

She tries stomping, slapping her running shoes harder on the wood as she nears, but it doesn't help. Nobody notices Carolyn till she's on top of them, slowing to a jog, brushing elbows on a curve. There are always couples strolling the width of the deck, the wife lost in speech, gesturing, the husband's head angled, nodding, before one of them glances back at Carolyn in her gray-wet tank top. Sometimes they flinch, cringe, as if preparing to be trampled. Men twice Carolyn's size. She calls a "Thank you," a "Sorry," an "Excuse me," hand bobbing. You would think after her third, her fourth, her fifth lap, they would be expecting it, but they're shocked every time. The same scowl every time.

Otherwise, her runs are good. You don't get views like these from her old student center treadmill. A horizon of red tile roofs, slopes of mosque-towered hills, yet another harbor of ticking sail masts. And always that blue-black sea roiling on the other side. Half the passengers wander out just to stare. Maybe prop their elbows on the railing to steady the camera they fished from their purse. Others stay longer, blink at paperbacks and complimentary newspaper print-outs along the rows of cushioned lounge chairs. Some fall asleep. It's the rocking. The gentle, sea-heavy rocking. This is Carolyn's life now, her future, what she chose, what anyone would choose if they could.

The deck circumference is .33 miles. Carolyn runs nine laps every day, walks the tenth, to put her over 5K, what she would do back home, her old home. She could beat a

seven-minute mile, but she's on vacation, her honeymoon. The watch Cliff gave her is analog, because he said it looks prettier on her wrist. She almost prefers it now too, the way the slender second hand swings in a firm, sharp arc, like the circles she is running. Carolyn is the skinny second hand rotating. Plus the gold matches the wedding band. Numbers would be nice, even little identically spaced studs, but she's getting used to it, the estimating. She knows basically what time it is. How fast she's moving. The week is just flying by.

Each port has so many shops, rows and rows, some simply folding stands with bright awnings shivering in the sea heat. There was a ship lecture about history and culture and how to haggle, but Cliff wouldn't go. His parents didn't either, but they do so many cruises. This is the Holtons' second just this year, one of their standards, which is why they chose it for a wedding present. Plus she and Cliff get all their expertise, too.

Carolyn finds a little box, a decorative wooden box, with Arabic letters carved into the lid, or maybe they're only painted on. There is a whole table just of beautiful boxes. The larger ones are too expensive, she is sure, so she presses her finger to her favorite of the tiny lids and smiles at the bearded man behind the makeshift counter. Carolyn likes to buy one trinket at every stop, to remember it by. This will all be over so soon.

The man announces some amount, something Carolyn

cannot calculate quickly, what it means in real dollars. It sounds like a lot. Her purse is open and she shuffles little colored slips of paper from her left hand to her right hand. Money should be simple. Every port is different. Each accent harder to decode.

“You think we’re stupid?” Cliff plucks the box from the row, rattles it in his fist. “You think you can cheat us?” He yanks half of the bills from Carolyn’s right hand, doesn’t count them, shucks them at the counter. “That’s what we’re paying.” Actually, it isn’t the box Carolyn was looking at, but the one next to it. They are all the same almost. “That’s it, nothing else, no more, got it?”

The American system is better. Things cost what they cost. There’s no confusion, no ambiguity. Haggling makes Carolyn feel naïve and miserly. It cheapens whatever is for sale, the whole exchange.

They eat at an outdoor café afterwards, one with laminated menus and a column of American dollars next to the foreign prices. A mug of coffee and biscotti wouldn’t cost this in New Jersey, but it’s the ambiance too, and the sprinkle of cinnamon and those other spices Cliff doesn’t like.

Opposites attract, her mother said when Carolyn pruned the engagement ring from its tiny hinged case to show her. She didn’t wear it at home unless Cliff was visiting. That obese diamond, she’d never seen anything like it. Not that her family is poor, not by any reasonable definition. Probably other people wouldn’t think her mother and father opposites, certainly not their first names, Seung and Jeong. Cliff couldn’t keep them straight if he tried.

Joggers with headphones are the worst. Sealed off in their little, trotting worlds. They practically yelp when Carolyn careens past.

But it’s the packs she hates, four, five, even six or seven meandering in a porous clump, the larger the more oblivious. Carolyn stops dead sometimes. Eventually a face will turn and blink at her. A gap between shoulders will eventually widen.

