

Queen Mary

by Alex Koskin

Brian was 5 years old when he drowned. We sat by the lake in the middle of an abnormally sultry June. He bugged me: "Dad, let's go swimming, let's go swimming." I was busy competing with some teenager on the other side of the world in a high-speed Sudoku. Brian wanted to swim, and I wanted to kick this punk's ass. Brian realized that the phone was the reason and started jokingly covering my eyes with his little hand so that I would forget about the phone and finally take him into the water. I got angry and yelled at him. Then I won the competition. Then I didn't see Brian beside me. I let him out of sight for a maximum of 1 minute and 23 seconds, but this was enough for Brian to drown.

In the morgue, I really wanted to tell them: are you fucking with me? It's not him. My son had no swollen fingers and a bloated blue face, my child's stomach was not tightly filled with water and silt. My son had red hair and a slightly surprised face. Why are you showing me this ugly boy? I really wanted to say so, but I didn't. I didn't say anything at all. But it was obvious: around other people's children, thirty-year-old men do not cry on the floor in a fetal position. I signed a piece of paper and left.

I hardly remember the next six months. They mingled in my head into a dirty whirlpool of vodka, dope, cheap prostitutes, sober and drunk tears, oiled-faced drinking buddies, and a motel half-sleep. Somewhere out there, during these six drunk months, I robbed the first store.

The most disgusting thing is that you can't get drunk in prison. You can buy tiny airline bottles some fat dude smuggled inside of his asshole, the man with crooked teeth is sure to drive moonshine somewhere in stuffy shady cellars. But that is not enough. Every alcoholic in prison is like a bum in a store with elite booze. It will be enough for him to sniff, but not enough to get plastered.

Twice I tried to hang myself in the cell. A month I've spent in the infirmary after a fight which I eagerly ran into. I never thought before that imprisonment

implies deprivation of the freedom to choose to live or die. The court didn't tell you to die, boy. We know better how to punish you. And then I received a letter from her.

God knows who she was. Some unrealistically powerful bitch. She had connections everywhere. And a lot, a shit load of money. She managed to get a decommissioned cruise ship and drive almost seven hundred criminals onto it. I'm telling you: a shit load of money.

The letter was long and beautiful. I don't like to read much, but as I read the curls of her handwriting, I could feel the hairs on my back stirring. She wrote that she knew that I wanted to die and wrote that she would help me if I helped her and participated in some kind of scientific research. She wrote to me because she knew that if I hadn't thought that she would help me with my problem, I would never have volunteered for some stupid research. In a couple of weeks, we were actually offered the chance. Motherfucking connections.

I remember this big cruise ship. It was called "Queen Mary" and was very beautiful. After the cramped smelly cell, I enjoyed the absence of cockroaches and the properly working can. These guys should advise the government on the reform of the penitentiary system. For two weeks of sailing, almost seven hundred criminals who walked without handcuffs on the ship did not arrange a single scuffle, not a single brawl. To my recollection, no one even cursed. Of course, drugs played their part too.

I'm not too sure about dope, to be honest. Something could be mixed into the water or food. They had to mix it in, otherwise, it is very difficult to explain how all of that happened. But I haven't really seen any drugs. I remember the people who were involved in the service. There were few, very few of them on the ship, or they were hiding somewhere. I may have seen them two or three times. But someone had to change towels in the bathroom, cook food, wash decks...

It all started suddenly and strangely. We sailed for about 10 days. As I later found out, we went out into neutral waters. The days gradually grew dimmer. It seemed to me that I was hearing voices or seeing something that was not there. Someone's laugh, whether childish or female, but with a hint of insanity. But it wasn't scary at all. It was nice. We were doing something. Together with some guys, we were moving some boxes on the lower deck. I don't remember anyone

telling us what to do. I just felt: here comes a guy, he is dragging a box, he needs help. And I helped. Perhaps these are all dreams because I slept there a lot. It is foggy, but I will never forget the feeling of indissoluble unity, even if I dreamed about it.

Several times I saw her, the woman who wrote to me. She was much younger than I imagined. Probably no more than 25. Beautiful, with a neat, well-proportioned body, a shock of red hair, and the eyes of an old woman. She was saying something in the dining room. I watched, we all watched. After the death of my son, everything that had pleased me earlier ceased to give this effect. It did not disappear, it remained as a habit, a need, a way of survival, but it did not bring pleasure. I drank but did not enjoy myself. I ate, but with no appetite. I fucked, but not in awe. Like masturbating with a living body. But when she spoke, I felt drawn to her. I craved her, she was important to me. Perhaps more important than anything else.

