

No Going Back – Caitriona Kelly

I was making the first of fifty beds, when I heard that a man had just been wrestled back up the gangway. One of the other stewardesses had heard it from Bilbo. She'd said that he'd said, there were four of them on him, and that he wasn't going anywhere, except back to where he came from. We were docked in Rosslare. On a tight turnaround, back to Le Havre. Two weeks on, one week off. Summer work. July 1995. After a week on land it took me days to find my sea legs again. *There's more waves in a bleedin' bath*, the chief stewardess would mutter, as my stomach heaved through the first forty eight hours back on board. Most of the crew lived down aft, below sea level, the drone of the engines, white noise. The officers lived on the upper decks, where there were portholes, and fresh air and views of the sea. We were all given beer bonds and cigarette bonds every week, and drank and smoked ourselves over and back, and over and back.

I carefully folded the starched white sheet over the stale blanket. There were days when the chief stewardess would measure the fold on the sheets with a ruler; the same days she'd leave skittles under the bunks to make sure you'd hoovered properly.

"What are these?" she'd once asked, a little mound of them in her outstretched hand. "Skittles...?" I'd replied.

"I know they're skittles, think I'm fuckin'-well *colour* blind? What I want to *know* is, what were they doing under ones of your bunks?"

I knew better than to try and come up with an answer. I'd seen her make a woman cry, all because of a pubic hair found in one of the en-suites.

All stewardesses to the cinema. All stewardesses to the cinema, over the tanooy, and off we'd gone, in our tight pale blue smocks. Twenty-five stewardesses, talking in whispers, filed into rows of cinema seats. Seated in front of the wine velvet curtains on a plastic deck chair was the chief purser, white shirt taut over his bulging stomach. Beside him, the chief stewardess, a paper cup containing the offending hair in her blue-gloved hand.

"Who was cleaning cabin number 152?"

Silence in the dim light of the cinema. A middle-aged stewardess raised her hand from one of the back rows, her voice thin. *That's mine*, she said. Snorts of laughter, and the purser's lips crawling away from his gums. *My cabin I mean*, she mumbled. A smaller ripple this time, and we let our backs sink into the seats.

Passengers had already begun to nudge their way through the car deck doors by the time I'd showered, changed out of my smock and taken up my standby position.

Tickets in hand, they searched out their cabins, the thick smell of hot rubber following them down the alleyways, and up the stairs. Sometimes you'd forget which country you were docked in; you'd be in Rosslare and asking them how their holiday to France had been. Or the other way around, in Cherbourg wishing them well on their trip to France. Bilbo squeezed past them in his orange boiler suit and came over to lean up against the life jacket locker beside me.

"Story? Thrun him into the cell they did" he said, as if picking up a conversation we'd just left off.

"Who? What cell?"

"The black man they had to carry up the gangway. Four Gards it took. *The* cell. There's only the one. Near the bridge. Last time they used it was for some poor

bastard who was having a nervous breakdown, kept trying to throw himself overboard, had to be tied up he did. Pissed himself and everything. This one was *real* quiet going in. A refugee.”

As soon as we'd been given the nod to stand down, I headed for the bridge. I'd been there the previous evening doing two hours towards my steering ticket. *Repeat the coordinates out loud. Every time. And don't forget to say Captain*, the first mate whispered in my ear, his breath beery and hot. I'd just turned twenty and kept forgetting to do both. The door from the bridge deck was open, the Captain, seated on a leather-backed stool, smoking and staring out to sea. I knocked anyway, and he turned towards me, his eyes blank.

“I was here yesterday evening. Steering” I said.

“Steering...”

“I eh...I wanted to talk to you about the man...the man in the cell”

“The cell...the man in the cell. What about him?”

“Well...it's just that I was wondering if he really has to be in the cell, I mean locked up like that all the way back to France”. “Captain” I added.

His eyes settled on mine.

“You're the one who does the steering. *Now* I have you. And what do you propose to do with our prisoner... huh?”

I'd proposed a cabin. Free to come and go. Or have him brought food and water if he preferred. Keep an eye on him. *OK*, he'd said. Just like that. *Your responsibility now*.

Two hours later, and the ferry had begun to roll. Leaning into each step, I made my way along the empty alleyways towards the man's cabin. *Seasickness, all in the head*, Bilbo had told me, tapping his temple. *Get your mind to go with her, in the same direction, at the same time, and you'll find your legs*. It was on the main deck, a four berth without a bathroom. I took the starboard side alleyway that led off the main square, my fingers brushing the bulkheads and doors. At the end, another square, smaller. I stood facing the cabin, my feet firmly planted, about to tap out the sharp insistent tone of key on door when the ship pitched, and the door swung open. I caught a glimpse of him then. Tall and lean, he had slightly almond-shaped eyes that peered out from under large swollen looking eyelids. Round wire-frame glasses made his eyes dance. His cheek bones were slender or were once; on one side of his face the bone rounded, jutting out, long ago broken. His skin was drained of blood, a grey brown. The deck rolled and I lunged forward taking too big a step. And he, back.

“I'm Nina, I..”

“Come in. Please” he said.

And there we stood, swaying and rocking in tandem, like two dancers, and me trying not to stare.

“It is you got me out of that cell? And in here. They say to me. *Said* to me, it was Nina. I thank you. Very much. You are very kind”

“I..”

“You are very kind. Excuse me, but I am a little...under the weather?”

He sat down, perching himself on the bottom bunk, shoulders hunched. He cupped his face; the crown of his head level with my eyes. I looked at his hair and thought of a black lamb I'd seen once in the Pet's Corner at Dublin Zoo.

