

## The Queen

Carla steps off the gangplank, leaving good old dry land behind. She crosses a lobby carpet patterned in giant hibiscus flowers and joins the sizeable check-in queue. Elsewhere in the room, clots of athletic men hang out telling jokes and ignoring their wives, who dutifully stand in line, cradling fancy, plastic-sheathed dresses. Like all the rest it appears, Carla has come to the Queen for a wedding. Otherwise, she would not set foot in this tourist trap of a docked oceanliner which, due to its Long Beach location and its catering to t-shirted capitalist jocks, gives off the distinct vibe of the anti-artiste. She hopes the ship's dress code will force these yapping neanderthals to shed their surfing shorts and baseball caps. She *hopes* the Queen has a dress code. She hopes the Queen has a bar.

But despite her initial misgivings, Carla becomes, soon enough, completely absorbed by the floating museum. Here she is strolling the old teak deck. Here, admiring the elegant brass in the bridge, shiny and spit-polished, as if the crew were about to file in any minute and send the command out in bells-- five bells-- for hoisting up all anchor. By the time she has finished the guided tour she feels fully suffused with the Spirit. On the Queen, romance is a given; it tinkles through the chandeliers and invisibly issues from smokestacks. What better place for a wedding! Indeed, Carla feels as if *she* could be married, and not just married someday, but married *right now*, this minute. When she passes men in the narrow hallways leading to her stateroom, she doesn't see assholes in shorts anymore; she is looking for her husband.

In this other life where she finds herself, surrounded by muted decor, it's a regular pastime to sail to Cherbourg put up in a room with a brass-rimmed porthole and teak paneling and a king-sized bed. Where you sit at the marble-topped vanity and inscribe notes to your future lover, while the current one lounges in the porcelain tub, his toes curled around faucets dispensing one's choice of sea or fresh water.

Carla! he will call. Did the maid bring my dinner jacket?

Darling, and here she looks up from her writing-- *my hands on your chest and your mouth*  
--Shall I get you a gin darling?

Lovely, angel, do.

Carla drops back on the bed and spreads her arms wide: she's an angel. She notices her feet seem slightly elevated from her noggin, that in fact the whole bed appears to be tilted up towards the end. She rolls over and hangs her head off the side, and sees that the floor also lists, meets the wall at a slightly acute angle.

Darling! she calls to the bathroom, Why is the room crooked? She hears a sudden splash as if she has wakened him from a doze. It must be because we are up near the bow, she says, is that right? Sweetheart?

Nothing. Or rather-- he acknowledges her logical prowess with silence.

Yes, that's got to be it, she thinks, and considers curvature. She brings the ship map to the bed and traces the elegant arc of the hull as it meets all thirteen decks. Perhaps it is something about the shape (along with the air trapped inside) that keeps Her Royal Highness afloat. All of her steel, her rivets, all of the engines, the catwalks, the decks, the doors, not to mention her luscious appointments, her room construction, her people, the appurtenance of people.

Appurtenance! Carla yells to the bathroom. And darling, what of the men? She leaps from the bed to the carpet, dynamized by the picture of the thousand men who built her from a single (brilliant) man's drawings.

Engineers! she cries, grabbing her overnight bag from the floor. Feats of engineering! She pulls out her makeup kit and begins to dig around for lipstick. Dearest, what do you think I should wear? Silence from the bathroom. Carla ponders silence.

So! This husband conveniently drowns, leaving her free to choose the teal-colored silk blouse. Free to go out and explore every *inch* of the great beached ship.

### Five pm.

A good place to start, as always, no matter where you find yourself, is the bar. And here on the HMS Queen, Carla has several to choose from. There is the Art Deco lounge all the way *forward* as the ship people say, in whose club she is now a member in good standing, poised as she is in the *forward* lounge on her streamlined deco stool, sipping a cosmopolitan, her eye wandering discreetly to the other folks in the room-- a couple, a man in a suit and tie, the band setting up for the evening-- then coming to rest for a while on the faded mural behind the bar. It portrays a lush sylvan scene, replete with the requisite nymphs and satyrs cavorting in flora and fauna and Greco-Roman columns and urns. Carla sips quickly and mentally reconstructs the painting to its original, sensual tints-- cardinal, cyan, cerulean, jade-- in order to remove herself from the bathos of a certain rock-n-roll era that is just beginning to be noxiously recalled by the two long-haired guitarists and their electronic drum machine.

