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Nightmare

At the time, I wasn't aware of being scared. Before leaving, I'd been more afraid of seasickness than the possibility of a shipwreck. During the twelve days that we lived on the ship sailing between several seas, the water was incessantly calm like oil or yoghurt.

It's only once we returned to our previous existence on land that my dreams turned against me.

In the dream, the ship's horn blows its departure, I'm still on the quay and it's too far to run. I'm alone, without passport or coin of any denomination and of course it's one of those countries where even the alphabet resists my efforts to read it.

The dream came at me frequently for at least six months, then subsided.

Belly Dancer

Off to the side, the belly dancer watched the Greeks circling the small dance floor.

She kept her hair black and long so that it slapped her ass when she swung around hard, the finger cymbals ringing.

The photographer smoked a cigarette while the Greeks-- the captain and his first mate, and some women-- danced. The women wore clothes, of course.

She wanted to be a woman wearing clothes, regular skirts or slacks, a blouse, shoes. She went barefoot for money and called herself a dancer, plopping herself in men's surprised laps (and sometimes found surprises there). She longed to cross the dance floor sedately, no jingle of fake gold coins, just the steady tap of modest heels, a little like those Greek dances with the women's heads tilted just so.

On the Ship

Up on the bridge, the pace was slow. The captain stood portside, his eyes on the quay, leaning out to get a better view, speaking into the walkie talkie in his hand from time to time, listening to

the Ukrainian pilot who guided him.

The Yalta Brass Band played as the ship berthed, early morning.

The day before, Captain Nikolas, who was not a captain but in charge of safety on the ship, had taken us around to the muster station, explaining the way the alarm system worked, alerting the bridge with lights and bells when something's gone wrong.

We stood in the wind, listening. His demeanor was almost apologetic, as if he didn't want to have to bother us with these details: a fire would be detected by the sensor, a sprinkler would throw an "umbrella" of water from the ceiling, the fire would be closed off in a particular section of the ship, we'd don our orange lifejackets and climb down the ladder into the lifeboat. The lifeboat is equipped with everything, he said, extra life jackets, food and water, seasickness pills.

Leaving the deck, my husband pointed to the lifeboats. You see that rope on the side? It's what you hold onto if the lifeboat capsizes.

Black Sea

We were just off the ship for the first time in two days. The Black Sea had been mercifully inviting.

In the foothills of the Crimean Mountains, pale-faced, blue-eyed women and children showed their wares as if they had no desire to sell them. Their eyes were large and pitiful, most of them colored a blue so stark and bright they looked otherworldly.

There was nothing avid in them, nothing grasping.

Later, having declined to buy large chunks of amber, painted wooden eggs, clacking ducks and an assortment of communist-era clothing, we boarded the bus. The driver took the vehicle down the road until it widened and then he turned the bus around. Driving back past the salespeople with their summer-sky eyes, some stared hungrily while others looked down at our feet behind the screen of slightly tinted window glass.

No one had bought a thing, not even an apron with its red cross-stitched "WELCOME."

Palace

At the end of the tour of the Livadia Palace, after examining photographs of Roosevelt, together with Churchill and Stalin, after being shuffled through wood-paneled rooms where momentous words had been spoken, we walked the cement path to where the bus waited. Along the way, we passed a waif of a pale child with almost-white hair and sad diminished eyes. He waved at the people passing. He made waving look like the saddest thing in the world.

Before he made me go back and leave a dollar for the boy, my husband told me that when Slav prisoners were first brought to the Byzantines, they thought the Slavs were angels.

I walked back to the boy who waved whether there were people passing in front of him or not. Watching him was like getting a glimpse of heaven, his hand moving at an otherworldly pace.

When I gave him the money, he handed me a small tin badge of a plastic star and in the red center, an image of a boy's face, much like his own.

We wonder if this boy is a kind of cult and have stuck the pin on our refrigerator where it reigns

over the daily preparation of our meals.

Tea Time

Afternoons were filled with sunlight from starboard or port. Slathered in oil, people lay on plastic chaise longues, books covering their faces. The northerners sought sunlight, heat, anything bright. Some of them put on loose-fitting bathing suits and swam the length of that overly blue pool, slick with oil from the ship-spewed smoke and debris carried on the wind. The pool was no more than ten feet long-- just five strokes and they had to turn.

Those who didn't swim or lie on chairs sat upright and drank more tea, ate additional cream cakes, sometimes three or more and a cookie or two as well-- fortification against the full hour before dinner.

On the Bridge

As the only woman on the bridge, I made myself thin as the horizon and watched things aslant: the small boats that came up on the radar screen, the way the captain was kind but imperious, the truer kindness of the first mate, who was tall, gaunt, and shy. He stooped, even when he laughed.

