

Light And Dark

21 Short Stories

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To my family, who are above all things to me

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FOREWORD

Of these stories: I hope that some make you laugh, that others make you think or surprise you with their endings - but most importantly, I hope they all give you pleasure.

If they succeed in this, I will be one happy writer.

SUSPICION

Let me ask you this – was there a time when you couldn't believe your eyes? I mean, you *literally* could not believe what you were seeing? If there was, did your jaw drop or did you just rub your eyes and swear to yourself? I'm telling you now I did all three when I saw a certain guy push his wife overboard.

It happened so quickly, and he was so *natural* about it – murder being such a quaint, inconsequential thing, of course – that I felt I just had to be mistaken, right? One casual glance round, one quick motion to grasp both ankles, and a swift heave, and she was gone. Then, a turn and stroll along the windswept deck and – get this – an audacious nod and smile to the steward as he passed him, and he was away. The trouble with something like that is it's so outrageous it just can't be true - can it?

I know that it *can* be true, and although I was drunk, I was feeling just sober enough not to want to get myself killed – so I stayed right where I was, hidden in the shadow of a hanging lifeboat, the large, motorised kind with plenty of room that they always use on cruise ships these days (lessons learned from the *Titanic*, right?). I didn't detach myself from the wall holding me up till the man was gone – and I mean *well* gone. Then, I stumbled to the stern and peered over the rails.

I could see nothing in the water but waves, churned to a white hue by the thrust of the engines. The waves settled and quickly merged into the blackness of the Pacific - it was difficult to see anything beyond them. Even the dim light from a crescent moon didn't help, given that it was partially hidden by long threads of cloud being shunted along in the sky by the south easterly wind. If there really had been a woman she was gone, left swiftly behind in a cold, vast and indifferent sea. It was a desolate way to go and I began to quickly sober up and ask myself what I could do, and what I should do.

Ok, firstly – had I actually seen what I thought I had? I shook my head to clear it and ran my fingers back through the hair I had left, then massaged my temples with both hands. I came to the conclusion that I had seen it indeed. I closed my eyes and tried hard to recollect something that had happened only a few seconds ago, but that already seemed like a distant dream.

The night was warm. Of course, it is cold in Alaska, but in August, with the ship two days out from Ketchikan on the return down to Seattle on the US mainland, the air temperature was a tourist-acceptable 66 °F. The woman had been wearing neither a jacket nor a coat, and I had recognised the same belted, light blue dress with white stripes on that she had been wearing when she boarded with her husband seven days before. Her striking yellow hair had set her apart, and I recalled thinking at that time how it seemed incongruous with her middle age. They had seemed happy enough, but I guess I was wrong – one of them had been very unhappy for sure.

Two other questions struck me. You may think it odd, but the first one – *how the hell is he going to get away with this?* – arose before the second, which should have been the most important – *can she be saved?* I guess it was less than a minute from the moment the woman disappeared until that question entered my head, and it suddenly made me turn and look for that steward, though I knew that the cold shock of the water followed by hypothermia was just as likely to kill her as drowning by the time help could get to her. I saw him on the upper deck smoking an illicit cigarette - the end glowed red and amber and a wisp of white smoke spun upwards and was shredded quickly by the wind. I was about to raise my arm and yell, when I realised I was not alone – there he stood, the *devoted husband*, silent and still, not five feet away. He was looking at me curiously, although in as unconcerned fashion as you like, and though my blood temperature seemed to drop a few degrees and my stomach muscles tightened, I immediately tried to adopt his casual manner, then, deciding it was best to take refuge in my drunkenness, slouched against the rails.

"Whoa, you seem the worse for wear." He said this in a cultured west coast voice with an amused look in his eyes that I didn't really like, but which I pretended not to notice.

"Seasickness," I answered, though the sea was only mildly choppy.

"Possibly a martini or two as well," he laughed. "Although my wife does suffer from seasickness."

"Is she sick now?" It was a foolhardy dig. I was befuddled and scared, but, irrational as it may seem, I suddenly felt annoyed at his nonchalance.

