

'JUST LOOKING'

Fiction

First three chapters (6779 words)

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PART ONE: CRUISING

I

(Summer 2021)

I was watching the tornado: a piece of string jiggling punily away within spitting distance of the horizon. It might have seemed far enough away to ignore, if it hadn't been for the bracing gusts of wind that were rushing across the cruise ship's upper deck, ruffling my silk Hawaiian shirt and tickling what was left of my hair. The captain had told us that for our own safety, he wouldn't be leaving Marseille until the tornado had whipped itself out and as nobody could tell me when that would be, I'd decided to have a drink to pass the time.

Of which I had plenty. My sole surviving parent had died a few months earlier, leaving me with a house in Pinner that was worth over a hundred times what it had once cost him, so I'd sold it and given up work. For good. Such an early retirement – I wasn't quite fifty – should have been a reason for celebration, but before I could break out the streamers and balloons, my wife quietly left me, an event which, although I'd long suspected it was on the cards, hit me like a bolt from the blue. By that stage, to say sooth it could just as easily have been me who'd left her. In a nutshell, time had taken its toll of the outpouring of emotion that had kick-started our marriage twenty years ago and for a year and then some neither of us had been getting any sex from each other (or anyone else, for that matter; at least I know I wasn't).

Which is when I decided to treat myself to a trip on this ship of six thousand souls, dolled up now in the kind of flashy clothes I'd never been able to afford before, not to mention my talking

watch and a cologne with a price tag which my Dad, thanks to whose house I was able to splash the stuff over me every morning, would have baulked at. Despite which trappings, I still wasn't getting any sex. In fact, on this boat I wasn't even getting the time of day. I told myself to grow up, that I couldn't expect new friends – and even less women ones – to come flocking simply because Sally had given me the definitive E. So here I was at the deck bar (which I was pleased to find didn't have a name, given that the all the other bars on board, and there were plenty of them, had flagrantly tacky ones like L'Après Surf, The Golden Commodore, The Intrepid Matelot...). I ordered a coupe de champagne in lousy French.

"How long do you think that bastard's going to take?"

A man I'd never seen before had taken the stool next to mine. He had black hair, a thick-skinned face, and was probably in his thirties. He was wearing a black T-shirt with the words 'I PREFER NOT TO' printed in white. He pointed at the dancing string, while signalling the barman with a natural authority of a type I'd always envied:

"Un blanc-cassis, si'l vous plait."

"Oui, m'sieur."

The barman actually put down the bottle of champagne he was about to fill my glass with and set about preparing my neighbour's drink. I said:

"I reckon this one's on its last legs. Or gusts."

My neighbour raised the blue liquid to his lips. The barman picked up the champagne again, poured, and slid the glass towards me on a little white mat.

"M'sieur."

I detected a hint of disdain. I was trying to work out a suitable way of reacting to it when my neighbour put down his glass.

"Un autre, s'il vous plaît."

That was quick. As the waiter refilled, my neighbour turned back to me.

"I do believe you're right. It's a piddling little twister, as twisters go. But it's kept us moored in Marseille far too long. The fucker."

I almost spat out my first sip of champagne. For someone who didn't know me from Adam to swear like that first off, struck me as, well, a bit shocking. When I next looked at him, he'd started work on his second drink.

"So what do you do for a living, if I may ask?"

He kept his eyes fixed on the tornado. I shrugged. The champagne had already endowed me with enough self-confidence to boldly state:

"Not a thing, and that's the way it's going to stay. And you?"

His turn to shrug.

"I'm a fucking journalist."

He half-laughed, half-snorted, the way people sometimes do when they hear a bad joke. My neighbour moved his glass through the air to indicate the canopy of the bar, the bar itself, and the four dormant jacuzzis on the open deck, all of which items were decorated with gaudy mosaic motifs, like something Gaudí would have done if he'd been blind as a bat on a bad day.

"The whole fucking ship's done up like a Disneyland for adults. Backward adults. Which is what I suspect most of the passengers are. I mean, you'd *have* to be a fucking mental retard to pay good money for one of these aquatic saunters, wouldn't you?"