Next stop is the piano bar *amidships*, a dark and stuffy, quiet place filled with cigar smoke (one would imagine, for once upon a time a man might smoke what he liked in a bar), and here Carla coquettishly hides in a recessed booth and imagines waiting for her husband to join her for a pre-dinner cocktail. She rolls a plump olive saturated in gin between her tongue and her teeth and then bites it, not feeling the least bit guilty for getting started without him. Darling, he will say when he comes, I'm terribly sorry to keep you. The blasted telephone call to New York took ages to be put through, and he'll lean his slickered head to hers and press his lips to her cheek, and she'll immediately forgive him because he looks stunning in white tie, and because the gin is starting to make a little happiness out of her stomach.

The magic continues, all lust-drenched glances and squeezes of thigh, until 'Loise, in a semidrunken fit of sincerity, confides to her gallant mate a little of her feeling.

Oh darling, she begins, when you're away for all those weeks, when I am alone in the house, I stare at things for hours, thinking of all the terrible things I've done, how far I've pushed you away. Sometimes I feel that I've lost you!

My dear, the dapper man smiles over his raised glass, You think too much. You do.

Maybe so, but I can't help it.

Of course you can.

But I'm saying, I think about my *life*. And what it's supposed to be, and by that I mean what I *want*.

He raises an eyebrow as if warding away a dastardly thought. Sweetheart, he drawls patiently as if speaking to a child, But we have so much already. It's terribly selfish, don't you think, to want more? He turns and lifts his hand to the waiter. Carla regards the back of his head, with the hair cut straight and crisp against the white fold of his collar, and her heart turns over, nearly capsizing in her chest.

Waiter! Bring me another! She yells to the server two feet away. Her husband turns to regard her.

You're drunk again, he says.

I'm not. It's just, you were late, and--

--You're no good when you're like this, he says, and pushes up from the table.

Where are you going now?

Never mind. Come find me when you are sober.

His back forms a lovely V-shape from his shoulders to the top of his tails, before it disappears, with the rest of him, into the dark.

Carla lifts the martini glass by its stem and upends it into her mouth, feeling the last dribbles of gin dissolving on her tongue. She is aware, at least for tonight, this is probably the last time she will taste anything with such precision. The waiter arrives and sets a full glass down in lieu of the empty. Then he too is swallowed by the shadows creeping in, starting just at the edge of the table. But inside the circle, in the realm of illumination, Carla's hands rest on each side of the brimming glass, and the light gathers up and beams azure through the liquid.

## Six forty

Carla's come to the Queen for a wedding, so visit the wedding she must. The ceremony is being held in a chapel *amidships port*, not far from the piano bar, but one floor above it, on the gala Sun Deck. Arriving late, she peers in the twin ovals of glass in the doors, her view hindered by ornate curlicue etchings. She can hear music playing, a lugubrious Irish tune. It might be the middle of the ceremony, or it might be the pre-procession. She takes a chance and pushes the doors just wide enough to creep in. Inside, she glances up shyly, and is stunningly met by the collective gaze of the *entire audience*, who are turned and staring fixedly in her direction. Panicked, she quickly assesses that the wedding party has all but entered, all in fact but the bride, whose entrance, it seems, is imminent. Someone, a man, snickers. Carla skitters off to a side aisle and slides into a pew at the back. Though her eyes are pegged to the floor, she imagines the glare of the group still trained to the top of her head. She feels at any moment she might break out in a wail. At last, the doors flap open, and the bride glides in atop her confectionary white lace gown. Some in the audience sigh. A few clap. Carla avoids catching her eye, thinking she will get a look that searingly matches the extent to which she's ruined The Entrance, the moment, according to legend, that should be a woman's finest. If she knew the bride better, the faux pas would certainly pass into a silly "remember when," but in fact Carla's a friend of the groom's-- an ex-lover and illustrator she dumped because she was tired of feigning interest in his cartoons.

Now the bride's father is giving her away, and despite the misogyny of the custom, Carla finds herself starting to cry. She takes out a pack of tissues; it will be this way for a while. A woman like her, who has been unlucky in love, can merely stand by and watch in amazement while two people make such heady promises to each other.

