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THE SECOND WIFE

The true act of mourning is not to suffer from the loss of the loved object; it is to discern one day, on the skin of the relationship, a certain tiny stain, appearing there as the symptom of a certain death.

... Antoine Compagnon ...

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Every day at sea is the same for the Second Wife. *Who calls me that?* she asked the master. *The chinese crewmen, does she like it?*

Two years back in Hongkong, taking a barge – from the ship at anchor in Victoria Harbour – to Kowloon, a passenger making conversation, or perhaps voicing his wife's gossip, questioned the master, *Your wife?* After a moment of hesitation, the master spoke clear and loud, *As close as possible to be.*

Second Wife explained nothing. She disappeared after dinner each evening and was not seen until breakfast. Mornings she sat in a deckchair reading and promptly at eleven-thirty swam with the master in the swimming pool for a half hour. Afternoons she vanished once more.

Up there she goes, the one armed man gestured toward the bridge, *up to his cabin.*

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This trip Second Wife travels as the master's guest around the coast of New Zealand. There are no other passengers. The ship has carried bananas from Colombo, where the smell of cocaine hangs thick on the air, where you watch your back, keep your cabin locked, portholes closed, and never go ashore. You can be knifed to death for five dollars, the master told Second Wife, and prostitutes hire a boat to shout their wares alongside the ship at anchor. Two crewmen picked up syphilis, he said, and the joke is we have picked up a new cargo besides fish for Japan – Kiwi Fruit. Is that funny, she asked. The master roared, Kiwi fruit is another name for

Chinese Gooseberry. Sometimes when he tells her of sealife it makes her skin prickle. Water is precious, she has to restrict her showers.

Second Wife sits on the green lounge in the master's sitting room dressed as one who waits for a friend to go out with; a movie or lunch perhaps; only of course there is nowhere to go on a cargo ship. At ten am already her neck feels tense. Yesterday she read too much, today her eyes are puffed and itchy; that meant conjunctivitis. When the heated quarters become unbearable she paces the deck alongside the engine-room. The boom of the engine makes it unpleasant however. Second Wife prefers a cargo ship that takes a small number of passengers. As a paying passenger she has freedom to roam. And ... it is not easy to live a family life with no chores to do. If she makes the bunk she runs afoul of the master's steward. Nothing said, but he always resmooths the quilt, retucks the corners.

She stands and looks out the porthole. *Good girls don't go out with sailors*, she can hear her mother saying it. At fifteen Second Wife met a sailor – he had a tattoo as well which shocked her – at a swimming pool. She was wearing her white play suit with the red buttons, bare midriff. *Meet me at the pictures*, he pleaded, *I'll be gone tomorrow*. Mad to see him, she lied to get out, was found out and faced the consequences after.

Second Wife often stands at the ship's railing watching the waves. She takes deep breaths, knowing her destiny is here on this ship. Her grandmother had been very fond of sea voyages too, until she married at thirty. She had a tray full of rings. Second Wife wondered about the rings which had never been spoken of until recently. Grandmother left home at fifteen. She worked on the goldfields and was right in the thick of the action around the late 1890's. She married Second Wife's grandfather (a butcher) on the rebound ... from what? A love affair with a naval officer? Second Wife wishes her grandmother had not died so young. She would like to talk to her about a few things.

The front deck is clear. The containers were off loaded in Auckland. The bow dips and the master crosses the deck with the first officer. They laugh and joke. The master's sense of humour is admired. Second Wife says, *I am a sailor's girl*. The master grins, *That is not too bad, isn't it?* Second Wife does not correct his English. After all these years she has become used to it.

She keeps her cosmetics in the top drawer of the bureau next to the bunk. They both appreciate the double bunk. He was chief officer of an old ship when they first met and both remember six weeks of cramming into a single bunk. But nothing could have prised them apart. He turned, she turned. Sex was miserable. It took a year to come right, and then with

unexpected loveliness; they had after all decided it did not matter. *It turns out we are both nervous people*, the master said. *Were nervous people*, Second Wife corrected. Everything was so wrong; they were both married, of different cultures, oceans between their homes. Only being together felt so right. After that first voyage she left her husband and home.

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“So-or, you took a chemest shop vit you,” the master watches with interest as she unpacks.

He fingers an earring, examines it.

“Give me a drawer then, and by the way, your sarcasm has improved since you’ve been writing to me ...”

He keeps his things neat. There is room for hers. All in together. With nervous fingers Second Wife presses creams, lipsticks, powder and pins into a tidy bunch, “Shipshape,” she whispers to him away somewhere, running the ship, then to the mirror, “The sacrifices I make for you Captain Larsen ...”

Meals are painful. The chief engineer who sits opposite Second Wife tries to tell jokes in terrible English. He wishes to shovel the Storm soup followed by hunks of Rye bread into his mouth with rough abandon. He has beer before lunch, it makes him ravenous. Second Wife smiles assuredly at lesser crewmen who come and go, sit at other tables. They do not acknowledge her unless she speaks first. Uncomfortable, she wants to have her meals in the cabin. “Cannot,” the master says, “the galley staff would go on strike. Pretend the other crew are not there, they don’t notice you ...”

“That’s just it, because they say nothing ... they don’t acknowledge me because I am an embarrassment.”

“You are not an embarrassment,” he says patiently.

“Well just how often do you have a stray woman on board?”

“Ho ho ho ho!” Second Wife joins in his laughter. The master is a quiet man, speaks little. He knows all about people. The Grand Passion, a friend had said, tongue in cheek. What happens when his ship stops coming to Port Melbourne?

