

Woman behind Man

RETURNING FROM HAMBURG, ON BOARD THE SS ALASKA, he proposed marriage. There was an approaching storm at the time, and it peaked to gale force eight. Patches of foam covered the surface of the water, with airborne spray seriously reducing visibility. Her red hair was shining as brightly as the ocean, but it was so short that the wind could not lift it softly as he would have wished. Even then he was thinking about the fragility of blondes. The ship was suddenly enveloped in a green haze that seemed to come from beyond the sea. He could have sworn he heard music playing in the background.

She lived in Twickenham, and he lived in Leytonstone. They would meet for supper and later go to the theatre. At a young age he was already overweight, but then he liked to eat vast quantities of food. And now they were together, on board a large passenger ship travelling in rough seas. This was the first time they had not been chaperoned, and certainly the first time they were surrounded solely by strangers. They were trying to write a script about someone who inadvertently kills another person.

With a storm on the way, both Al and Alma became dangerously seasick. She threw up within minutes, but he was able to hold on. He climbed up to the bridge where he thought the fresh air would help, and breathed in and out very slowly trying

to hold in place the contents of his stomach. The many seagulls screeched eerily as the ship came close to land, and the cliffs appeared to greet him as giant and intimidating sculptures. He then went through the list of food he had just eaten, and decided that it would be too high a price to pay if it were disposed of in a violent and nauseating manner: caviar and vodka, followed by mushroom soup, lamb with mint sauce, peas, potatoes, gravy, followed by brie and crackers, and then raspberry ice cream with pineapple. The dinner had ended with coffee and liqueurs.

“One day,” Al said, “we’ll have dinner parties at our house, and we’ll invite famous actors. And when we do (notice that I say *when* and not *if*), we must serve them exactly the same meal that we had tonight. This will be our very special homage to what we’re going through right now. For if we survive tonight’s horror together, then we’ll be able to survive many other horrors as well!”

“Real or imaginary?”

“Is there a difference?”

The waves became vertiginously high, the surface of the sea turned white.

“What if I say no to your marriage proposal, Al?” she asked when they were back in the ship’s restaurant, sipping a cup of tea that had to be held tightly because of the serious swaying.

“Dearest Alma,” he said, taking her hand and kissing it softly, “without you I’d probably end up as a waiter on a floundering ship. So what is it to be?”

Her wide eyes gave away her reply. He was trembling so much that his lips seemed to be saying words unpronounced. She decided that it had less to do with his future responsibilities as a husband, and more with the impending storm.

“It won’t be as terrifying as you think!” she said to make him feel better.

“The marriage or the storm?” he replied with tears in his eyes.

Even then he could not help feeling like an innocent man accused of a crime he had not committed.

“Are you that frightened of thunder?” Alma asked.

“I’m a coward!” he admitted. “On the subject of fear, I’ve the lowest threshold. If only we could dump all my anxieties into the waves, like a burial at sea.”

“Remember I’ll always be here for you,” Alma replied to appease him.

Al could not stop staring at the waves. In fact, he seemed to be entirely hypnotised by them.

“Look at the sea, the terror of it, the menacing obliteration!”

“Again you’re exaggerating, Al!”

“It may be exaggeration to you, but to me it’s just a way of life!”

The storm never materialized, but anticipating it was a harrowing experience for Al. Watching him sink in a corner was even more harrowing for Alma.

“There’s some value in anticipation. It creates conjecture, doesn’t it?” she asked.

“I’d call it impending horror”, he replied. “I’m convinced that thinking about what may happen will stop it from happening!”

“That’s highly unlikely!”

He smiled and breathed deeply in and out before answering, thinking solely of keeping down the food.

“Well, it certainly worked this time!”

By the time they got home the script was finished. It was the story of a

woman driving a car and killing her passenger without having planned it. And yet that death was the most convenient thing that could have ever happened to her. And yes, it would be a story with plenty of blood.

“Do you remember the storm at sea?”

“You mean the storm that never materialized?”

“You could say that it didn’t happen, but to me there were a hundred, a thousand storms. Each one of them so very different, each one with its own set of circumstances and tragedies. Imagining all those storms, each one more frightful than the next, was much, much worse than having to live through only one of them!”

Alma wanted to say that he was exaggerating as usual, but she decided to be sympathetic.

“Is that so?” she asked.

Al tried to explain.

“This is why our script will work!”

“Are you trying to say that someone can kill through sheer negligence without so much as brandishing a weapon?” Alma asked, always with second thoughts about everything.

“There’re many ways to shed blood, and most can never be proven!”

Alma served the lamb with all the trimmings, including the mint sauce. The guests, mostly actors, were told that the menu had a name.

“Impending storm!” said Al, enjoying his food like nothing else.

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