To be mollycoddled by a bunch of obviously underpaid people from the world's poorest countries so you can pretend you're *really somebody* for a few days."

I looked him in the eye. Was he taking the piss? He slammed a hand over his mouth in an onset of surprise that looked genuine enough.

"I'm sorry, of course, you're a paying passenger. How rude of me."

I slugged back the rest of the champagne.

"And you're not?"

"I'm here to do a feature. All expenses paid."

He turned to the waiter for the couple of seconds he needed to say:

"Encore une coupe de champagne pour monsieur!"

This time, I was served with alacrity. He raised his glass with a warm smile.

"My shout. Allow me to apologise once again. You don't look at all like a backward adult."

The door leading from the lounge area swung open and a woman stepped onto the deck. She too was in her thirties but had less of them than the man next to me, for whom she was making a beeline.

"So this is where you're holed up. Christ, Jean-Pierre, I've been to every damn bar on the ship!"

Jean-Pierre? I looked at him, amazed. Sure, his French had sounded native, but his English, too, was impeccable. He spoke it with a BBC newsreader's accent, without a trace of Frenchness. For instance, he'd said 'twister' not 'tweester' and 'fucker' not 'fuckerrrr'.

"You're French?"

The woman, who was a little shorter than us and wore designer jeans and a tastefully matched white blouse, glanced at my Hawaiian shirt.

"Oh, he's French all right. But that's the least of his problems."

"That's my Helen, always the joker. This bloke here doesn't work, the lucky fucker. My partner, Helen."

I held out my hand.

"Pleased to meet you. Jim."

She gave it an honest squeeze.

"Pleasure."

I pointed to Jean-Pierre.

"How come your husband speaks such perfect English? I've never come across a foreigner who could do that."

Helen gave me a smile both wry and resigned.

"Oh, Jean-Pierre never does things by halves. With him, it's all or nothing. With everything. And we're not married, by the way."

She was definitely English, and probably wouldn't have made it as a BBC newsreader: her voice had a discreet but persistent London cadence to it. Jean-Pierre had taken advantage of our brief exchange to obtain his third kir; or was it his fourth? He nodded at the sea.

"Jim and myself were wondering when that arsehole of a meteorological phenomenon would fuck off and die."

She sighed.

"This year and the last, they've been popping up all over the place. Real pests."

We peered. The tornado had gone from being a piece of string to a single shivering strand of thread. The bracing gusts had

ceased to blow. Then the siren went off, sounding like an amplified fart. In the aftermath, I heard muffled instructions being shouted in French by sailors hidden away over by the bows. The deck began to tremble and the ship, to shift slowly out to sea. It was about then that an elderly man in a grubby white suit emerged onto our deck, crossed it at a hobble, removed his panama, and sat down at the far end of the bar. A thin layer of excessively tanned skin prevented his head from looking like an outright skull.

"It's good to be out of Marseille," Jean-Pierre said, nursing his drink.

"Too right."

Helen had ordered herself a beer. I frowned.

"What's wrong with Marseille?"

Jean-Pierre muttered:

"It's a city in which white French people avoid walking past brown ones by crossing over to the pavement opposite. All the time. Every day. So you can imagine who gets the top jobs in that city. And the middling jobs. Or even just jobs, period. And don't even mention the newcomers. From non-ex-French colonies in Africa. Or from eastern Europe. Those people don't stand a chance."

I came to the end of the second coupe.

"Is it really that bad?"

Helen swigged from the neck and nodded:

"Jean-Pierre hasn't told the half of it. It's only going to get worse, now that the second party in the Town Hall is the NSLF."

"The NSLF? I don't follow French politics."

Or any other kind. Jean-Pierre pushed another glass of champagne into my hand.

"Nous Sommes La France. Remember the Le Pens?"

"Of course. But they're ancient history..."

"Because they turned out to be too fucking moderate for this citizenry. People wanted something meatier, something they could really get their putrefying Gallic teeth into, and hey presto!, along comes one Célestine Buchard and her gang. They're still not very well known abroad, but here they've started to kick up quite a fuss. She makes the Front National look like, I don't know, Oxfam. Of course..."

Another snorted laugh.

