

a very cold hand

"Che gelida manina! Se la lasci riscaldar." Giacomo Puccini, *La Bohème*, Act I.

Rudolph, her husband of forty years, had just passed away, and Lucia was not in good health, so she decided to spend whatever was left of her life travelling around the world. She learned in a podcast that many widows spent years going from one cruise to another (sometimes on the same ship), enjoying the absence of housekeeping obligations, the fine food, the dancing, the onboard swimming and other exercise opportunities, the social interaction with an ever-varying set of fellow travelers, and the shore trips to exotic destinations.

She researched the terms offered by various cruise companies, the availability of overseas medical insurance (a must), internet access, and other potential cost items. She finally selected a budget cruise company that offered, for a relatively reasonable cost, Mediterranean and river cruises that would allow her to touch the high points in Europe and the Near East. She finally decided to take the plunge and signed up for her first cruise.

The cruise ship, somewhat ominously, was called *Olandezul Plutitoare*, which was translated by its owners as *The Cruising Dutchman*. Some potential travelers, however, remembering the ghost ship legend and Wagner's gruesome tale, dubbed it *The Flying Dutchman* and refused to book it. Lucia was not superstitious and knew nothing about opera, so the unpromising name did not faze her.

The *Olandezul* sailed from Venice one cool afternoon in March, with Lucia and a few hundred passengers on board, bound for ports in Croatia and Montenegro on the Adriatic, on the way to Athens and the Mediterranean.

At first, Lucia was disappointed at the small size of her lower deck inside cabin, only large enough for a single bed, a desk with a chest of drawers, and an armchair. Closet space was, however, adequate, and she supplemented it with an over-the-door organizer. This allowed her to put away the numerous items she

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had chosen to bring onboard, including formal and casual wear, several pairs of shoes, and a large supply of cosmetics and health and beauty aids. She was ready to shift from this tour to the next one upon returning to Venice.

On her desk she found a newsletter with details of the options for that evening and the following day. It was too late for the formal afternoon tea, but she could choose between a set-seating dinner and no-set dining—that is, being placed at the first available table. She selected the latter, hoping to start making friends from that first day.

The dining room featured a buffet, with all sorts of tantalizing delicacies on display. Lucia decided to eat sparingly, for gaining weight during cruises was a well-known hazard that she intended to avoid. A bit of Cesar salad, some fish and seafood, a dinner roll, and a cup of vichyssoise were all she brought to her table.

There were four people present, three women and a man, all in their sixties or seventies, talking in low voices to each other. They paid no attention to Lucia, who greeted everyone warmly as she sat down. Other than a slight bowing of some heads, her arrival was unacknowledged.

Lucia frowned but put on her most friendly face and, turning to the lady on her left, broke the ice by inquiring, “Is this your first Mediterranean cruise?” The lady clearly heard her, but made no response. Lucia waited a second or two, and added: “It is my first. I’m hoping to take a walking tour of Athens when we get there.” Again, no response.

Her attempts at conversation were put on hold by the arrival of a waiter, who was holding two open bottles of wine, one white and the other red. He approached Lucia, and motioned for her to make a choice. She pointed to the bottle of white wine and said, “Thanks, I will have some white wine. What are you serving?”

The waiter poured Lucia a generous glass and responded, "Pinot Grigio." With that, he turned and headed for the kitchen.

Lucia made a big show of picking the wine glass up and slightly flicking her wrist, making little circles in the air, then smelling into the glass and taking a sip. She commented to the table, "Ahh... I smell pineapples and lemons... it's a refreshing young wine." She did not know much about wine, but had taken a course at the adult center and had picked up the basic conversational terms.

All her efforts to impress the audience and start a conversation going failed to elicit even a nod of assent. Her companions were clearly ignoring her. Lucia was so flustered that she downed the wine in two big gulps, ate a morsel of salad, and got up abruptly, almost knocking her chair over.

"I've never been so humiliated in my life," she told herself, her cheeks still burning.

In her room, she tried to make sense of what had happened. "Did I say something wrong? Was I wearing too much perfume? Or maybe I should have put on better clothes, instead of jeans and a blouse?" She ran through, and rejected, many possibilities. Confused and dejected, she went to bed early, starting to feel pangs of hunger and longing for the abandoned meal.

The following morning, she got up early and had a satisfying breakfast, alone in the empty dining room. She showered and got dressed in a semi-casual outfit. Overnight the ship had moored in Split, the largest city of the region of Dalmatia. Split was ancient, its origins dating back to before the days of the Roman Empire. Lucia had read that the city had a number of points of interest, so she slipped away from the ship and joined a half-day excursion about to take off at the pier. The tour had an assigned guide, who took the tourists on a visit to Diocletian's Palace, once a huge palace of a Roman Emperor and now a beehive of shops, residences, and cafés. The tour then went on by bus to Trogir, a small town near Split that had a medieval core surrounded by walls, a preserved castle and tower, and dwellings and palaces from the Romanesque, Gothic, Renaissance, and Baroque periods.