The ceremony stretches out to accommodate readings by family and friends. Sources here are all over the map: from Sappho to St. Paul, reflecting among the Catholics (and lapsed) a generational shift in appropriate devotional material. Here Carla can rest from her sniffing and

survey the other guests. She slides her bloodshot gaze over row upon row of blondes, the real ones in some cases looking slightly more fake than the bottled. A fairly conservative set of hairdos is on display, except of course for her own spiky thing: yellow with inch-long roots. Soon her eye alights on a lone red ponytail, curling down a black shirt. Silk, it looks to be, and the back underneath it decidedly male. He sits alone at the end of a middle pew, his eyes roaming, like hers, over the people listening attentively to the Song of Solomon. His skin is creamy and studded with freckles; a small tight smile trims his face. She watches the man watch the others, and something begins to uncoil in her bottom half, like a snake emerging from the rocks, from out of her winter-long sleep, to divine what the world might have to offer for a morning snack.

## Eight

All right now, what was his name? Carla tries to remember as she watches him neatly tossing off a Guinness. He sets the empty glass down, a creamy mustache of foam on his lip. Next, his tongue flicks out, a small triangle of pink, and she pauses, her wine glass poised in the air, to watch him lick himself clean. He looks up and catches her staring. Was it Conan? Clive? Some Irish name. Then he winks. He gives her an Irish wink, and his eyes crinkle up at the corners, just like they are supposed to. Her heart drops down to her stomach, and from there, a buzz spreads out to her limbs and she's forced to turn away to cover her blush. She sees the bride and groom standing arm in arm at a table of people; the groom says something and the entire group erupts into laughter.

Happy couple, eh? the Irishman says.

It's very impressive, this day and age, Carla says.

Dunno about that. Everybody gets married. It's staying together that's hard.

Not everyone, Carla says, and immediately wishes she hadn't. The Irishman looks at her teasingly askance.

What have we got here, a virgin? he says. You know, he says, patting her arm, there are very few of you left. She raises an eyebrow coolly, but once again she's betrayed by her blood, which rushes to her skin to meet his lingering hand. I'll get us another drink, she says, standing up and grabbing their empty glasses before she makes a genuine, priceless ass of herself.

While waiting in line at the bar, a woman she doesn't recognize runs up with a camera.

Susan! the woman yells to Carla, get in this picture with Bobby!

The man in front of Carla turns and looks at the camera woman.

Megan, what? he says.

Get in the picture with Susan!

Bobby looks around, eventually dropping his gaze to Carla. She smiles. He smiles back.

Nice entrance Susan, he says.

Why thank you Robert, Carla replies, playing along.

Maybe *you're* the one that should have got married! he says, then snickers meanly at his joke.

Put your arm around her Bobby! the woman shrieks. Which he promptly does, yanking Carla into his armpit.

Great, that's great you guys! The woman takes the picture and tumbles off in another direction.

Susan, Bobby says, you're looking *good*. You look so *different*. Yeah. I like your haircut.

Thanks. Can you buy me a beer?

You bet! As the line moves on, Carla jockeys herself from his grip.

So what are you up to these days. Still real estate? he says.

No, I'm an artist.

Sorry?

A book artist. I make books.

Books?

And some painting. I'm still painting a little. Installations. Sculpture. Found objects.

Boy. What happened to *you*? I mean--

--Guinness, Carla says to the bartender.

--I never heard of you *painting*. I never heard of *anyone* painting.

Carla sighs. How many weddings, how many conversations exactly like this?

Well hey it's none of my business, Bob says.

Doesn't this look yummy, Carla says, as she reaches to pick up the beer.

You'd better find yourself a guy who's *loaded*, that's all I can say.

Five, the bartender says. Carla imagines the pointed end of her shoe fitting snugly into the V at the top of Bob's pants.

Too bad I'm already married, she says.

Oh, I didn't hear.

No big extravaganza. Nothing like this.

Bobby sips his drink, his eyes drifting over the top of her head.

The bartender wants your money, Bob, she says.

Oh right, how much? He drags his attention back to the bar.

We're very happy, Carla says, to his back. She stands there a moment, staring at the fabric of his suit as it stretches across his shoulders, the thread of the seams almost visible, almost popping out of their stitches. It reminds her of her father, whose clothes had never fit. It seemed to her at some point he had existentially tired, and after that he just wore the same old suits, year after year. Like Dad, Bob here is likely an ex-athlete going to fat, and like him, he will probably die in the sudden clutch of a heart attack. For herself, Carla fears it will be more like how it is with her mother-- the slow, womanly decline of the broken heart.