"...at first everybody said they wouldn't get anywhere: too extreme, too uncivilised. And they're still pretty small, but as Helen just mentioned, they now have more than a few councillors in Marseille's City Hall, and in some other towns and cities, come to that. And they're running for the state elections in a couple of months. Remember how a few years ago, everyone was talking about the New Politics?"

That rang a boring bell. I nodded.

"Well, they're now calling Mademoiselle Buchard an example of *Renewed* Politics. Another example of the limitless capacity of journalists for inventing slang that'll be passé come the New Year."

He had a fresh glass in his hand. Helen was observing him. I broke in, feeling as I did squiffily at ease with these people.

"So what's their line? Islamophobic? Anti-immigration?"

Jean-Pierre's eyes widened and two clown-like spots of red rose up on his cheeks.

"First, let's sort out our terms of reference. Given that Islam isn't a race, 'Islamophobia' has only ever been a euphemism to justify hating dark-skinned people with the excuse that they might

be Jihadist arseholes, although most of them aren't. On the other hand, there've been not a few cases of blonde-haired, blue-eyed Northern Europeans who *are* Jihadist arseholes – they were probably arseholes anyway, period, long before they betrothed themselves to their vision of the Prophet - but nobody ever gave *them* any problems."

He raised a didactic finger.

"So it all boils down to race, in the end. The French have always been obsessed by it, but these days they're taking it more seriously than they do their fucking crêpes and wine. They're convinced –"

"Not all of them," Helen said quietly.

"A fuck of a lot of them, that their country has turned into an enormous Swiss cheese, with a wog or a dune coon or a yid or a chink or a Slav *untermensch* – to use their terms - ensconced in every hole, living the life of Riley while gnawing away at what's left of the French Way of Life. And it's no good telling my compatriots that we all come from Africa and that the word 'race' no longer deserves a place in the dictionary. The bastards have gone back nine decades, to the hard-line racism of that time, mainly anti-Semitic, as it was then, because Arabs or Africans weren't around in quantities large enough to hate yet. Back to when the Cagoule used to have fun blowing up synagogues, to when the police would dutifully pack Jewish orphans into boxcars."

Jean-Pierre paused for refreshment. Helen looked knowingly concerned. He nodded at her.

"Helen thinks I'm overdoing it. She thinks France is still a happy-go-lucky cradle of civilisation. I'm out to prove her wrong."

She humped.

"Or not."

He grinned at me.

"I have a little plan."

Helen tutted in my direction.

"A bad one, in my humble opinion."

"What plan would that be?"

She flopped a dismissive hand through the air.

"He won't tell you, it's his best kept secret, entrusted only to myself. But I can tell you this: all it's going to achieve is the stirring of even more shit. Pardon my French."

Jean-Pierre waved his glass at her.

"You're just saying that because you're Jewish. The lees of historical fear, dontcha know?"

The elderly man who'd plonked himself down at the far end of the bar looked up at us. No, at her. His eyes were brightly wide and a thin smile had drawn a line across his face. Helen, oblivious to this, grimaced at Jean-Pierre.

"Time for your early afternoon nap, I rather think."

He glanced at his watch.

"One more for the walkway to the cabin. You?"

I held out my glass. This time he simply nodded at the barman, who got our tipples ready in the twinkling of an eye. Helen handed the man her cruise card and said, waving a finger to indicate all three of us.

"C'est pour tout ça."

Her accent was almost as bad as mine.

"So," he said, when we'd both taken a new sip, "what did you do before you gave up doing it?"

I took a look at my bubbles.

"It's not exactly a success story."

Jean-Pierre looked mockingly at Helen.

"You're stirring I mean staring at a man for whom failure is a way of life. Please go on."

I raised my glass to my lips, then lowered it. Better to get it over with.

"If I wanted to be pretentious, I'd say I used to be an artist. But in the course of a twenty year career of daubing canvases, just five were displayed in a collective exhibition that lasted two weeks, too long ago to be worth remembering. I made ends meet by teaching art history in a preparatory school for bunch after bunch of upper- middle class kids whose pocket money was an insult to my salary. Year after year. All that's over now. Both my dire classes and my even direr pictures."