The tightest corners are below the lifeboats, practically single file. The boats dangle from chains thicker than Carolyn’s calves, but her jaw still tenses under the weight of their shadows. Hers is third from the end. B16. She and Cliff would have to share it with one hundred and forty-eight strangers. She had to attend a drill, had to be herded into elbowing rows, breathe other people’s hair gels and failing deodorants, feel her own skin going slick in her rubber life preserver, while straining to catch crew officers shouting room numbers through bullhorns. Cliff’s parents are on the other side. Carolyn passes under the shadow of their balcony ten times every day.

She pushes harder on the next straightaway, returning a nod from the lone man in the row of chaise lounges. His paperback sags every time she nears. She was running the first time Cliff noticed her, too. It only took him a week or two to register her detour from her old circuit, the daily coincidence, those taut, white legs. That’s what got him. He told her so. Those legs. She timed her cool down stretches for the bench opposite his dorm lounge, timed it so he just happened to be wandering out, if he wasn’t skipping class again.

Carolyn waits to pass the deck entrance before overtaking the next jogger. Doors are the real danger. She has been nearly hit three times. Not by passengers, they’re easy, a sandaled foot over a bottom frame, white-trimmed hinges easing open. It’s the brown doors, the staff doors. Kitchen help shove through backwards, arms clamped under towered trays. The ones in mechanic jumpsuits don’t even apologize, don’t know they’re supposed to

be smiling at you. They slouch in corners and suck on cigarettes. Maybe they lift their eyes as Carolyn jounces past. She worked in her dining hall right up to graduation, just weeks before the wedding, the skin of her fingers wrinkling in the steam of the ladles, bowl after grotesque bowl.

They must have their own, smaller lifeboats somewhere below. The non-carpeted areas of the ship don't appear on the framed maps between the elevators. Sometimes Carolyn slows as she passes a "Staff Only" door left ajar, sometimes left dangling wide open. Then she has to stop and stare, panting at truck-sized winches, at anchor chains thicker than her thighs. She will stand and stare breathlessly until the back of a jumpsuit begins to turn.

Carolyn coaxed Cliff out of their cabin five minutes early, but his parents are already waiting on the little couch outside the banquet room again. Mrs. Holton is frowning.

"You remember there's a dress code, honey."

Cliff looks at his shorts. They're nice, khakis, with lots of extra, useless pockets. With his red polo tucked in and the belt, he looks perfectly presentable.

Mr. Holton shrugs. "We're paying their salaries."

Cliff walks a step back, almost behind Carolyn, as he is suddenly talking animatedly about something, suddenly very deep into a retelling of the Istanbul excursion. The maître d' is smiling and shaking his head. He's Filipino. Practically the whole crew is Filipino.

"I'm so very sorry, sir," he says. Cliff's arms are gesturing in hard, tight thrusts, as he keeps talking, keeps pretending not to notice. "But we will have to ask you to kindly change for dinner, sir." The maître d's eyes are wide and bright, his head bobbing gently now, hands crossed as if in his lap. There isn't a thing threatening about the little man. He looks almost like Carolyn's father. That self-effacing

grin. It's a strategy, a choice, something surrendered for a goal, something Cliff can't see, can't decode.

They are seated along the spiral staircase, where the string quartet is setting up, while Cliff saunters back to the elevators. "Did you see his name tag?" Mrs. Holton says. "Ron." She exhales loudly through her nose. Mr. Holton chuckles. Carolyn doesn't understand. "That's obviously not his name. I mean, our porter, the card he left says 'Philip.'" She exhales again. "They must give them all easy to remember ones."

Carolyn nods, imitates Mrs. Holton's laugh, a softer version. Her face hurts from smiling. She can't think of her cabin porter's name. He leaves them a different towel animal each day, elephant, lobster, monkey, anteater.

When their waitress arrives, her name tag reads, "Caroline," which Mrs. Holton points out good-naturedly. "Look," she says to Cliff. He's dragging his chair back to join them. "You have two wives now."

He picked his chinos, not his khakis, even though he stained the chinos with wine last night. The dried splash runs along the outer seam. Carolyn keeps looking down at it, while tapping her ring against her fork. It hardly makes any sound.