Throughout the tour, which started in the morning and ended in the late afternoon, the guide made many interesting announcements in good English but gave no answers to Lucia's questions, leaving her with the impression that either the guide's English was limited or she had broken some taboo that made her unwelcome. For that reason, the tour was not as pleasant as it could have been.

Lucia rushed back to the *Olandezul*, arriving near the end of the formal tea service. She found herself a love seat in the back of the room (which by that time was nearly empty) and waited to be served. Soon, a young girl arrived with a three-layer cake stand heaping with scones, candied fruits, petit-fours, and finger sandwiches. She placed the stand on a low table next to Lucia's seat and left, returning in a short while with an open box full of tea bags of many varieties. She presented the box to Lucia, indicating that she should choose some tea to her liking. Lucia perused the offerings and asked, "Do you have blackcurrant tea?"

A brief grimace of panic registered in the server's features. Swallowing hard, she replied in a very low voice, "No, ma'am."

Lucia frowned. She had expected the young girl to make a counter-offer, perhaps suggest wild berry or even blueberry, but she said nothing. Irritated, Lucia inquired sharply, "Well, what do you recommend?" The girl turned around and ran away.

A while later, a sullen waiter in cruise line uniform came over to Lucia holding a large tea pot. As he poured silently into Lucia's cup, she recognized the dark hue of her favorite tea, blackcurrant.

Lucia could not stand it anymore. As the man finished pouring, Lucia asked in a loud voice that was almost a scream, "What's going on here? How come none of you people will talk to me or answer my questions?"

The man's face assumed the fixed stare of a frightened rabbit. After a second or two, he shuddered and replied in a whisper, "We are not allowed."

"What do you mean not allowed? What is going on?"

"You are not one of us" he answered, dropping each word as if a knife was piercing his lips. With that, he walked away briskly.

Lucia was baffled for a moment, then incredulous, and finally almost choking with rage. She slammed the cup on the table and went down to the lowest deck, where the crew had its quarters. She asked the first person in uniform she ran into, "I want to see the Captain." The man nodded, took her by the arm, and escorted her down a corridor to a large cabin that was obviously the ship's main office. Entering through the open door, Lucia found herself facing a seated bearded man, dressed all in white. The jacket had gold trim along the cuffs, gold buttons, and decorative epaulets; the man wore a peaked cap with gold trim.

Astonished at first, the captain got up, made a courteous bow, and asked in a clipped, British sounding tone, "How may I assist you, Madam?"

Lucia was taken aback by the question, for she was not sure of what exactly she wanted. Finally, she pulled herself together and replied, "I've a complaint. Your staff is apparently forbidden to talk to me. What's the matter?"

The captain appeared confused. "Has anybody told you that he is prohibited from talking to you? Because this cruise line prides itself on the excellent service it provides to our honored guests."

"Well, one of your waiters just said that I wasn't one of them. What does that mean?"

"Ah, that!" retorted the captain airily. "I'm sorry, most of our crew members are from various parts of Eastern Europe, Hungary, Serbia, Rumania. Their English is limited, so they are instructed not to speak to our guests any more than necessary, to avoid misunderstandings. If you need to talk to anybody, talk to me, or the purser, or any of the other officers onboard. Any one of us will be able to give you satisfaction, I assure you."

There was something insincere in the Captain's explanation that left Lucia unsatisfied, but there was not much more she could do. She thanked the Captain and retreated to her cabin.

She was still tense. She changed into her swimming suit and went upstairs to take a dip in the hot tub, an oval enclosure with walls covered by lapis lazuli

and aqua tiles. She entered the tub at one end of the oval, and crouched, neck deep, on the steaming waters, sensing how her body and mind relaxed amidst the vapors. She felt drowsy and was about to fall asleep when the noise of a splash at the other end of the oval startled her back to consciousness. Shaking herself alert, she noticed that others had entered the tub: a large woman in her thirties and a boy, no more than six or seven. The boy was pounding on the hot water, releasing cascades of steaming liquid all around; some droplets reached Lucia, startling her.

“Say, madam, could you please ask your child to stop splashing around?” she asked in a firm, somewhat annoyed voice. The woman looked in her direction and said nothing. The child spun his head and looked around the tub, peeking at and then past Lucia, giving no sign of recognition.

Lucia bolted out of the tub and ran back to her cabin, shivering but not stopping to dry herself. She locked the door and plunged into her bed, still shaking.

She recovered after a while and felt hungry. She was not ready to face the dining room, so she ordered a meal from room service and asked for a glass of scotch, neat. The liquor would be charged to her account as a supplement, but she needed something to calm her nerves.