He shrugged his shoulders. They looked large in his tight, lightweight navy blazer. He looked kind of generally out of shape, even for a late middle-aged man, but I knew that he had strong arms – you can't throw someone overboard in a single heave without them, I know that much.

"She's lying down in our cabin right now."

There, I felt that doubt creep up again. He was as cool as could be – surely, I couldn't be mistaken? But when I closed my eyes, I recalled that tiny cry of surprise – not fear, but surprise – that had come from her trusting mouth and that had dissolved into the night as its owner spun and tumbled downwards. I decided I needed to get to my cabin, not only to straighten my thoughts, but because I was afraid he would realise that I wasn't as drunk as I was pretending to be. For me, that wouldn't prove to be a good thing for him to know.

I muttered a good night, and he raised a hand and nodded as I made my way along the deck towards the centre of the ship. I opened the door to the stairs leading to the cheaper cabins below-decks and chanced a glance back. I immediately wished that I hadn't; although the deck was not particularly well lit, I could see him leaning casually against the stern rails, with the now uncovered moon floating behind him. His eyes were hidden in the shadows, but I could tell that he was looking directly at me. He was rubbing his chin slowly, as if pondering over something – I could guess what it was.

*

Sleep did not come easily, or the morning quickly. Tomorrow, there would be one full day of cruising left. I had a feeling that it would be filled with self-doubt and indecision mixed with an awful lot of anxiety, and accompanied by fear. I lay on my berth throughout the night, looking out of a porthole through which I could see little but dismal clouds passing by. It was probably my imagination that heavy footsteps occasionally stopped outside my door.

The cabin was small, making me feel oppressed – the one my wife and I had shared a few years ago had been larger, almost grandiose, in comparison. It was not the same ship, of course; this one was of middling size, and revisiting our last trip together was a somewhat bitter, almost masochistic reminiscence for me, because she had left me shortly after. But I had certainly not expected to be lying where I was, thinking of another man's wife and the possibility that he had purposefully killed her. I finally slept.

*

I was once told that no matter how bad things looked during the day, they look a hell of a lot worse at night. The reverse must be true of the morning because when I woke and saw blue sky through that same porthole and heard passengers conversing, seemingly without a care, as they made their way to an early breakfast in one of the diners, my concerns yet again dwindled to a kind of nagging doubt. In all honesty, I had no idea what to do. In any event, although I wasn't sure that modern vessels still had them, I decided that I was not going to hide away below decks like a rat on a ship.

I risked a look in the mirror and saw what I had expected to see after the night I'd had – a slightly jowly face of fifty-two, eyes somewhat bloodied, with dark circles beneath them. I admitted to myself, though, that I was used to seeing my eyes that way – wine drunk to excess tended to have that effect. I reflected that it had been my wife who had often driven me to it. I began to feel a kinship with that guy if his wife was anything like mine.

I showered, then dressed in fresh but un-ironed cream linen slacks and a white shirt, and brushed my hair. I remembered how it had once been, longer and abundant. I was disappointed but resigned to the fact that was no longer the case. Getting older is a bummer for us all, but I wasn't looking too bad. I left the cabin and headed for breakfast, pretending that nothing was amiss. It was only when I thought of the guy looking at me the previous night that I felt the occasional prickle on my neck.

The woman first spoke to me at the buffet table. She was young - but not too young -of an age when it isn't totally out of the question that someone as good looking as her would want to strike up a conversation. It was, after all, a cruise ship with over 800 passengers on board; people do speak to other people... don't they?

The thing was, I didn't think anything of it, and we conversed over croissants and coffee. She was interesting enough – and interested in me enough – for me to allow myself to forget the previous night for a short while, and when she suggested meeting for a drink that evening, I accepted. We finished breakfast and walked out on deck, where I watched as she sashayed away, dark-haired and slim – someone, somewhere, was a lucky guy.

For the rest of the day, I alternated between curiosity and apprehension, sometimes on a crowded deck – I felt safer around people – and at other times in my locked cabin, sharing a bottle of cheap Chablis with myself. I saw no sign of the husband.