Everything that happened next seems very strange. But only now. Then everything seemed incredibly logical. I just ended up in a long line. We moved slowly. At some point, I saw that everyone was masturbating in front of me and joined them. In a large hangar on the lower deck, a bed was bolted to the floor with large screws. She lay on the bed, tied with a thick rope. She was completely naked, her legs pulled up to her stomach and fixed so that her pelvis rose slightly above the bed. She had a pillow under her lower back. At the head of the bed sat her eternal companion - a dark-haired adult woman, much older than the first one, but very beautiful with smooth bronze skin. The companion stroked the redhead, whispering something.

One by one, the guys from the line came up to the bed, climbed onto it, did their job, and left. Between the first ten guys, naked girls walked, whom I had not seen anywhere else on the ship, and looked at the guys' junk. Where needed, they helped with their hand or mouth. I didn't need help. The girl came up, looked down, smiled, and walked by. When I climbed onto the bed, she was crying soundlessly. Her companion did not look at me, she whispered in her ear: everything is fine, you are good, I love you, He loves you, you are worthy, everything is fine... Or something like that. I don't remember much. When I finished, she opened her eyes and looked at me with her old-lady eyes. I was in awe of delight because she was looking at me. I got out of bed and left the hall. When I got to the end of the line, I felt that I needed to step into it again.

This went on for three days. We ate, slept, and stood in line. Five times a day they took a general break — they probably fed her. All this savagery has never bothered any of us back then. We did what we had to, we were part of something bigger and we were pleased. Perhaps even happy. It's strange that I didn't get to know any of the guys then. I did not know a single name, although I have not seen so many dicks in my entire life. Now I'm trying to remember if any of us spoke to each other. We must have. It's absurd that almost seven hundred people wouldn't say a word in two weeks, but I cannot recall any conversation. And then they disappeared.

The woman, her companion, and the attendants disappeared. The weather was wonderful that morning and I remember how we all went swimming. For the first time in these two weeks at sea on a cruise ship, the whole crowd went down to the bathing deck, which went under the water with a gentle rubber edge. I don't swim. I only take a shower when I myself can't stand the smell. I stopped at the water's edge while the guys kicked off their clothes and dived into the water. The man in the water in front of me looked around. He smiled at me and waved his head towards the water. I slowly shook my head like a lamb. He came up, took my hand, and pulled me towards the water. On the way, I took off my boots and pants, pulled off my T-shirt — he waited for me — and stepped into the tepid foam.

I walked slowly. Bare heels splashed on the water, black rubber roasted by the hot June sun warmed the feet, and there was joy in front of us. The guys frolicked, splashed, swam in the distillation, laughed, and screamed from the top of their lungs in the delight of freedom. The radiant eyes of the person in front of me shone with kindness and warmth so that I felt a lump in my throat. I rushed into the water. I drowned in a cloud of spray and fluffy sparkling foam, and he laughed and dived in front of me. He swam backward, looking at me, accompanying me, leading me on a thick cable with a radiant gaze from which he did not let me go. I swam with delight and joy. I was happy.

At that moment I hit a corpse. I didn't notice it and bumped into it as if it only materialized when my shoulder touched it. His bareback, covered with a thin shiny film of water, swaying on the soft waves. In one second I woke up. My heart pounded and fear gripped my balls with an iron hand. I'm going to drown, I thought. I was smart enough not to show it. I stopped to rest. I closely watched my watchman and he followed me with unblinking eyes. I tried not to

drop my smile into the water. Slowly, backward, I swam towards the ship. The guys in the distance swam and splashed, but among them, I could distinguish white islands of backs. My watchman's eyes strained. And in a split second, he was underwater. The water swallowed him as if someone very strong had pulled him down in one instant. I turned and hammered my hands into the water. With all my strength, I jerked my legs, pushing back the streams of water and whoever might be in them. With each blow, I was getting closer to the edge of the deck, but I felt that the lightning-fast creature with each blow was getting closer to my feet.