A somber waiter delivered her food and served it silently on her desk. She said nothing to him and did not give him a tip.

It got late but Lucia could not summon sleep. She paced restlessly back and forth in her cabin and at last made a decision. She put on her party dress and went up to the ballroom. It was Viennese night, said the daily newsletter. She had not waltzed for twenty years, but she was in a dangerous mood. She would finally have a good time, and if not, she would leave the ship in Athens and give up on this awful cruise.

As she entered the ballroom, the party was in full swing. A dozen couples were twirling around to the strains of “Voices of Spring.” As she stopped to take in the sights, a wigged young waiter in costume approached her deftly, handed her a champagne flute and, taking her arm, escorted her to an empty table at the edge of the dance floor, from where she had a full view of the action.

At first, she watched the gyrations and admired the finery that some of the female passengers were sporting—everyone seemed to be attired differently, from Victorian gowns of light materials to strapless dresses and tee shirt outfits. A few unattached men came and went, all seemingly in search of something. A couple of them hovered in the vicinity of her table, but after making brief eye contact with Lucia, walked on.

Lucia slowly sank into despair. She did not know why she had come, what she was expecting to find in this ocean of humanity. She had never felt so lonely; she started to cry silently.

A hand rested softly on her arm. She raised her head and there was a man, bent solicitously over her heaving shoulders. “*Cara signora, perchè piangi così?*”

“I’m sorry, my Italian is quite rusty,” replied Lucia, quickly wiping her tears.

“I apologize,” said the man, in heavily accented English. “I was wondering why are you crying? It’s a beautiful night, and that lovely spring awakening music

lifts the spirits. You should be out there dancing, not sitting in a corner like a widow in mourning.”

“I am a recent widow,” replied Lucia, again on the verge of tears. “I am alone in the world, and nobody cares about me. I can’t even get people to answer when I talk to them.” She hiccupped and got ready to begin crying again.

“Come, dance with me. It’ll make you feel better.”

Lucia wanted to tell the stranger to get away, but he was the first person who had shown her kindness, and it would have been ungrateful to dismiss him. “All right, but I’m not a good dancer. Watch your feet.”

The man shrugged dismissively and started to assist Lucia to get up. Just then, the orchestra finished playing “Voices of Spring” and paused to get ready for the next selection. The man sat next to Lucia.

As they waited, Lucia took a closer look at her rescuer. He was not young; probably as old as she, thinning gray hair and a face with deep wrinkles on the forehead and the edges of the mouth. He was solidly built and accompanied his speech with strong gestures. A man of action, no doubt. He did not look like her lamented husband but had a similar air, and this similarity hurt her like a fresh stab to her heart.

To clear her mind from these morbid thoughts, she looked up (he was taller by more than a head) and said, “I am Lucia. What’s your name?”

“My name is Marcello. I’m a painter from Lucca, in Toscana. That’s in Italy, you know?”

“I do. Are you on vacation?”

“No, I’m working here on this ship. I was hired to restore some fading murals in the main dining room. It seems that steam from the buffet damaged the paintings and I am tasked with retouching and repainting, as needed.”

Lucia sighed. “I am taking my first cruise. My husband died recently and I’m trying to find a way to live by myself, all alone.” She did not mean to open up like this to a complete stranger, but she felt relief.

“I’m sorry for your loss,” replied Marcello. “How are you liking the cruise, so far?”

Lucia wanted to utter some bland nonsense, but again felt compelled to tell the truth. “Not much. People ignore me, and the staff is under orders not to answer my questions. Even tonight, nobody has sought to speak to me. You are the first.”

“Ah. I understand now. Perhaps you were not yet ready.”

“What do you mean?”

“What is the last thing you remember clearly before coming onboard?”

“I was in the departure lounge, waiting to board the cruise. It got very stuffy; they had the heat set high and it was not that cold outside, so I felt a little faint...”

“Ah, Lucia. I have some bad news.”

“What?”

“You must have had a heart attack or something. All this time you have probably been teetering between life and death. You were allowed to board this ship because it was apparent that you were not going to make it, but you couldn’t

be treated as one of the passengers as long as you were alive. You must have died just minutes ago, since I was able to approach and talk to you without crossing any barriers.”

“Am I... Am I dead?”

“I’m afraid so. This ship only comes ashore to collect new passengers.” He seized her hand and got her up on her feet.

“Your hands are very cold. Let me warm them up.” He took her right hand in his and planted a loving kiss on it.

“But yours are freezing also!”

He spoke softly in her ear. “Of course. Now, will you stroll with me around this modern version of *The Flying Dutchman*?”

“Yes, please” she whispered.

They vanished into the night, as the orchestra started playing the haunting notes of Sibelius’ “*Valse Triste*” for the couples in the phantom ballroom.