She blinks and leaves the bar quickly. She goes back to where she left the beautiful redhaired man, and is considerably disappointed to find he's no longer there. She threads her way through the crowd with his loam-colored beer in one hand, her glass of wine in the other. The Irish band is playing a jig that starts slowly and progressively speeds up. People dance madly by in a blur of flushed, grinning faces. The bride careens around the edge of the floor

with a man who is not her husband, her skirt bobbing and swimming around her like foam at the edge of the sea.

Carla makes her way to the wall of windows at the rear of the ballroom. She sees the Irishman outside, on the deck. He stands with his back to the window, smoking a cigarette. He seems to be watching the sky, which is cloudless and losing its last hint of evening blue. Now he is lifting his hand. Behind her, the band has switched gears and is playing a weepy song about loss, something about a beautiful lassie falling into a well. Stupid girl, Carla thinks, looking out at the Irishman's hand, now pointing aloft, the cigarette gripped between index and middle fingers. She follows the imaginary line from his hand to a pole at the end of the ship, where a seagull quietly roosts. Calm and still as they are. And then she sees what he sees-- a crow swooping down from above for a diving run at the gull, barely missing its head. Each time the crow dives, the gull raises its beak to snap at it once, before returning again to stillness; each round of attack the briefest breach in the usual quiet.

The Irishman turns to look back, as if he senses her watching. His eyes crinkle up in his gorgeous smile when he sees her. She raises the pint of Guinness and he nods and salutes her beneficence with his smoking fingers.

### **Ten thirty**

A few drinks later, it is an easy job for Carla to lure the Irishman out of the ballroom. The two of them pause outside, in the hallway. Inside, the party still rages.

The band is pretty good, the Irishman says.

How many beers have you had? she says.

Don't know. It seems I've lost count.

Carla nods down the hallway. We could go that way, she says.

We could. And where would that take us?

Adventure, maybe, she says. Something new.

I'm supposing you have a room?

The word is *stateroom*, she says.

Oh yes? Is that the word?

His Irish accent makes her want to drag him into the nearest place. A closet. The ladies' bathroom.

Shall we do the Queen, she says. He looks at her, and grins; a flash of irresistible twinkle.

Oh I should *say*, he says. The old gal could use some doing!

So invited, Carla grabs his tie and tugs and they move away together. The crimson carpeted hallway eats their steps thickly up into silence. If someone were to watch from the doorway, they might see the redhaired man place his hand on the blond woman's ass. But nobody is watching. Inside, the music will travel from Irish jigs to American disco and the bride will dance with all of her guests until the ribbon at the back of her dress unties. At some point, the dress will fall from her shoulder to expose one pink-nippled breast. Which event all the guests will recall. They will not recall having seen the spiky blonde and the Irishman leave together, or to remember having noticed the two of them at the wedding reception at all.

## Midnight

They pause on some under-deck, having lost count of the stairwells. They breathe the stale air trapped between gunmetal walls and ceiling. Before them, a black door is stenciled NO ADMITTANCE. Imagine their surprise, then, when they push at the door, it opens, and they enter a room with a pool. O'Brien? O'Malley? McSwain?, who's been grumbling for the past while to go back to the party, quite suddenly shuts his mouth. A water-blue ceiling lifts high above them and the pool yawns empty below, its aquamarine tiles set off by vermilion benches and mouldings and doors. A stainless steel slide replaces a diving board as the launch to the

void. Behind the slide, on the wall, a red-framed window opens into a narrow room where fat white towels are stacked in perfect squares on the shelves. Waiting for wet hands.

Wow, the Irishman says and in this vacuous space the word becomes airborne and takes a long time to die.

Shhh, Carla rejoins, like a hundred snakes hissing. She is stunned with dread and excitement. This place, out of all the Queen, out of all the redolent past one can feel swelling up from her decks and her brass and her long deep hourly hoots, is where time seems to come to a point. A point of entry, perhaps. A gateway to *the dead*. Carla steps out of her high-heeled sandals and lets herself down one of the steel ladders into the empty pool. The corrugated steel steps make small impressions on the soles of her feet.

Wish I brought a camera, he says.

It's as if they never left, she says.

Who? he says, and then, Look! This tile is marked with a royal seal. He kneels, inspecting the edge.

Carla lays back on the floor of the empty pool. The tiles are old and some of them broken and jutting into her spine. As soon as she closes her eyes the drunken sideways sliding begins, but it's not too bad yet, so she rides with it for a while. Every heartbeat sounds in her ears as if being flushed from a long distance.

