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I got the memo while on rotation in the gift shop. I liked working at the gift shop and I particularly liked working the cash register. It was positioned in the middle of the shop, a single column of heavy wood. It felt like I was sailing the ship. I'd rest my elbows against it while surveying the space, breathing stale, recycled air. I'd watch customers move lethargically between the aisles and pretend I was in charge of them all, issuing instructions in my head. Sometimes they would obey my instructions and I would get a very warm feeling, the kind of feeling I used to get from watching a video of a dog on the internet. It would sustain me for a little while.

From the register I could see almost everything in the store. To my right were the artisanal and novelty chocolates. Flavours like wasabi and goat curd, gouda and sun-dried tomatoes. Beside them were the edible insects, exoskeletons dipped in dark chocolate or salted caramel. To my left were the animal-skin rugs and blankets, all different kinds, all perfectly intact. The skin slipped from the body the way athletic girls can peel an apple in a single, flawless spiral. At the front of the shop were racks of allegedly designer clothes, with brand names I had never heard of, though they all sounded European enough to be convincing.

Further afield were perfumes and cosmetics, vodka in skull-shaped glass bottles and clocks made from old records, earrings cut out from bits of Lego and pens capped with real gold, watches that would work five hundred feet beneath the ocean's surface. There were cheaper things as well. Plastic key rings and T-shirts with the *WA* logo and

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coffee cups that said *I Love You, Mum*. There was an operatic quality to it. A domed roof and heavy velvet curtains. A white marble-effect floor threaded with veins of gold and grey. The air smelled oily and perfumed. The day before, an American couple came in and the woman looked around the shop and said, *Honey, isn't this great, we can buy all our presents without ever having to leave the boat*. It was one of many identical gift shops on board.

I'd begun my morning by mopping the floors, which was also my last job of the day. If I worked the late shift followed by the early shift I would get this unpleasant feeling of hovering in and out of myself, like my body and brain couldn't agree on where I was standing in the order of time. I'd often have to retrace my steps, waking up and then falling asleep and then going to bed and then taking off my make-up. Sometimes I'd have to go further back, remembering when I started working on the ship, when I left my old apartment, when I got married, when I passed my entrance exams, when I broke my arm roller-skating. Recently I'd developed this compulsion where I would try to figure out what I was doing exactly a year earlier, but it was hard work after several years on the *WA*. I had done the same things so many times. Mia would call this my *auto chronological endo pathology*. She could be pretty smart when she wasn't pretending to be a baby.

After I mopped the floor I wiped down the surfaces and sprayed the room with very expensive air freshener. I removed the fresh flowers from the fresh-flower fridge and arranged them around the shop. I was the only staff member on rotation trained in arranging the fresh flowers. This is something my co-worker, Zach, hated me for. He told me I was not a visual person. He told me that at least twice a day. Often, after I had finished arranging the flowers, he'd go over to them and act as though he was plucking invisible pieces of fluff from them, but he would never actually touch them, because he knew he was not allowed to. I watched him do this from the register, rolling my eyes and hoping he'd notice.

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Mid-morning, I watched a customer pick up a rhinestone-studded T-shirt spelling *Chic*, holding it against her body and watching herself in the mirror. Buy it! I thought. Buy it! Buy it! But she did not, returning it to its slim glass shelf, folded inexpertly but not inexpertly enough that I felt compelled to fix it. I felt my serotonin levels deplete.

By late afternoon the daily newsletter had been delivered. It was filled, as usual, with all the stupid stuff happening on board. A hypnotist in the cocktail lounge. Polynesian night and poke. A talk with a marine biologist in which she was contractually obliged not to answer questions about the sea levels or the dying molluscs or the coral outcrops or the whales.

It also contained what was tenuously labelled *news about the passengers*. A ruby wedding anniversary plus a photograph of the couple holding champagne flutes. So-and-so dying. I imagined Mia walking around the ship and searching for stories. She was on rotation at the news desk. She hated it. She said the only story people had was that they were rich and unhappy.