Jean-Pierre laughed in a way that put me instantly at ease.

"Art!"

He bellowed the word.

"Art!"

Ditto.

"We're all brought up to worship artists as if they were mysterious eminences, as if they had the key to some arcane treasure, and yet all they've ever done has been to tickle our eyes, and often not very much at that. All those fucking galleries – be they small, large or fantastically overblown - scattered around the continent like so many pockmarks in order that people can visit them because they've been made to feel they ought to. And yet, when you talk to all those endless spectators and start sorting the wheat from the chaff, that is to say, the ones who visit galleries simply because that's the cultured thing to do from the ones who really enjoy looking at painting and sculpture because it speaks to them and is alive, well, you'll end up neck deep in fucking chaff

and with enough wheat to make, I don't know, a small bread roll. You only have to look at the way art is promoted, either through subsidised exhibits in public galleries - used by governments everywhere so they can brag with patriotic idiocy about the haul of famous canvases they've managed to amass - or through private dealers who determine the worth of their goods by sheer guesswork: arbitrary prices for arbitrary tat, anything to keep the art market on its drearily even keel. I mean when was the last time you saw something really original?"

"Well, I don't..." I babbled.

"Never! That's when! Never! Useless installations, banal canvases, half-baked statues, all tucked away in those galleries which pay art critics exorbitant sums of money to write incomprehensibly hermetic catalogue texts simply in order to jack up the prices of the garbage on display."

He took a long, slow sip. For a moment, I wondered if this ranting of his was supposed to be tongue-in-cheek, but his eyes were serious enough.

"You know, when I was barely twenty and chock full of optimism, I used to think that if art was put into the street, if art was strung from the window sills and the lampposts, if art was as common as paving stones and kerbs and passing cars, it would give people's lives an edge, it would actually *do* something. But what has it done in all the years that have gone by since then? Fuck all! Art!"

After having had gallery doors slammed shut in my face for decades, after having watched the years pass (and pass!) with nary a break to assuage my frustration, I found his diatribe rather comforting. Helen touched him on the shoulder.

"Jean-Pierre..."

It was if she'd unplugged him: his shoulders slumped, his mouth became resigned, his eyes went tired.

"I know, Helen. My early afternoon nap. And then I need to file some copy."

He put his empty glass down on the bar. Helen shook my hand.

"Nice to meet you."

Then it was Jean-Pierre's turn to say farewell. But as he seemed in no hurry to leave, I asked him:

"What paper do you work for?"

He looked at the floor of the deck.

"It's only been going for a few weeks..."

He gave me an enigmatic little smile.

"...*La Tribune Gauloise*. They've printed out one of those poncy little cards for me."

He reached into his back pocket and handed me a calling card with his name, position ('travel journalist'), email and phone numbers. Out of courtesy, I said:

"I don't have a card, but please let me give you both my number, at least."

Helen took out her smartphone.

"Fire away."

The number taken and the farewell protocol over, they walked off. I looked around. The Mediterranean coast was sliding prettily past the port side. When I turned back to the bar, the elderly gent at the far end was looking at me, his almost-skull of a head cocked slightly to one side. That thin line of a smile was back on his face. Or maybe it had never left it.

"You meet all sorts on these cruise ships!"

An English upper crust accent, with the cracks of age in it. I didn't know what to say.

"Well, yes."

"I've seen that chap around. Rather partial to this vessel's dozen or so taprooms."

I smiled, warily.

"I gathered that."

"Didn't know his lady friend was of the Hebrew persuasion, though."

He said this with a humorous disdain I found, well, repulsive. I stopped smiling, flustered for a reply. I pretended to look at my watch.

"Time I got back to my cabin."

"I hear we'll be in Nice in time for *le five o'clock* on *le promenade des Anglais!*" he called after me as I strode to the nearest door, hoping he was noticing that I was ignoring him. Behind me, the jacuzzis finally burped into life.

II

Later that afternoon, we did indeed have a few hours in Nice. I trooped off the boat together with thousands of other people under a stunningly hot sun which I welcomed, mind, as it justified me wearing my aviator sunglasses and white designer sports cap, both recently purchased and itching to be donned. The Promenade des Anglais was busy with people whose exposed arms and faces and legs were damp with sunblock. I could still remember when the local Boots sold sun cream with a protection factor of eight. Now, of course, in places in the sun, nothing less than sixty would do. If you valued your life.