What is that sound? she says. She hears, or thinks she hears, an almost sub-audible vibration. Feels it, more than hears it, through the ground, or her body, or both... as if she were feeling their traces, their leftover energy imprints... the people? The children, who held their breath and dove, kicking themselves to the bottom, to find a quarter's glint on the tile and grab it and shoot to the air. The children, the boys, of course, the pigtailed girls, the fathers standing in the shallow end launching kids from their shoulders. The mothers sitting poolside, pale skin welling from the margins of swimwear. Darlings! they call to their children. Come come, we must dress now for dinner!

Oh I can hear the people, Carla says. I think it's the people I hear! She starts, feeling a

touch on her leg, and opens her eyes. He is squatting, his freckled forehead inclined, watching his own hand slowly pushing the skirt up her thigh.

Yeah, he says, it's the party. Shakin' their bums at the party, must be upstairs. She listens, her heart beating faster. The blue ceiling squeaks as if supporting a thundering herd. He's right. He's definitely-- Oh. Yesss, she says aloud, and the sibilant snakes return.

Right. Good, he says. Her eyes are beginning to burn.

You took off your tie, she says.

Yeah I did a long time ago.

But I love you in white tie darling.

White? It wasn't white, he says and that is the last thing; his lips, his tongue pressing into her mouth and she hears, perhaps some laughter, away, and yes, he's right, whatever he does... is right, and who is this man, her husband? whose face is somewhere over her shoulder now, his tangerine hair sweeping her neck; then she hears, and while the tiles cleave into her back, she turns her head, and laughs a little to hear it under the salt tears raining down from the ceiling, the thundering herd pounding over the ceiling, at every wedding they play that song!, the song that commands you to *Cellll-le-brate* good times, *come on!*

### **Three am.**

On the edge of the listing bed, Carla steadies her drink in her hand and tries to recall why it slopes upward--the bed, that is-- but she can't. They have done a pretty good job on the minibar in her room. This is after the Pool and what's a person to do after the Pool but drink? She took him on a tour of the bars and now they are here and enjoying the tiny bottles of Stoli and gin and merlot from the recessed cupboard. The Irishman stands across the room, in front of the porthole. The streetlights of the city shine turquoise and amber behind his head. Where are we anchored now? she asks herself. Is it Rio? Sevilla? New York? Or could it, could it *possibly* be the Long Beach fuckin' harbor? Carla touches the tip of her tongue to her

nose and tries to remember his name.

The pants are down at his ankles. The dick pokes out from between the tails of his shirt. He braces one hand on the marble vanity top for support. When he laughs, which he is doing right now, Carla sees his lips and teeth are stained purple from drinking wine. She watches him whack off before the emerald lights and the porthole. Every now and then he yells out something-- Christ!-- in his Irish accent.

Where did you say you lived? Carla says.

Christ! Ah sheet come on, he says, and groans, then laughs, then snorts.

Can I come over your house ta visit?

Mother a god I can't get me a woody!

What's wrong w' that one there?

Ah Christ we ha been drinkin', we ha been drinkin' a bit tunnite.

Come over. Commover here and siddown.

O yeh? Awright. O yeh?

He minces to the bed-- bound as he is in his pants-- and waggles his strawberry eyebrows. She tries to laugh but somewhere inside she is stone cold sober. It always gets to this point; when you come around to the other side of drunkenness while you are drinking. When your body has minimal motor control but your mind is suddenly sharp and clear and sees straight through to the void. You want to be asleep by this time. You want to at least have stopped drinking. But really you want to never have started, you want to have never been born.

Carla? Darling? she hears a voice and a splash from the bathroom. Oh thank god, she says. Thank god!

That's right, the Irishman says, put yer pretty face rightere! Indigo-grinned, he tries to shove her head into his crotch, but she rolls away and falls off the bed with a little thud.

Whatsa matter, he says, where ya goin ya stupid cunt. Ha! I didn' mean that. No, I didn'-- jeeza god I'm pissed-- O now, where a ya goin'?

She closes the bathroom door and locks it behind her and slides on her knees to the bath.

Darling, darling, you're back.

I never left, he says. I've only fallen asleep, look here at my skin I'm a raisin!

Carla doesn't bother to get undressed, simply slides in the tub belly first like a crab and yanks on the faucet. Water sprays and the two of them scream. It'll warm up in a minute she says, lying full length on her husband, wrapping her arms around his neck and kissing him as if from the very depths of the base of her spine.

Do you feel that? he says.

Yes, I love you too, she says.

No, that shaking, you feel it?

What shaking?