The next day, we were to dock in Seattle after a round trip – Juneau, Glacier Bay, Ketchikan and then home. I wanted...needed... to see what would happen when we disembarked. I felt that I couldn't be wrong about what I had seen – but many people, including the crew and the passengers, had seen and conversed with both him and his wife on the journey. He'd said she was in their cabin, but he had to leave the ship – how could he do that without his wife? I put off deciding what to do until the following day.

My head swam, only partly as a consequence of the wine, and it had not cleared entirely by the time of my date, but I made my way to the bar that looked out over a dark, balmy sea upon which the ship fairly glided, as if it couldn't wait to get home to port. The woman sat at a stool with a vodka martini, and although the bar was crowded, she had saved me a place. A glass of wine – full, but not for long – awaited me.

I guess flattery and attention after being deprived of a woman's company for long is enough to turn many a man's head – and I don't except mine. She was fun, she was pretty. There comes a time in an evening when confidences flow along with the alcohol, and a couple of times, I almost told her what I'd seen the previous night. I stopped myself, but only because I didn't want her to think I was mad or a drunk, and at least one of these was true. In any event, we made progress on other fronts. We exchanged cell phone numbers and addresses, and promised to look each other up. It was the usual vague thing that vacationers say and do - if I'd been hoping, in my middle-aged head, for something more tonight, it wasn't going to happen.

We went out on deck, and I said goodnight and watched her walking away – it was a pleasurable sight. She passed a man nearby who was leaning over the rails, looking out at the sea. I did the same. I think it was my imagination, but I thought that I could see the distant orange and yellow lights of mainland US winking at us in welcome, although I knew we were still many hours away.

I looked across at the man, and it was *him* – he looked back at me. He was dressed smartly but casually, and I put his age at close to mine; perhaps, we weren't really so different - apart from the odd case of homicide. We stared at each other for a moment or two, and I felt he still had this slightly undecided air about him. He slowly walked away. I shivered and retreated to my cabin.

*

I slept better than the night before, perhaps because I knew that things were coming to a head. When I woke and went upstairs, our ship had wended its way through Puget Sound, and we were coming into Elliot Bay. The Port of Seattle looked, as you might expect, full of bustle; the long winded aggravation of disembarkation loomed before us. My luggage had been colour coded, and I waited up on deck for my group to be called. During my wait, I scanned the gangway on the designated lower deck fervently for the husband; I was certain he would have had a suite, which takes priority over single cabins when leaving the ship.

Well, my jaw dropped open, and I swore yet again – the guy seemed to have a habit of making me do that - when I saw him and his wife, with a carry-on piece of luggage each, mingling with the crowds as they pushed and shoved along with the best of them. Her yellow hair blazed in the sunshine, and she was wearing that same light blue, belted dress, or something very like it. There seemed to be something of a kerfuffle, and her husband was arguing with one of the stewards, but she swiped her cruise card to debark. It was only when she was jostled and she dropped her bag and lifted her sunglasses, the better to pick it up, that I saw it was my pretty companion from the night before – my jaw dropped even further. She looked up, and that feeling you get when you know something is inevitable hit me. She put her glasses over her head with her right hand and looked directly at me for a longish moment. Smiling, she pulled her glasses back down, nudging the man. He suddenly stopped arguing, and, with an angry gesture, he turned away from the steward, and the pair of them strode casually to the exit terminal. It was the last that I saw of them.

I certainly needed a drink. The interminable debarkation made me wait, which was just as well, because by the time I had claimed my baggage, I had decided to take a cab to *Bar Harbor*, a ten minute drive away, and finally think this one through.

I sat in the bar and ordered the most expensive bottle of Chablis that I could afford – a *Grand Cru Bougros* – filled a glass and raised it. Before I drank, I thought of my wife, whose behaviour had turned me into the drunk I was, and who had then left me because of it. I thought then of that guy who, for whatever reason, had taken his future into his own hands. All it had taken was a blonde wig, a blue

dress, a lover to wear them, of course, and a diversion at debarkation while she swiped the wife's cruise card with her own.

I drank to him. I wouldn't be telling, and not just because, cold blooded as it was, I couldn't judge him awfully for doing what he had done. Nor because I had a suspicion, and my grudging respect, that he had committed the perfect homicide.

Why then? Because that guy sure knows how to plan a murder. And now he has my address.