Breathing in the omniscient scent of prosperity, I stood for a moment in front of the Negresco hotel, with its flagged cupola and bright white walls, trying to imagine the hundred or so years of hundreds of lavish holidays it had hosted. It was the kind of place I would never have dreamed of going into before, but I could afford it now, even if they charged the price of a DVD deluxe edition box set for a Perrier. But I knew I'd feel uncomfortable just lounging in its lounge bar if I didn't have something to keep me occupied. I'd never been good at doing absolutely nothing, not during all those years of giving classes and filling canvases with stuff that was never going to cut the mustard; and not now that I'd 'retired'. Maybe that's why I never had what it took to be a painter: because I never took time off to stop and think. To *really* stop and think.

Up ahead of me, a group of fellow cruisers, identifiable from their on-board ID bracelets and the way they huddled together as

if stuck in an invisible lift, were examining the postcard stands at a kiosk. On the side of the kiosk closest to me the day's papers were spilling over their racks. A slim, tallish woman who hadn't yet hit thirty was browsing a copy of *Libération*. I walked over and flicked through the titles, stopping when I came across *La Tribune Gauloise*. The gaggle from the boat was moving on in their touristically ponderous way. When the gazelle-like girl put the newspaper back in its place I was surprised to spot the tell-tale ID bracelet dangling on her wrist: she didn't look like a typical cruise ship client, what with that untouristy light-brown dress of hers and, well, her solitariness. I dug into my trouser pocket for some change. She glanced at my Hawaiian shirt and I thought I caught her suppressing a smile as she turned to leave. I bought the *Tribune Gauloise* and made a beeline for the Negresco.

At first I thought of taking a seat on the terrace but then thought I'd stand less chance of running into the hordes of my fellow passengers – especially that elderly man, who was niggling the back of my mind – if I sat inside. Tourists never sit inside when it's sunny.

The indoor bar was as silent as a church and almost as empty.

La Tribune Gauloise had several different supplements, one of which was devoted entirely to travel. I separated it from the rest. A waiter dressed like a guest at a formal wedding appeared at my table.

"Un Bloody Mary," I said, frenchifying the English words.

"One Bloody Mary? Right away, sir," the wedding guest answered in an English almost as impeccable as Jean-Pierre's, a caricature of whom I recognised immediately at the top of what looked like a regular column in the travel supplement. He was

obviously a bit more important than the lowly hack he'd made himself out to be. The piece turned out to be a funnily sarcastic skit about his last port of call, Barcelona. But there was none of the vitriol of the kind he'd been spitting out on the boat, none of the sound and fury: apparently, he tethered his language when addressing the general public. The Bloody Mary arrived, and the first sip set me to wondering what the hell – what the *hell* - I was doing, sitting on my own in this five star crypt, reading stuff written by a drunk I'd just met on a boat too big for its own good. For a second, just the one, I wondered what Sally was doing now. Then flicked her out of my head and turned back to the newspaper.

In general, there seemed to be rather a lot of coverage of the woman whom Jean-Pierre and Helen had mentioned: Célestine Buchard. She (and her party) popped up in almost every section: *Actualités*, *Politique*... In *Société* a headline caught my eye, maybe because it was phrased as a question.

'WHAT WOULD YOU DO IF YOU WERE A NATIVE-BORN
LE RAYOLIEN?'

An inset map informed me that Le Rayol was a tiny municipality in southern France, half-way between Hyères and Saint-Tropez. For several months, the inhabitants, according to *La Tribune Gauloise*, had been complaining about the 'invasion' – the newspaper's word – of their commune by immigrants from an ethnic minority, the Mashubians, who came from a region shared between Ukraine and Belarus, called Severia. Severia? It sounded like a name out of a Tintin story, but my state-of-the-art smartphone revealed that Severia did indeed exist and even had a

capital of sorts, called Novhorod-Siverski, which sported an onion-domed church and a triumphal arch.

