

QUEEN'S GRILL BAR

by

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I'm a librarian, and I kissed a film star once. I touched her nipples too. At least I think I did.

A holiday where you fly to New York and return to England on the *Queen Elizabeth 2*. With my brother Arnold, who hated it, but since my divorce there's no one else to travel with, I've looked after him... well, since you died, mother... he has to come. This film star... well it would have been better without Arnold in my cabin. I like exotic places, libraries like in New York, would have toured the one in Washington if there'd been time.

You'd like her films. Hélène Martin, pronounced the French way, I learnt enough of it in school for trips to Calais, for the duty-free. It happened on the ship. Where there's a library too, not that it fits in that fantastic world, not what I'm used to either. I mean, why get a book for entertainment with so many other things to do, like meeting famous people? My British Library is for study, I fetch the books for scholars.

Before I met Hélène I spent the time strolling round the ship in awe at that whole new world of floating elegance between sea and sky. Watching for shearwaters—I'd read about them in the ornithology section, flitting over the ocean, never coming in sight of land except to breed. Arnold, meanwhile, stayed sleeping in the cabin—we may be twins but we're not identical, he's not too bright, poor Arnold. I mean, when there's luxury food, day or night, even for those paying the lowest fare like me! Easy to gorge yourself and get indigestion like I nearly did but managed not to. Good entertainment in the evenings too.

I didn't read a single book. Five days at sea and a film star were escapism enough after managing with Arnold in our old East Croydon house... well you remember how some people, who might have bought it, called it unpleasantly musty when they didn't.

Exploring decks and their different levels, discovering you can walk the length of the ship on some, while others stop at a staircase, or a lift... that's how I met her. I'd wandered up two flights of stairs to the balcony with its expensive shops overlooking the Grand Lounge. Then forward towards the Queen's Grill Bar, off limits to the likes of me. You see, mother, the wealthy passengers have a restaurant of their own, even special seats upstairs in the cinema... like a private club where they can remain anonymous without appearing in the public rooms. Except in the Casino, the best place for seeing the rich and famous, with slot machines I'd sometimes risk a pound on and green gambling tables—not that I'd not make a fool of myself with things like that. The night before, I'd stood watching a TV personality playing craps—didn't say a word, of course, he'd never remember me afterwards, not like Hélène.

She was coming out of a first-class cabin. The corridors in the higher part of the ship are no different from those below, nothing to stop you imagining having a cabin there provided you don't go too far, to the Queen's Grill Bar itself. She turned to look at me, and with my democratic principles denying special privileges to the rich I told myself I had a right to be there. That I'd no desire to mingle with the upper classes, that walking round the boat deck you could see into their windows anyway and might glimpse a celebrity if you weren't afraid of staring.

She was in tears, genuine as in her first film, *Love in the Morning*. Seeing me—like the fantasies I make up for my brother Arnold, I still can't quite believe it happened—she flung her arms around my neck and sobbed. No explanations, mother. I didn't say a word, not knowing where to put my hands and tempted to hold her like I would to calm my wife, but that had ended badly and I wasn't sure it was the thing to do, someone might follow her out of the cabin, and how would I explain it?

"My God I'm sorry," she said artistically.

Less glamorous than on the screen, I wouldn't have paid much attention if she hadn't been a star, with wispy blond hair falling across a face... well somehow anonymous, except that everybody knew it.

Did I really invite her for a drink? I'm still in awe at the enormity of it.

"Coffee," she said. "Not in the Queen's Grill, though." (As if I'd ever suggest a place like that!) "I can't stand it another minute! Somewhere else. It'll be an... experience!"

With other passengers looking on, I paraded her proudly down the glittering, metallic staircase, through the Grand Lounge to the Lido Bar behind. Sitting at a comfortable table with views of sea and open sky, with the swimming pool outside and glimpses of an occasional shearwater skimming by between the waves—it was a place I loved. A waiter in white gloves took her order.

I didn't dare ask why she'd been crying, so I asked her name instead. Knew it already, of course, but not whether it was correct etiquette to say so. Bad enough not having a dark suit for dinner, which would have done for our Mauretania Restaurant, but I'd only brought a decent pair of trousers with me, plus that corduroy coat you made me years ago.

I'm not sure she was offended I didn't let on I'd recognized her, or relieved. "Hélène... Martin."

"I'm Horatio Humphries."

She laughed. I've never liked my name.

"My husband says he doesn't want us slumming with the other passengers. He's the director, Brandon Phillips."

I knew that too.