My lungs ached from harsh breathing, my heart could not cope with a load of horror and crawl strokes. I was 10 meters from the deck when it grabbed my leg. Cold, slippery fingers gripped my ankle tightly and pulled me down. I kicked his arm, twisted the grabbed leg. Leaving behind me a column of frightened bubbles rising to the surface, I pulled myself up to my leg and began to unclench my tenacious fingers. With my nails, I scratched, tore off, and pounded. I floundered with my feet, kicked and jerked in different directions. Something heavy met my free leg and my grip loosened slightly. I broke free and rushed upstairs.

I gasped as I crawled out onto the deck. Cough tried to knock water droplets out of my lungs, and I crawled on the warm rubber away from the water. A little red-haired boy was sitting at the edge and looking straight ahead, but I paid no attention to him. I looked around: the creature was striding across the deck in my direction. I tried to jump to my feet, slipped, plopped on my ass, and, confused in movements, crawled backward. It stretched out its arms in different directions and screamed in a strange double voice "Come back to the water." I shook my head, crawling further and further. "Back in the water" — the high and low parts of the double voice were even further apart. I slammed my back into a pole and hit the back of my head on the metal. My ears rang. It stopped. A thin tongue of water licked his heels, barely reaching the toes. Anger inhumanly distorted the face of the creature and it screamed again. "Come back into the water": the scream at the lower levels made its way into the liver, the upper levels pierced the eardrums. I did not move and breathed heavily.

The creature looked at the boy. The boy, who had never moved during all this time, slowly got up, turned, and walked in my direction. Blinded by the sun

behind him, I recognized him only when he came too close to me. Everything inside went cold and shrank, I wanted to scream. "Dad, let's go swimming." Tears gushed from my eyes, which looked at Brian's always slightly surprised face. Struggling with myself, I shook my head. "Let's go swimming". He stretched out his little hands towards me and I wanted to grab hold of them so badly that I almost went crazy. I could not move and with every step he took, I only pressed harder against the warm metal of the pillar behind me. Brian stood in front of me. "Let's go swimming, dad" — he reached my face and closed my eyes with his warm little hand, smelling of sand and grass. I sobbed aloud. I removed his hand from my face and covered my ears with palms. "Let's go swimming, let's go" — rang in my head, and Brian pulled my leg... I screamed. Sometimes now I feel like screaming too, but I can't. That bestial, wild cry into which I put my whole soul, the cry of life and death, the cry of pain and despair, the cry of love and hope I cannot repeat. I kicked my son.

He plopped down on the deck, looking at me in surprise and resentment. I grabbed him screaming and crying, threw him to the ground, and began to punch him in the face. Sometimes my fist hit the blue, swollen face of the drowned boy, and sometimes it hit the bubbling bloody lips of a child who whispered to me "let's go swimming, dad." On the tenth or eleventh beat, I felt a sharp pain. Before my eyes were my bloody, bruised, and abraded knee with raised above it knocked and twisted fist. I looked around — no one was around. Only the archipelago of small white islets just shone in the sun, stretching to the horizon.

I was picked up by accident. A lonely distraught passenger of a lost drifting cruise ship with an empty belly and a wild story. Nobody, of course, believed me. The red-haired woman did not seem to exist. Or maybe her connections helped her hush everything up. It was decided that it was the largest prison break in history, which ended in failure.

I served the rest of my term and got out. Now I could make my plan come to life. Or to death — I don't know which is more correct. But I didn't. Something inside me didn't want to die anymore. Even now I would not write about all this nonsense. At times it seemed even to me that it was all a dream, hallucinations of a drugged convict. But after 6 years I saw her again.

On TV, beautiful shots of parties of the mighty people, giant country residences, dance halls with gilded columns are often shown. At one of them, either on the occasion of the president's birthday or on the occasion of rewarding someone with another dog's regalia, I suddenly noticed a woman in a long black dress. She was dazzlingly beautiful. Brilliant neat earrings, exquisite necklace, light makeup, and luxurious high hairstyle of red springy and unruly hair. Something twisted in my stomach and I didn't click the remote control. The camera moved a little and I saw a child next to her. A boy with red hair and a slightly surprised face sat in a small black tuxedo and a sleek bow tie, proudly and primly straightening his back, looking faithfully at his mother. He glanced briefly into the camera, probably just following its movement, but I could swear that those old eyes of my son's copy through wires and lenses, antennas, and time were looking directly at me.