After we'd finished reading the newsletter we got ready for what we were supposed to refer to as Twilight, the early-evening hours in which we played yé-yé and served French Martinis. Customers would pop by to do some shopping before their evening meal. Many of the female passengers bought gowns or catsuits or new blouses to wear straight out of the store and into dinner. I was often put on changing-room duty because I was good at wrangling zips and making small talk with husbands. I had a good idea of what husbands wanted generally, and I was happy enough to give it to them. But before I could take up my usual position, a courier appeared in the shop entrance, walking towards me holding the envelope out in front of him. It was a plain brown envelope, very humble.

*Ingrid*, he said. *Are you Ingrid?*

*I am*, I replied.

*Congratulations*, he told me. *You have a memo from Keith.*

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He handed me the envelope. I held it to my nose and inhaled. It smelled like butter and malt. It smelled like a cake missing a crucial ingredient. My heart moved quickly in my chest. Zach appeared by my side.

*Open it, he said.*

I stared at him. *Come on, he said. We've not got all day.*

I slid my finger beneath the fold and ripped. My hands were shaking slightly. I held the letter in front of my face, noticed the *WA* letterhead, the looping italics of Keith's signature. I ran my thumb over it to confirm it was real and not a scan. I read the text in erratic chunks, like eating a meal the wrong way round. But I already knew what it meant. I knew as soon as I saw the brown envelope.

*I've been chosen, I said.*

I passed the memo to Zach and pretended to be surprised, like I wanted him to confirm it was true. But really I wanted him to see for himself, to rub it in his face. Zach twisted the head of the anglepoise lamp, spotlighting the paper. I watched his eyes move across it in mechanical lines. He handed it back to me with a taut look of regret.

*You've got to be kidding me, he said.*

*I'm in, I said. Aren't I?*

*You're in, he said. Fuck sake.*

He tugged the letter back.

*What do I do now? I asked.*

*Clearly, you say yes.*

*OK. Right. Who do I say yes to?*

*To Keith. At the ceremony.*

Zach was regarding me with a nervous urgency. It was exhausting to witness.

*When is the ceremony? I asked.*

*How can you not know this? Why did you even apply? His face stiffened. Tomorrow, he said. Most likely.*

I looked up at the passengers moving around the shop. The women's gowns grazed the floor, collecting dust. The men wore

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monochrome, big square shoulders. They were ready to begin their evening. I put the letter in my pocket and told Zach I was leaving. I don't know why. He was not senior to me and I didn't owe him anything.

*I've finished my shift, I said.*

*You've finished more than your shift, he replied.*

*What's that supposed to mean?*

Zach brushed the keys of the register, pretended to be very engaged in the task.

*I think you know exactly what I mean, he mumbled, not looking up.*

Walking away, I wondered what it was about Zach that I found so offensive. Whether it was how overly tactile he was with the till and its contents. Sometimes I'd catch him running his fingertips over the surface of the fake cruise money some of the customers preferred to shop with. He once told me the money had been designed by Keith himself, and that there were all sorts of hidden meanings in the artwork. The tiger, for example, symbolized power. I glanced back and saw he was watching me leave, his pale eyes freakish and crazed. I quickened my pace towards the exit, feeling like a balloon floating in the sky or an animal wriggled out of its chain, something untethered and set free.



After a shift I'd invariably head straight back to my cabin. The walk took me about half an hour if I didn't use any of the lifts or escalators or walkways. This was quite an average commute. When I first started I was excited by it, the number of different lives you could live all contained within one moving place. You could eat at countless restaurants. You could swim in many pools, each one unique in shape, depth, temperature and concept. You could play mini-golf or try zip-lining or escape from an escape room of which there were several themes. You could flip fake coins into an ornamental pond, scale a

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vertical garden. There was a newspaper and TV studio. There was a philharmonic concert hall. There was a hospital.

While the kaleidoscopic array of objectively pleasurable options was what drew me to the *WA*, within a year I found I'd mostly just sit in my cabin, occasionally making uninventive plans with Mia and Ezra. I had specific things I would do with each of them, tiny recalibrations to better suit our particular dynamic. With Mia I'd watch films at the cinema, share popcorn and a drink, take a walk, get dinner in the crew mess after. Mia had energy and she emanated energy. It was something to do with the angles of her face. Ezra was more soporific. We would sit by the staff pool but never swim, or watch television for hours on his bunk. Sometimes we would just hang over the railings and look out at the sea. But if the three of us were all free at the same time, which we rarely were, we'd play Families.