She told me they were travelling to England to make a film, Brandon assuming in his usual shitty way (her words, I'd never say a thing like that) she wanted to relax without her fans. So they kept to the Queen's Grill and surrounding rooms, except for going to the Casino like they'd done each night and yesterday she'd lost nine hundred dollars.

The waiter, bringing our coffee, was just as nonchalant serving a celebrity as a complete non-entity like me. If I were famous, I told Hélène, making her laugh, I'd still have eaten in the Queen's Grill up above—why not enjoy being acknowledged by other important persons too?—but would stroll in public rooms as well, where ordinary people would recognize me. Make me feel good, I don't get much recognition from my fellow humans since you died, despite working in the library. And Arnold might as well not exist for all he helps!

I explained I was sharing an inside cabin with him on a lower deck, leaving him asleep in the morning ("Like my husband!" she laughed) while I walked round the deck to welcome the wonderful new day at sea. And when I returned at night, unwilling to miss something and go to bed, he was already tucked in and dreaming.

I hesitated. "I'm a... librarian, you see."

People mostly respond with a bored "How interesting" to that. But she exploded "Heavens!" with that touch of drama reminding me she was an actress. "It's what I always wanted!

I *love* books. If I hadn't been forced to do what my parents told me, I'd have gone to library school and never even entered a cinema. My God I hate it!"

"And if I hadn't been forced to do what *my* parents wanted," I blurted out, "I'd have gone to acting school."

An actress who wanted to be a librarian, and a librarian who'd give anything for just half her fame! Her parents, she told me, had been music-hall comedians in France, my mother was a schoolteacher, my father a city-clerk in Walthamstow, that was the difference. I said I'd acted in plays at school, but not that my greatest success was playing the grandmother in one of Chekhov's. But I was good! Then I described my work at the British Library, which she thought she'd heard of.

The ship gave a roll and a wave of anxiety spread through the Lido Bar. The water in the open-air pool slurped against the side.

Hélène said "It's going to get exciting."

I thought the same. On my trips across the Channel I secretly enjoy the rocking motion and being out of reach of land. I felt a rough sea might be fun, though my brother Arnold is afraid, calls me morbidly romantic when he knows I'm listening.

"My husband keeps on saying 'If only it doesn't get rough!'" Hélène reached over the table and took my hand. "Horatio—wasn't that Nelson's name?"

"Battle of Trafalgar, 1805."

"Let's walk round the ship, Horatio!"

We struggled along the deck against the wind, under the lifeboats hanging solidly above. Up steps at the front—battling the gale so we could barely lift our faces towards the bow and the greying waves ahead—then down the other side, wind pushing behind us now as the deck rocked and pitched beneath. This was where you could see in the windows of the Queen's Grill Bar, but now my celebrity walked beside me, her steps veering from side to side like mine, shortening or lengthening erratically. Round the rear of the deck to a sullen, threatening ocean, without a shearwater in sight. On our next circuit they'd closed the steps up to the front—high winds, a board across them warned—so we had to go inside again.

Back to the bar, where the white-gloved waiters were collecting crockery. Hélène laughed excitedly: "It's so different! Normally I'm hanging around the set, waiting. The same thing time and time again. This... is real!"

I thought of the world of books, my usual escape from the gloom of a deserted suburban house and a twin brother whose only existence is to watch TV. Real life, which... I could hardly breathe... I was sharing with a star!

I found her more and more attractive. Since my divorce I've sometimes thought about remarriage, but no, mother, I'm not that unrealistic, a brief affair though, don't film stars have them all the time?

"*There* you are." The voice wasn't pleasant, nor were the possessive eyes and unnaturally black hair.

"Brandon, my husband," she introduced us. "Horatio Hodges."

"Humphries," I corrected her.

He stared at Hélène without acknowledging me. "I couldn't find you."

She burst into immediate, impromptu tears.

"We've got work to do," he said, unmoved.

She glanced at me then started to rebel. But suddenly the ship heaved deeply, a more effective ally than this librarian could ever be. With the same sarcastic sweetness she used in *My Darling Lover* she said to him: "Brandon, you've gone quite white!"

I don't get sick, except for a slight nausea if I bend down to retrieve a penny from the floor. But her husband turned, his hand across his mouth, staggering between the tables as the whole bar plunged then rose again.

Her hand touched mine and she gave a little smile—reminding me of that famous scene with her and Leslie Mann.

We spent the day together, partners in a new aristocracy now, of travellers who were free of sickness. We'd cannon into each other, grab for rails or furniture, exploring places she hadn't been, screaming like adolescents on a roller coaster. In the slot machines we won a pile of coins, then lost them all again. With six or seven other passengers in the Theatre Bar we attended a lecture on how not to gain weight on board, then went to lunch at an uncrowded buffet, heaping food onto our plates and carrying them precariously away. I took her to the library—no books on her that I could find—and then she even showed me the Queen's Grill Bar above! Where we sat sipping Scotch in solemn silence with a wealthy couple I didn't recognize...

