because it was a relatively calm day.

I made my way onto the deck, past a stew of broken furniture and seawater, and up the stairs to the crew decks. Climbing higher and higher, I at last found the bridge and, pulling open the door, made my way inside to a room where lights blinked and a wheel spun, but there was no-one there, nor anywhere else that I could see.

After some hours the ship calmed itself, bobbing ponderously on the waves like a gigantic bath toy. I climbed back down to the passenger decks and made my way along the corridor until I found the ship's galleys where I put together a meal of bread and cheese. Then I saw an opened bottle of wine and took that too.

It's midnight. There's no moon but the stars are out and it's peaceful here. Even the wind isn't too chill. I've had most of the wine and I'll probably go back in for more soon.

Wait. She's standing right there. She's calling me.

I pull my clothes off as I run.

I run towards her. Towards the water.

And I jump.