“My name is Dominique. Where I am from, I can't go back. You will help get me off? Please?” he said, through papery fingers.

Writing this now, twenty-five years later, I struggle to remember where he was from. I've had him from Zaire, escaping Mobutu, then from Angola, wanting with all my heart to place him where he belongs. Belonged. And yet, I cannot make it up, nor do I want to. He is Dominique. He is African. He is thirty years old. An English teacher. Gentle. I know I felt comfortable in his presence. My twenty-year-old self aware of his smell, aware of his fear. I brought him food when he was hungry-dry toast that he chewed and chewed and forced down with black tea, chips he pushed around on a beige coloured plate, scrambled eggs left go cold and baked beans he smiled at in wonder. I told him I wouldn't lock him in and gave him the key instead. We talked and talked, and he spoke of the children he taught in his village. Their English clipped and correct. His way was with words. He'd written about politics, spoken about power and how it corrupts, voiced the truth, and risked everything.

We would like to remind passengers that the ferry operates on Irish time, which is one hour earlier than French time. I swivelled on my chair and looked out over the empty square from behind the information desk, five minutes into a two-hour shift. Passengers lurched past from time to time, clutching sick bags, or each other. From under the stairs, a man emerges and weaves a crooked path towards the desk. He has long blonde hair tied back in a ponytail. Mark, he says his name is. He'd seen a man being taken out of a cell just after we'd set sail and was wondering where he is now. In a cabin, I tell him. Waiting.

"I take it he's a refugee" he says.

He tells me Dominique had had the right to seek asylum in Ireland. I think of the big red-bricked mental hospital on the way to Fairview and wonder why anyone would come all this way to try to get in there.

"Look for a country of refuge?" he says then, seeing that he'd lost me. Turns out he's a human rights lawyer and then starts to rattle off what a refugee is according to some Convention or other, and there's lots of talk of fear in it, *well-founded fear* and *owing to such fear* and I think of Dominique's thin fingers covering his face.

And then he offers to smuggle him off in his car. No probs. Says he'd *totally* be into it.

"What are the chances?" he says and wanders off.

The next morning, passengers glided along the outer decks, the sea, a mirror. Mark had arrived at Dominique's cabin at ten as planned, only to tell us he'd had a change of heart. Was so sorry to be letting him down like this at the last minute. He hovered briefly, before taking his leave. Dominique just stood there, staring out the porthole at the hazy line of France, the shoulder blades on his back rolling inwards.

"I swim" he said, turning to me, the whites of his eyes tinged pink.

"It's much further than it looks, miles away, there's no way you'll make it, anyway you don't stand a chance with those engines...they'd suck you in and under as soon as you hit the water"

"I try"

"I'm telling you, you won't make it, the engines they'll..."

"You hide me. No going back" he said, no longer correcting his English. "They kill me"

So, I hid him, with only minutes to find a hiding place. I thought about my cabin and the space under the bunk, the lifeboats and their canvas covers, the cinema. In the

end I bundled him into the nearest life jacket locker, us both piling and pulling mounds of lifejackets until he was buried alive. *I'll be back, I promise*, I whispered. *Can you breathe?* I asked. *I can*, he'd said, his voice muffled. *You're sure...?*

Don't worry about me. I thank you. Go now.

I went back to making my bunks.

All crew to the main square immediately. All crew to the main square. I put the towel on the bed, folded down the corner, placed the cheap smelling soap in the triangular flap and headed for the main square. Along the narrow alleyways, past the mounds of used linen, and through dense pockets of stale air. Up the steep stairs onto the car deck, up again onto the main deck, across towards reception. Crew had begun to gather, streaming up from down aft, coming awake as they swayed and leaned into one another, their feet unsteady, now the decks still. From the galley, cooks chequered with acne. Stewardesses with sweaty red faces and hair scraped back off their heads in top knots, comparing how many beds done and left to do. Stewards in civvies and able-bodied seamen like Bilbo, flip flopped down from the heli pad; their bronzing cut short. Pursers and officers, descended from their quarters, hazy-eyed and rumped.

"We have a stowaway on board" the chief purser called out above the babble "French immigration are waiting for him as we speak and we have been told that we cannot turn around until they have him in their hands. Go find him". Divided hastily into search parties, we scatter, me running now up stairs and more stairs and out onto the upper deck, seagulls wheeling and the smack of hot air in my face and hair, slowing to a walk, passing through the open doors and down stairs two at a time now, lower deck, and turning my shoulder in its socket as I use the handrails to steer myself around corners I can't yet see. My legs are walking now, walking on empty. I see him then and he's being reefed by the scruffs of his shoulders, two big meaty hands dragging him out from the sea of orange life jackets, and a steward is chanting *I found him I found him*. They melt back one by one, crew who had gathered like flies, the buzz gone out of them, now he's been caught. Dominique sees me, his eyes awash with colour, and then he flicks them away.

He's brought back down the stairs and out through the main square, a spectacle being watched by more crew than ever now. His head is down. I move towards him, an involuntary reaching out of my hands in a helpless gesture. He looks up, sees me, a split-second glance and I know his last message is a silent plea to save myself, my job. That I have done all I can. And then he looks away, his face blank. He is led away by two French immigration officers, the last view of him, his sloping shoulders.

I see Dominique now as he crouched on his bunk, his journey far from over, and yet land in sight. I see him as he smiled in thanks and wonder, as he pushed his glasses up onto his nose before speaking. I see Dominique in the 40,000+ men, women and children who have died since 1993, trying to reach Fortress Europe.