They were polite, even obsequious. I watched my tail at every turn.

I spied a brass plaque giving details of the law for discarding waste. "... waste must be able to pass through a sieve with holes 25 mm in order for it to be dumped 3 nautical miles from shore." There were rules for all sorts of waste including glass, rags, paper, metal, and plastic.

After reading the plaque twice, memorizing as much of it as I could, I slipped out the heavy fire door, my tongue stumbling over the words of the law.

Rolls

Big rolls at sea. Onion rolls. Poppy seed rolls. Bagels. Bialys.

Meals

The days passed in the circular logic of the meals. Like wedges, breakfast and elevenses, lunch, tea, dinner, and midnight snack put order in their days. Eventually, they would be delivered home on the circuitry of those meals.

Lazy Days

Lazy days on the deck, wind in everyone's hair-- even the ones without much hair. For them, the caress was more intimate.

Hierarchy

One morning, the captain was almost petulant. Confident that the espresso he had been served was not Illy, he voice veered toward a growl.

On a ship, everyone is below someone else. The captain under the stars, the weather, tides and God.

Cross

My first cross, given to me by the Patriarch of Constantinople, is made of gold-colored tin. It's the kind of cross that might have come from a gumball machine, inside a plastic bubble. I suppose it's precisely the cross I deserve; after all, I didn't even pretend to kiss his hand.

A Woman I Never Met

She and I came so close to meeting! One of her sister nuns, a pretty young French woman with a hairy mole above her lip, harangued me at the site of Mary's tomb and I walked away unceremoniously; the perfumed church incense made me feel sick. I walked down the stone path until I came to a place where I couldn't hear her voice or smell anything but carob.

While I watched the other visitors going by, my husband met another nun, someone from my very own city, who probably went to my high school, and possibly even the same year! Later, he told me about her. I wanted to go back and meet her-- but the taxi driver was waiting.

I'll always wish that we'd met: I picture her serious Chinese face, framed by cloth in an ugly shade of blue, nun-blue. When she sees me, it opens into a smile so excited, so greedy, it's almost too much.

I know nothing of the stuff of her days, the rituals that fuel a life of celibacy, a life wed to Jesus.

I can only surmise: the vision came in the middle of July, the day's blue sky made indistinct by the swift-moving early evening fog. She'd gone out to buy something, a candy we both liked-- watermelon Jolly Ranchers.

Now in the Church of St. Mary of Ephesus, summer brings her all the watermelon she can eat.

Choking

It was Easter, after all, for the Ukrainian girls too, even if they made their cross higher up on the shoulders and said *Christos Anesti* differently.

At midnight, just after the Resurrection was announced, the Orthodox divided up into two groups: the Greeks took over every table in the red-carpetted dining room but one. There, the two Ukrainian bargirls sat together, in their best clothes and self-conscious.

During the meal, one of the stewards went up to the captain and make a secret gesture toward the girls, mumbling something about Odessa and Yalta. Immediately, the captain excused himself and walked around to each of the tables, wishing the crew members a happy Easter and drinking to their health. When he reached the Ukrainian girls' table, Lena, black-haired with stunningly white skin, choked on her sip of wine. I hope I was the only one who noticed.

She must have been in love with him. A captain of a ship is, after all, more than just someone who commands the vessel. While at sea, the ship is the world; the captain is God and the president rolled into one.

Venice

There were twelve chefs, altogether, on the ship.

On Easter Sunday, Greek Easter that is, three or four of the chefs were on the back deck, the

crummy deck where the crew sometimes went to play backgammon or have a cigarette.

In three half-barrels set close to the side of the ship, good-sized lambs were turning on the spit. Some of the crew were sitting nearby on plastic chairs, the kind gypsies sell from the backs of trucks. Everyone smoked and had a beer or glass of wine.

They didn't pay much attention to their surroundings, but it was hard for the rest of us not to notice. Beyond the stark white-metal surface of the ship was Venice. Her grace was apparent even there, at the dock, in the burnt umber of her buildings, their hand-made angles, the ubiquitous water.

They listened to their music, smoked their brand of cigarettes, drank wine from their islands. The captain's daughter danced provocatively with the first mate, who found himself almost flat-out on the metal deck while she gyrated above him. People threw glasses that smashed easily; some of the glass got lodged in the first mate's hands as he smacked the deck. By the time the meat was done, his hands were a bloody mess and the captain's daughter's white blouse was red-speckled.

When the sun turned, the heat left the back deck and everyone came to their senses. Donning jackets, we went ashore for a late afternoon coffee in one of Venice's squares, leaving the deck to the Philipinos and Sri Lankans, who'd celebrated their Easter two weeks before.

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