Carolyn has barely passed before the woman quips: "*Oh my God.*" She means Carolyn. The fact she is running again, after that morning excursion, the hour roaming shadeless ruins, heat like a fist. Carolyn simply doesn't tire. It's her body, she can't help it. She studies the couple on her next lap: about her and Cliff's age, only pudgier and blonde, the ones who didn't want to take their shoes off at the mosque. Carolyn lets her heel graze the hem of the woman's flapping dress.

When Carolyn went on that cross country vacation with her family in high school, it was all about getting

there, the next gas station, the next cramped motel room, the stingy clicking of the miles on the dash counter. This is the opposite. Every night you curve your body around your new husband in the same cushiony bed, and every morning you toss open the curtains to a wide new view. The ultimate room service. The world on a tray.

Which is why Carolyn avoids the elevators, keeps to one glass of wine, only enters the twenty-four hour dining deck twice a day, max. She doesn't even like crossing through on her way to the saunas. Yesterday a man was yelling at a teenager, berating the girl for standing bare-foot at the drink dispensers in her pool towel. It was unsanitary, he said. His jowls shook as he jabbed his finger at her feet. The flesh of his arms swayed.

She will never get fat, she promised Cliff that. It's just not in her genetics. He promised too, though he's already a little soft above the hips. No one can keep up with Carolyn. She might break seven minutes today. If she's remembering her starting point correctly. It's so easy to get lost, lose track of laps, the positions of the tiny hands, minute eighteen or minute nineteen. She can't even be sure of the day of the week or which country that is bobbing beyond the rail.

"Excuse me," says Mr. Holton. He taps the boy on the shoulder. "Excuse me." It isn't really a tap. His fingers and thumb meet in a blunt point. "Is there some reason you think you can cut in front of all these people?" He gestures without looking at the line of squinting tourists clumped at the foot of the concrete stairs.

The teenage boy keeps looking down, feigning deafness, obliviousness, as he did when the woman in front of Carolyn questioned him too. The boy's father glances back, reflexively. He is the real culprit, wedging into line,

allowing his family to flow in around him. They aren't from the cruise ship.

"Do you hear me?"

The shove bounces the boy's face off his mother's back. She's standing on the next step, teetering. The upper line bobs and rights itself too.

The father spins at Mr. Holton, says something, a string of harsh consonants and grimaces. Carolyn has to shuffle into the people behind her as Mr. Holton elbows onto the man's step. Cliff's shoulder presses into Carolyn's ear, as she flattens her hat against her chest. The rim could have struck the woman behind her.

It looks so much shadier at the top. The cutting wouldn't be quite so bad if it weren't for the sun. There are donkeys up there, to take them the rest of the way, to the shops and restaurants perched above the bay. The view is supposed to be so dramatic, one of the very best.

Mr. Holton's fist is gripping the boy's biceps now. His thumb and fingertip touch. He is shouting something over the other father, but in English, obviously, though Carolyn doesn't register any of his words either, just the way the bulge of muscle in his neck thickens. Everyone is turned, mumbling, frowning at the two fathers. Then suddenly the other family is stepping around, moving into the open space at the bottom of the stairs, out of line.

Cliff studies the cement between his sandals, face pink, from the heat probably. His mother is shaking her head. She leans further into Carolyn. "The rudeness," she says. Barbara says. Mrs. Holton insists Carolyn call her Barbara. "Absolutely astonishing." Carolyn is another Mrs. Holton now, Barbara likes to joke. When they rise into the shade, the ripe, wet scent of the donkeys widens. It can't be much longer now.

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The sun always sets in a different window, a different corner of the ship. Tonight they start watching it in bed on the mounted TV, before Cliff makes a pass. There's a livecam on the stern. During the day the channel is just the wake of the ship, a white gouge in a relentlessly tearing ocean, the time blinking in the corner. The sun inches a little deeper, its red gone a little thicker every time she looks over Cliff's jouncing shoulder.

Cliff's parents' cabin is the same only exactly the opposite, a mirror of theirs. Not that Carolyn has been inside. She studied diagrams online while planning everything, the reception, the trip, the ceremony. The Holtons haven't been demanding or invasive at all. They meet as a foursome once a day, for a meal or two, also usually a nightcap after suffering through the evening's entertainment together, some lounge crooner or Broadway review. Mrs. Holton seems to like them. If both couples signed up for the same day excursion, fine, if not, that was perfectly allowable, too. The Holtons often prefer staying onboard.