Unexpected droughts in Ukraine and Belarus, the paper said, had sent the Mashubians, along with many other eastern European minorities flooding (sic) into France and targeting (sic) small communities and setting up what amounted to ghettos (sic) there. They claim, so the paper claimed, to be fleeing hardship, but the fact (sic) is that they are increasingly disrupting (sic) the lives of the inhabitants of the localities where they choose to settle. And in the case of Le Rayol, they were also upsetting the tourists on whom the village's prosperity depended. I had finally realised that this new newspaper for which Jean-Pierre worked – what with its extensive coverage of a reactionary politician and this unpleasantly worded report - was nothing more than a right-wing rag, when, at the bottom of the article, in bold, I found this:

OUR READERS DECIDE: SHOULD THE MASHUBIANS IN LE RAYOL

- a) be granted a temporary residence permit? #leraycitoyens
- b) be allowed a work permit on the condition that they find gainful employment within a given period? #leraytemporaires
- c) be repatriated immediately to Severia? #lerayrepatriés

Please tweet your answers to @TribGau. The results will be published in tomorrow's issue.

Christ, these people had been facing food shortages! What did the staff writers of *La Tribune Gauloise* expect them to do, starve to death? Everyone knew the effect such sudden droughts could have: heaven knows there'd been enough of them in the last few years, sometimes in the most unlikely places. I looked around the

bar. At the few occupied chestnut tables sat people so self-assured of their own comfort, so sealed off in their well-heeledness, that thoughts of droughts doubtless never crossed their minds. The next sip of the Bloody Mary tasted bland. I put the paper down and waved at the waiter.

"L'addition, s'il vous plaît."

He took his time.

III

I'd forgotten that that night was the Gala Evening, during which everybody was supposed to converge on the Supreme Eatery – an immense dining area with chandeliers and oak panelling – wearing full evening dress. Sally had always found occasional formal dressing fun. Never saw the point of it, myself. As my glass-walled lift descended slowly to the cabin decks, I had a panoramic view of the main mall – that artificially lit array of pongy pizza counters and chromed-up ice cream parlours - along which women dressed in dresses with a sheen and carrying pointless pochettes and men in dark suits, white shirts and bow ties, were all ambling, not *quite* as proud as peacocks, in the general direction of flunkey heaven. When the lift was a just couple of floors above the mall I caught sight of Jean-Pierre and Helen walking with the flow, the pair of them dressed up like dogs' dinners. I knocked on the glass and they looked up. I gave him a what-the-fuck? frown. Jean-Pierre answered back with an only-doing-my-job grimace. Helen tipped a stuck out thumb in the direction of her mouth, by way of telling me her husband would be putting away a bellyful at dinner. I smiled understandingly: if I worked for that stupid daily I'd have been on the sauce too.

*

My cabin felt smaller than when I'd first installed myself, at Marseille. It was hospital clean. The bed had been swaddled tightly, as if to stifle any urge the sheets might have to wrinkle. I threw my copy of *La Tribune Gauloise* onto it and opened the

balcony window, sniffed the emptiness of the all but black sea, stepped outside and plonked myself down on the single white chair. The water was but a whisper.

I patted the chair's plastic arm. What a present I'd given myself. Two decades of marriage come to an end with a whimper, and you try to take it on the chin by purchasing a ten day trip on this, this....this barrel of canned laughs. All the time I'd been with Sally, I'd never imagined that this particular sadness – this blend of emptiness and loneliness I was now feeling - would be in store. I tried to make out the horizon. A waste of bloody time.

Once she had left and was from then on dead to me – and I to her – my head had started to fizz and pop as if someone had poured sherbet into my ear, and I wanted nothing better than to get away, to leave London and its large stock of Sally-related memories behind. I browsed holiday sites on the internet, and the ones promoting luxury cruises struck me as being just the ticket, enticed as I was by the photos of laughing couples who weren't *too* young; of the en suite cabins with their yellow, green and blue furniture; of the whirlpool spas, the tribute bands, the mini golf courses, the robot bartenders... All this tickled the froth in my brain pink. Fun, that was the only thing I could think of after twenty years of relationship. Which was crazy because fun was something Sally had been pretty good at. She'd always had a light, innocent feel to her, even when making love, even, for example, when she'd been on her knees spreading her buttocks expectantly. Before meeting her, I'd always been something of a moper, a bit of a grouch, a wet blanket, a plonker. Sally, now that I was thinking about her in front of that invisible maritime horizon, had offered me an easygoingness I'd never felt before. How could I have ever imagined that her absence would herald fun? Here I was, two days