The day I got the memo, I walked home via the boardwalk, the central promenade at the heart of the ship. A sunken stretch flanked by endless tiers of upper decks, filled with lavishly dressed passengers, canopied food vendors and street performers. Large speakers played artificial circus music, blocking out the sound of the sea. It took a long time to move through the crowds. I had arranged to meet Mia and Ezra below deck.

Ezra had a solo cabin, like me. He had covered its already white walls with sheets of white cotton, which hung low and loose. He said he'd done it for the texture. That everything on the ship is so slippery and smooth he feels like a cat in a bath, scrabbling around with nothing to grip on to.

*I've left watermelon on the side*, he called from the bathroom, when I let myself in. He was on rotation in the staff kitchens and always brought back the leftover fruit.

*Mia's running late*. He stepped out of the bathroom, pressing a towel to his face. *Do you want to watch TV?*

Ezra was Mia's younger brother, but they were nothing alike. Like Mia, he was olive-skinned, though a lot paler than his sister, as if he

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had faded. He had the look of a person who is always between things. Sweet-tempered but vague. Sometimes it felt like he was running into you accidentally even when you had arranged to meet. Often, we would be in the middle of a conversation and he would look wide-eyed, suddenly alarmed to find me there at all.

He switched on the TV. Behind him his bed was unmade. Scattered across it was a book about communicating better at work, a teaspoon with a ring-shaped stain, and a polystyrene box containing semi-set smears of ketchup and mustard. Three remaining chips. I noticed he had not yet put on a shirt.

*How about Friends?* he said. *Or The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air?*

*I don't mind,* I replied. *Whatever you want is fine.*

I wondered why I always sounded aggressive even when I was trying to be gentle and amenable.

He swept his arm across the duvet and the mess spilled on to the floor. He lay down and shuffled over, his back pressed against the sheet-covered wall. His cabin did not have a window. I lay down beside him and we both stared at the TV. Chandler was stuck in an ATM vestibule with a model. We laughed when he said gum would be perfection. I was tired, close to falling asleep, when without warning Ezra coughed loudly into my hair. I held my hand to the back of my head. I could never tell whether I really loved Ezra or felt sorry for him. I'd always had a hard time distinguishing between pity and love.

*I've been chosen,* I said.

*Chosen for what?*

*For the thing,* I said. *As if you have to ask.*

*Oh right. I didn't know you'd applied.*

*I did, yeah.*

*Oh well,* he sighed. *Good.*

A cat jumped on Ross's back. Ross tried to shrug it off but it clung on anyway. He was wearing a sunset-coloured sweatshirt.

*What time will Mia be getting here?* I asked.

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*Soon.*

Despite being the person in the world I was most comfortable with, Mia still made me extremely nervous. For a long while I thought this was because she was very beautiful but more recently I realized it was because she doesn't care whether or not she is liked. Ezra once said to me, *It's nice to be nice.* And I agree, it is nice to be nice. I get a lot out of the camaraderie of mutual niceness. It means people don't look at you for too long. But to Mia it simply holds no appeal. Sometimes you can almost see her making the decision to be unkind.

*You know what I wish,* Ezra said, raising his voice over Monica, who was hysterical about biscuit crumbs or ink stains or something. *I wish all of these sheets would fall on me. And I would be so perfectly swaddled.*

*We could do that if you wanted.*

He coughed against my neck again.

I heard the sound of Mia outside the door. Heard her exhale, push her keycard into the lock.

*Mia!* I shouted, as she came in.

*Hello,* she said, making the word sound heavy and long, before falling horizontally across us.

I met Mia at induction. We were put in pairs and told to make eye contact for a full five minutes. It was supposed to generate employee intimacy and trust. I thought about my husband. How I'd scroll through his search history instead of asking why he was in a bad mood. How I'd masturbate quickly, quietly, in the bathroom, instead of asking him for sex. I did not want to make eye contact with Mia. I did not want to make eye contact with anyone.

I'd previously imagined eye contact as a kind of mutual forward momentum, meeting in the middle. Two stone cherubs spitting at each other, on either side of an ornamental fountain. Their torrents uniting in the centre. But as I stared into Mia's eyes I understood it is not something that exists in an equilibrium. It is more like one person spitting into another person's mouth. An advancer and a receiver.

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