Cliff and Carolyn grew up not two counties from each other but didn't start dating until senior year. They were in the same Poli Sci course, how Carolyn first saw him. She was overloading before her scholarship ran out, and Cliff was taking an extra semester or two because he had to change majors a couple of times. A lecture hall that big and he just thrust his hand up any time, spoke as loud as the podium speaker, cornered the professor at the stage edge afterwards to debate a grade. Carolyn can hardly believe it. Her name isn't Dohn anymore. It's Holton. Mrs. Carolyn Holton. Mr. and Mrs. Clifford Holton.

She is staring at the framed paintings bolted into the wall—they are shells, probably, cross-sections of ornately vaginal shells—as Cliff starts grunting open-mouthed

and pulling at her hair, or grabbing it at least, in both fists, the way you might if you were passionate. The TV screen has gone black. Unless those dots are stars, not static. The time is still blinking in the corner, but the horizon of reds and pinks and purples is gone. She missed it. Sometimes the sun drops like a coin. Sometimes it's a cigarette going dead behind its own smoke, a thinning out, no squinting, not a sunset at all.

It's a kind of community almost, the runners, the only people really working out here, committing to a regimen. Carolyn never got that at the fitness center, or the country club Cliff took her to. She likes to glimpse a bobbing ponytail, a pair of bobbing shoulders, vanishing beyond a bulkhead. A reason to lean into the next curve, shout at some straggler as she's passing. Carolyn can overtake anyone if you give her time enough.

It's taken most the week, but she feels at home, padding into the center lounge afterwards, up the carpeted stairwell, down whatever hallway she fancies. There are a half dozen ways back to her cabin.

The door's cracked, so she's expecting their porter, that friendly gap-toothed smile. She wants to ask about the last towel sculpture. Cliff said seal, but she thought the head was too big. But it's Mr. Holton sitting in the love seat by the balcony doors, newspaper on the shelf of his stomach. Mrs. Holton is on the bed, her stocking feet propped on a white pillow, as she jabs the remote.

"Good morning," she says. Barbara says. She glances toward Carolyn, sort of, eyes still on the screen.

Carolyn says good morning. The bathroom door is shut. The shower sounds like rain on her parents' metal roof. She must have forgotten they were all meeting for a final brunch. Tomorrow morning will be so hectic.

“How was your jog?” asks Barbara.

Carolyn perches on the little chair at the edge of the shallow closet. “Okay,” she says. “Too many strollers.”

Mrs. Holton exhales through her nose. Barbara does. “They shouldn’t even allow babies on board.”

Carolyn is clammy, the sweat stains darkest around her cleavage. “No, I mean people strolling. They get in the way.” Her underpants are damp, too.

Her mother-in-law exhales again, more sharply. “Well,” says Mrs. Holton, “it is called the *promenade* deck.”

Carolyn nods, corrected. Her face is warm. It was her own fault. She wasn’t being clear.

Her ring glistens on top of the little desk, next to the pile of queer coins. The column of light between the curtains carves a line through Mr. Holton’s paper, the stunted desk, and up the paneled wall. Carolyn doesn’t run with the ring on. It could rub the skin raw. Any jewelry. Any exercise. Really you can’t call it work. Running in circles. A body disposing of useless calories. She twists to stare at the screen, waiting for the clatter of the shower to stop, for her turn to come.

The woman in front of Carolyn is complaining to the girl at the front desk. Something about the attitude of the staff, the one who had barred her husband at the doors of the lounge because he had forgotten his jacket in their cabin again. The girl behind the computer screen keeps nodding, keeps mumbling in agreement. She would find out his name, forward a report to their supervisor. Her fingers type in precise bursts.

Carolyn waits her turn. She doesn’t want to get anyone in trouble. It’s just that last night, at dinner, their server, or not their server, that was “Caroline” again, but the other girl, the one who brought around the trays of complimentary cordials, that girl wasn’t exactly clear, since it

was just the little glasses with the ship’s logo and not the actual contents of the glasses that were complimentary. By then Mr. Holton was already raising his in a toast. To Cliff and Carolyn. To Clifford and Carolyn, Cliff’s mother said.

The girl raises her finger to interrupt. “What is your room number, ma’am?”