At dinner we ate in my ordinary Mauretania Restaurant, where the waiter served her cheerfully, not showing any surprise she wasn't my unattractive twin. Later, in an intimate audience, we watched a comedian performing on the Grand Lounge's tilting floor. A fairy tale! I loved her sitting next to me.

"It really is more fun," she said.

I escorted her through the still heaving corridors to her first-class cabin. We hesitated, then kissed goodnight. H el ene Martin, the star—for a moment her tongue lingered in my mouth.

Then she was gone.

"See you tomorrow," I said, as the door shut behind her and the snoring husband I could hear inside.

Back through the corridor, past the shuttered shops overlooking the now empty Grand Lounge below. Imagining, mother, how without Arnold in the way I could have taken her to my cabin. Down the staircase to the dance floor, lingering on it like the entertainers who performed each night. Would she, without her husband, have invited me to her cabin too? Out through the Casino, downstairs again, past the library, bouncing with happiness and the motion of the ship. Into the Lower Lounge, with its dark windows on either side and a splashing sea beyond... to a luxuriously padded chair, where my yearning soul could revel in the memory of that kiss.

I'd failed her, though. Should have taken her away somewhere, like in her films. Hadn't been dashing, romantic enough, and she'd returned to Brandon. But what to do? In all this luxury there was nowhere we could go, the weather was too wet and cold for the open deck. Although if it cleared tomorrow... perhaps a romantic walk with the moon shining on the sea.

I didn't want to go to bed, not yet, but the next day would come sooner if I did. I set off down a different staircase from the ones I knew, then a corridor I didn't recognize, and—why hadn't I explored it before?—a double L-turn in the middle, where we could have stood in a tight embrace, drawing apart if someone came along. I might have slipped my hand inside her dress to feel her trembling breasts...

Arnold, under his blanket, was awake. "Where you been?"

I felt like murdering him. Knowing I wouldn't be believed, I told him: "With H el ene Martin... you know, the star."

"Right!"

Kissing her, I thought. Why, mother, does he always make fun of things I long for?

Next morning the storm had died. Passengers strolled on deck, in public rooms, laughing over how sick they'd been. A final day with H  l  ne, before arriving in Southampton the next. A walk on deck at night...

All day long I looked for her. Walked the corridors, made circuits round the boat deck once again, where she might see me from the Queen's Grill windows. Queued for a buffet lunch and lost my place because I thought I saw her strolling by. Then sat waiting in the Lido Bar, watching flocks of shearwaters in their lonely ocean world.

In the evening I saw her playing roulette with her husband Brandon. I risked a smile. She glanced at me, then whispered in his ear. He gave an explosive chuckle as the teller called a number. Her merry laugh. A pile of chips was pushed towards her.

The deck outside was dark, there was no moon. I could hear the calling of the sea below.

I cried myself to sleep that night. Silently, so Arnold wouldn't wake. Slept badly. Half dreamed, half imagined, H  l  ne in her studio, lonely, bored, while others thronged about her. Interesting people who talked to me, included me, thought me interesting too. Then I'd turn over, angry at such confused fantasies of what could never be.

Sometime in the night I woke up. At least, I think I did. The cabin door was partly open and, in the half-light from the corridor, stood H  l  ne. I looked for Arnold but for once he'd left. She closed the door behind her and I could sense her moving in the darkness. Then she was on top of me, her lips pressed onto mine, her tongue flickering in my mouth. Not saying a word, she took my hand and placed it inside her nightdress where I could feel her nipples growing firm. She moaned as she had in *Romantic Interlude*, then held me tightly until we fell asleep.

When I awoke, there was the same mysterious light, the door half open, and Arnold, in his usual place, was talking about me in his sleep.

In Southampton I watched her go ashore. She looked at me with that well-known smile from *Passion without End*, then walked away with Brandon.

I've seen all her films by now. Always the romantic heroine, idealized, glamorized, no longer mine. In the library I've searched the catalogues—credits, husbands, leading men. Love ever after, lasting from one film to the next. They say now she's divorcing Brandon too.

I don't know her address. At the studio they have a system for screening telephone calls. All I can do is watch her on video... remembering. And imagining...

"Dreaming of your film star again?" my brother will sometimes ask sarcastically.

I hate him, mother. Trusting only in prosaic truths, Arnold doesn't believe a word of it.