into this supposed fun of mine and just the thought of the word was starting to squeeze two tears out of my self-pitying eyes. I wiped them away and decided to get something to eat. I slammed the balcony window shut and gave my yellow and green table a kick as I left the cabin. I took the newspaper with me.

I wandered over to what was signposted as the casual dining section, meaning you could stuff your face there no matter what the hour. I wandered amongst the offers. There was an apparently Japanese restaurant that was offering mainly Chinese dishes. And a German bistro that served nothing but a range of differently coloured sausages. In the end I opted for the Wet Gull Gastropub because unlike the other places - each of which had two or three lonely looking passengers tucking into their fare - it was utterly deserted. I sat down at one of the tables. In one corner of the restaurant, a screen showed that we were on course for the Corsican capital, Ajaccio. A smiling, bearded man in a red apron strode over with a menu.

"Welcome to the Wet Gull, sir."

I ordered the dish of the day, a hamburger called the 'The Simon'.

He grinned.

"Very good, sir."

His name badge – I noticed as he dropped the smile and turned away – had SIMON printed on it. I returned to the menu. One page was dedicated to the Wet Gull's international range of vodkas: over sixty, from the five continents. Even India and Pakistan, it turned out, produced their own vodkas, as did Korea and New Zealand, not to mention France. Which made me think of Jean-Pierre. Why wasn't he here? He would have a field day testing out this little lot. Then I remembered: he was with Helen

and most of the rest of the boat at the Supreme Eatery's Gala Evening.

My hamburger arrived. On top of the burger itself, Simon had placed a large slice of soft cheese whose goo was already oozing down the side of the meat. I opened the paper at a page I hadn't yet read, and took a first bite.

The door opened, something which amounted to an event in the customerless void of the Wet Gull. I wiped a goblet of cheese off of my lips. Blow me down if it wasn't the gazelle girl, still in her light-brown dress, still on her own. She had, I could now see, an attractively alert face and long, straight hair that was a slightly lighter shade of brown than said dress. She was peering about to see if the Wet Gull Gastropub was her cup of tea. She spotted me – I was, after all, the only person in the room – then did a double take. She narrowed her eyes.

"Haven't I seen you somewhere?"

I held up *La Tribune Gauloise*.

"We saw each other out of the corner of each other's eyes, at a newspaper kiosk."

That mildly humorous comment whose spontaneity surprised even me, seemed to put her at ease. She looked over at the bar. Simon wasn't visible. She turned back to me and in a confidential stage whisper, asked:

"What's this place like?"

She had an accent, but I couldn't tell which. I held up the menu.

"It's got more brands of vodka than you can shake a stick at."

She smiled at this turn of phrase I normally never, ever used and stage-whispered again:

"I meant the food!"

I pointed to my Simon and grimaced.

"You have a sample of it here. If I were you I'd hold the cheese."

Another smile. She took a couple of steps in and looked around again.

"I think I'm going to feel silly if I sit on my own in an otherwise deserted restaurant. Would it be OK if I sat at your table?"

Would it be OK? *Would it be OK?* I almost spat out a half-chewed morsel of my Simon. With what I hoped was unwolfish naturalness, I gestured at the empty chair opposite me.

"Be my guest."

She took the seat. I calculated about twenty-five, telling myself that there was no way, absolutely no way, that a woman as young and attractive and beautiful-eyed as this one could have any ulterior motive for sharing a table with an unprepossessing divorcee twice her age. I handed her the menu.

"What would you like to drink?"

I started. Simon had appeared at the table so fast he might have sprung out of a trapdoor. She looked at him:

"A Perrier, please. And..." She flipped open the menu. "A salade Niçoise."

"One Niçoise, coming up."

And Simon was gone. She looked at my Hawaiian shirt.