Carolyn gives Mr. and Mrs. Holton’s room too, since it’s really their bill. All the bills are. When Carolyn pointed out the miscommunication, Mr. Holton’s smile twitched, and then he shrugged elaborately, said how it was their honeymoon for Christ’s sake. Their last night. Live it up while you can.

Cliff told her not to bother, but it was the principle that nagged at Carolyn. One simply cannot allow others to take advantage of oneself. She wanted to say that to the girl behind the wide, wooden desk. It was dark, an obscene slice of some god of a tree. She couldn’t imagine how much any of it cost. Just the girl’s uniform, one of an identical thousand, always pressed, collars aglow. All of them had to live here, for months at a time, rooms, meals, laundry. This was their home. Passengers were only passing through. They were tromping through someone else’s house. Soiling their guest sheets, getting drunk in their living room, shouting into their kitchen.

When the girl asked if there was anything else she could assist her with, Carolyn mirrored her smile and whispered, “No, no thank you.” The girl’s eyes were bright and round, with a speck of mascara clumped at one corner. Carolyn wanted to lean forward and thumb the lash clean. The way she would lean into the bathroom mirror in her cabin, or at home, at any mirror at all.

They started in Venice, so of course it’s a disappointment the second time, at the tail of everything, the warm down.

Wasn't that the same musician strumming on the bridge, his sticker-matted case dotted with coins? Even the beggar woman with the knotted scarf and Styrofoam cup, the same ruined teeth.

Clouds like paintings barreled between those spires then, scissoring ribbons of sun-fringed blue from their centers. This sky is gray and flat. Carolyn and Clifford do not get caught in a rain burst this time, do not huddle in a doorway kissing as it brightens. The city is no longer a maze of picturesque alleys to wander lost in. She understands the map perfectly. Her watch is synchronized to the ship's channel, down to the circling second. She watched an ugly little ferry docking on the television screen while Cliff packed. He kept stopping to talk to her.

"Look, I'm just trying to say I'm sorry is all." He kept knotting and unknotting the stained chinos, trying to wedge them in. "About, you know, my parents and everything."

The main square is flooded now, really just an enormous puddle, hardly an inch deep anywhere. They built a cathedral on a swamp, a whole city on an island swamp. She won't miss the languages, the thorny exchanges over menus and cash registers. The way the muscles in her neck grip her throat when she tries to talk. It feels like drowning. Blinking through the wrong kind of air. Cliff keeps bringing up his parents.

"What do you mean?" asks Carolyn. "You parents are wonderful."

"I know, they just can be, I don't know. My mother."

Carolyn is scanning for cafés, for a comfortable place to sit, to pause, to squander their last minutes. The ship was so much simpler. They said their goodbyes to the Holtons last night, made them shrug off Carolyn's refrain of thank you's, such an extravagant gift, the cruise, the

food, the countries. She has never seen so much so fast in her life.

"I don't know what you mean," says Carolyn. "I love your mother." She says it twice. "I love your mother."

Cliff nods, reflexively. He agrees, of course he agrees. He hefts a strap higher on his shoulder. Carolyn's bag is in his other fist, but she has the carry-on, and her purse, so it's fair. Plus he's not the one who has to decide where they have to eat next.

When Carolyn passed through the dining deck, half the buffets were empty, their metal grates locked. The piano in the center lounge filtered up and down the staircases. She thought it was a song, a delicate, incomprehensible melody, drifting outward, incrementally, like waves thinning across flattened sand. But they were only tuning the keys. Clifford wheeled their suitcases past car-sized crates of cantaloupe and Boston lettuce filling the pier. There was the only ship.

Carolyn shatters a puddle as she passes yet another hand-chalked menu board, more bloated strangers leaning over smeared porcelain. She's hungry, but she tells Cliff they can eat at the airport. She has to get back on her diet anyway, start recording her morning weights again. You don't just make a decision—you have to keep making it, every day. That pinching in the pit of her, sometimes Carolyn tries to mistake that for virtue, but she knows you can't earn a life like this. It's something you're given or you steal. She will always be hungry. She is bracing for the plane now too, the hours of forced motionlessness, the coming jetlag, nights of insomnia waiting for her. She's married now. It's her choice. She has to remind herself that. Rotate the ring against the bone of her joint.