While her friend struggled through the tedium of marriage, Second Wife knew her relationship with the master was absolutely perfect, enabling her to say with stately calmness, *He will find a way*.

On shore she and the master take long walks, mountain climbing, he likes that. At sea, nights, they read, sitting across the room from each

other. Sometimes she raises her eyes to catch him watching her, and likewise he. Reading in the same room undisturbed by another's presence is a rare pleasure. Second Wife regards solitude as precious. Being with others socially chips away at her. Being with the master was like being with herself. He took nothing from her.

Second Wife is drawn to the bureau drawer. Both her own letters and his wife's are in the drawer. Not together. The letters, secured by an elastic band confront each other across a chasm of studs, epaulettes with gold stripes in khaki and dark blue serge, a gold biro in a case and a photo album. Second Wife has already seen the framed photo of the master's wife, Ingrid, which he has – for this trip at least – placed face down under her letters. Second Wife has grown used to that face – photographed at least fifteen years ago – and knows it lives on the bureau when the master is at sea alone.

Second Wife's photo is in the drawer too. No frame, face up to one side. The photo is posted back to her when the master goes home to Norway on leave. Too dangerous to take it with me, he writes.

And how do you feel about that? her psychiatrist had asked. It was in the early years when Second Wife was adjusting. *How do you feel when he goes home to her?*

She feels noble, somewhat martyrish, she decides. She tells him she can handle that. He really only goes because of his two young sons. She would not be able to respect him if he deserted them. And Second Wife's status is after all, just that, Second Wife.

Ingrid's letters are in her hand before she knows it. There's a wallop across the heart as she sees how dog-eared they are compared with her fresh, untouched looking bundle. She slips one of hers from its envelope. The pages look surprisingly fresh.

The master and first officer are not in view through the porthole now. She closes the drawer. Awkwardly, against her will, she brings up a knee and hoists herself onto the bureau. She does not expect this of herself, no she does not ... by craning her neck through the porthole she sees them talking to the electrician directly below. Clambering down, she winces as her knee catches on the drawer handle.

Second Wife takes one of Ingrid's letters and studies the writing on the envelope. Fluid, rhythmic, Ingrid's hand is controlled, unlike her own which lacks continuity. When she sets out to constrain the broken loops, the see-sawing letters, she succeeds but something is lost in spontaneity; she mourns at the end product. But the master enjoys her impulsive nature. Characteristically he does not indulge in criticism, and

perhaps it was not, when he said last night, "Sometimes you open your mouth before consulting your brain ..."

More surprised than wounded, and in reflection, Second Wife concluded his outburst vindicated the old saying: "And by the pupil the master shall be taught". She felt cheated and wished she had been clever enough on the spot to point it out. Instead she prattled, "Yes, but it works to your advantage. My brain, my scatter brain allows me to step over boundaries ..."

But the exchange has unnerved her. Cryptic question marks hover in her mind, like blemishes that appear overnight on a milk and roses complexion.

And what had she said to deserve such a pasting? Ten hours later and she cannot remember. Shows how important it was. She takes Ingrid's letter from the envelope. Would they have been left so open to scrutiny if written in English? Glad they are not she overcomes a violent impulse to tear all the letters into tiny pieces and shower them through the porthole to fall like confetti onto whoever was below. The incomprehension of those bovine faces! She can just see them, the master, the chief officer and the engineer skidding over the decks on a mad paper chase. It would be years before the last shreds of Ingrid's letters stopped turning up in odd places ...

The salutation reads, 'Elsklungen min'. Darling Mine! Well fancy that!

My wife is a cold woman, she would be happy if we lived as brother and sister, the master had said on that first trip. Sitting on the side of the bunk swinging his legs gleefully, *If she could see me now ...*

Elsklungen min is an endearment Second Wife knows well. From common usage, she mouths, from a lot of common usage. She looks for other words she knows. It is hopeless. She throws the letter aside and snatches the photo compendium from the drawer. Second Wife holds it to her nose. Leather, valued items inside. She flips the plastic holders; the boys, a sulky looking Ingrid with a spatula in her hand cooking pancakes on a flat grid. Not a bad figure, bags under her eyes.

The ship's engine hums at eighteen knots. Second Wife feels her teeth tingle, her limbs float lulled by the dip and roll underneath. Her trembling fingers say stop, if this elegant wood panelled cabin is a tabernacle, stop before you read it.

Tucked into the last plastic sheath: Ingrid, wearing a sun frock and sandals, the master in shorts and tee shirt. The Greek islands, they took a family holiday there on his last leave. The boys wanted to go, he said.

They sit close to each other like a honeymoon couple, saturated with sun and smiles. Ingrid's hand is on his knee.

Second Wife hears the master enter the office; hears the steward clink cups and smells coffee, the clunk of the tray on the sitting room table. He sits down on the bunk beside her and whispers softly, "It's coffee time ..." Second Wife closes the compendium, folds the letter and places it in the envelope before looking at him. He lifts his lower lip in a mouth shrug and lowers eyes to hers.

"You knew I would," she says.

"Vel, does not matter, Elskingen min ... "

"I think you should find another name for me."

"Okay, Looks for certain I'm getting in trouble?" his voice is deep with fun.

Second Wife sits quietly on the green lounge while the master pours coffee. He sips his coffee and looks at the carpet.

"We have a saying in English," she says.

"Oh ya ... "

"I wondered if you had it in Norsk too ... we say, when you have nothing to lose you can afford to be generous."

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