"You're not dressed up for the Gala Evening?"

"Or any other. I mean, why do people do it? Who in their right mind can think an evening is going to improve if they put on a bow tie and a dinner jacket?"

Simon served the Perrier and the salad.

"Enjoy."

And he was off again. She smiled at me.

"My sentiments exactly."

My heart fluttered and my crotch twitched. I tried to remember what it was like to be twenty-five.

"What's your name?"

"Jim. Easy to remember."

"And yours?"

"Raluca."

"Raluca? Where's that from, if I may ask?"

"It's Romanian."

I knew next to nothing about Romania, so decided not to say a word more about it.

"Forgive me for saying so, but you don't exactly look the cruise ship type."

She nodded, and swallowed some lettuce.

"I'm here to do some research."

Research? For a moment I wondered if anyone was on this boat just for a holiday.

"You're not a journalist, are you?"

"What? No. Sociologist. I'm studying social behaviour on cruise ships for my master's degree."

I feigned interest.

"At a Romanian university?"

"At the American University of Paris. I was lucky enough to get a scholarship."

She looked down at her plate then back up at me. For my part, I looked at her dark green eyes, bright with intelligence.

"You're not researching me, I hope."

She laughed. I felt flattered.

"No, although the solitary passenger *is* a recognised type on cruise ships."

A few minutes later she finished her salad. I sliced into my burger and blobs of cheese shot over the edge of the plate onto the tablecloth. I put down my knife and fork.

"I've had enough of this thing. Too much meat. Far too much cheese."

Raluca picked up the menu.

"I think I'm ready for something stronger. You said they had a selection of vodkas, right?"

She perused it.

"Wow! That *is* a lot of vodka."

She looked up at Simon, who had come to take our plates away.

"What would you recommend?"

"The Slovakian Double Cross is excellent."

"A double with lime."

Before he flew off, I added:

"And one of the Ukrainian ones for me. Neat, please."

"Certainly, sir."

People had been calling me 'sir' for about a decade. In front of Raluca, it made me feel self-consciously old. She frowned inquisitively.

"Are Ukrainian vodkas the best or something?"

"I've no idea, but I've got the Ukraine on the brain today. And Belarus too," I said, reaching for *La Tribune Gauloise*. "Ever heard of the Mashubians?"

I started turning the pages.

"Mashubians? Is that a type of animal?"

"Only for the editors of this paper. They're an Eastern European people hailing from Ukraine and Belarus. Look at this."

I handed her the paper opened at the article and the quiz. She read it properly.

"My God, that's disgusting."

Simon served our drinks.

"My sentiments exactly."

She raised her glass. I raised mine. The ensuing clink turned out to be the starting pistol for a long whirligig of a conversation washed down with vodkas from Belarus, Israel, Japan, Kazakhstan, Mexico, Mongolia and the Netherlands. We started by commenting on the quiz in the paper and went on to talk a bit about prejudice and racism and then we lightened up, laughing about the kind of people who went on cruises, which gave her a chance to tell me about all the other classified types apart from the solitary ones: the family groups, the old timers, the business people on junkets, and the couples trying to revive a wilting sex life on the high seas. I could have sworn that she slowed her speech when saying 'sex life' so that the two words, especially the first one, carried a weight they otherwise wouldn't have had, and no doubt it was because of that that we began talking about past relationships and where they'd gone wrong – although, as I didn't want to talk about Sally, I cast my mind back to the affairs I'd had before meeting her, such as they were – and this conversation entailed us talking in a circuitous way about, well, sex, which we went on to talk about in a less circuitous way, and finally in a surprisingly frank way until Simon appeared again to tell us it was closing time, lady and gentleman please. I was relieved that Raluca hadn't asked me what I did, so that I didn't have to tell her that I'd thrown in the towel and hung up my gloves. Perhaps, I suspected

from the enthusiasm with which she expounded her own past, current activities and fleeting thoughts, she was more interested in herself than in me. That struck me as being logical enough. My sentiments exactly. I stood up.

"Whoa! I think I might need a little help getting back to my cabin."

She gave me an I've-already-made-up-my-mind look.

"Please allow me to be of assistance."