You must be terribly cold, he says, his arms tightening around her. And indeed it feels as if the porcelain itself has begin to shudder.

Oh! We are under way! she says. That's it, we are finally under way!

At last, the voyage begins. The Queen abandons her harbor and enters the open sea. Soon, the couple will make her decks and watch breathlessly, arm in arm, as the last shadow of land disappears from the blue horizon. They'll wonder aloud if the mystical constellation of their union may somehow be in league with the vastness of the sea. They will raise their glasses, and chant-- as if to bewitch the moment to last forever-- *We shall steam ahead, to the last! To remarkable destinations!*

### Three twenty

When the Irishman finally succeeds in forcing open the door, he finds this: the girl lying prone in the tub. Cold, cold water overflowing the tub, cold water spilling the sides and immersing the floor and soaking his black-socked feet. And she, lying face down, her canary hair streaming out of her head like a mermaid or a medusa.

Jesus! he cries and rushes in and lifts her, sloshes her out of the tub by her armpits and drags her out, slipping and pitching and sliding over the wet tile floor. He falls before he can get out the door and the two of them go down together. Her head smacks on the sink. Fucksake! he yells, taking her by the shoulders, trying to sit her up, and now she has started coughing, spitting up warm acidic water all over his face and shirt. He begins to shake her roughly.

What do ya think you're doin! What were ya doin in here! Ya stupid--! The girl bends over and heaves onto the floor. Someone bangs repeatedly on the wall in the next room.

God dammit woman! Are you insane? he says.

Ohhh... she tries to speak, her face pressed to the bathroom rug wet from the spill and the yellow bile from her stomach.

Quiet now. Sheet. You're going to be all right. He reaches behind them and turns off the running faucet. He helps her up and out to the room. She stops before reaching the bed, and kneels, then drops her head to her hands. She looks as if she might be praying to Mecca, except for the coughing.

M'zahr, she saying. M'wedthnrruun...

Shh, quiet now.

M'weddthrun! she says louder, swinging her arm from under her body, the wrist cocked to display the fingers, like some kind of mutated bird.

Oh, are ya flippin me off now! he says. Is that the thanks I get!

She turns her head and rests her cheek on the floor and with a great effort and in between coughs she says loudly, Wedding ring'z gone... M'sorry... down the drain I think it-- oh, m'sorry, our ring! She folds her hands up next to her face and blubbers into the carpet.

The Irishman mutters, Mother a' god, and leaves her, goes to the open porthole. He lights a cigarette. Outside, it is barely dark, not because it is near morning so much as it's never dark in the city, even here on its very edge. The ocean air flowing in is cool, but nearly undone

by the smell of the harbor-- industrial waste and carrion. Nothing like the smell of the sea back home.

Earlier that night-- what seems like years ago now-- she led him, through many forbidden doors, down and down to the very bowels of the ship, until they stumbled upon the cavernous pit that had once held her engines. The machinery had long been taken away, and it was just a big empty hole, with catwalks criss-crossing the space like train tracks over a chasm. The place was spooky, and dark, and made him think about rats, but the girl got very excited and started chattering on about finding something there to put in her artwork. He had to stop her from running up a ladder leading off to some dim nether region. She stood with him after that, and shivered, and said sad, poetical things about the once great Queen who'd had her essentials stripped away, her power of movement riven. She stared into the pit, and it seemed to him as if a part of her had left to join with that darkness. He wanted to kiss her then, to touch her, to bring her back, but the feeling was so sudden and strong that it scared him and he did nothing. He just stood there and breathed the stale air that smelled strangely of earth.

The Irishman tosses his cigarette out the window. The streetlights' reflection on the water is so perfect and still, it might be part of the sea. Well what do you know, he says. It seems this boat's goin' nowhere.

He glances back at the girl. She is sitting up, watching him. She starts to say something, then shakes her head briefly. She raises both hands and covers her mouth with them, one on top of the other.

All right, now listen, he says, and goes to her on the floor. You can stop this cryin, all right? Get up. Come on then, dear! Let's get out a' those wet clothes. He kneels beside her, and gently loosens her hands from her face. Their grip has left a rosy mark on her cheek, which he touches with his fingertips. As soon as her hands are free, she launches into his arms.

Now look, what's all this about! You're a crazy wench, you know that? He laughs and clutches her tight. They rock like kids for a minute. Then he presses his mouth to her neck, and tastes the salt and wet of her skin, and feels the soft curve of her giving way underneath him.

