

*Francine*

If there was one person who was going to get in the way of my retirement, it was Francine. Oh, Francine. Just let me lay in the set a little more.

Sometimes people recognize me from the show and will offer to buy me a drink because they secretly pity me and my boat-sized life. But when she walked up to me, she didn't offer to buy me a marg, and she didn't give me those sad eyes neither. What she said is that she liked my top—a green, off the shoulder number. She said it reminded her of ice cream.

What else could I do? I cackled. Right in her face. I don't know why on this big blue earth she saw me with my typewriter teeth and thought, sweet. I don't know why she looked at me and thought, that is someone worth loving. She knew I was older than I should have been. Tits spilling everywhere because I don't wear corsets tight anymore, not since the surgery.

After I collected myself, made sure my tatas were in their homes, and my teeth in their gums, I turned around and walked right on away. I didn't want her to overhear my conversation about me being tired, me being old. Looking at her face was like looking into water—not the sea, but the water in some dream, where there's no wind and you can just stand there, still—and I saw someone I very much wanted to be, which was here, on this cruise, with her. I told myself I could do another circuit or two, and made my way to the buffet so it didn't look like I was just walking in circles.

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The air tinkled with the sound of forks and knives. I've always loved that sound. Honestly, the thing I hate most about my job is that once we step onto the stage, people stop eating. Like they can't watch us and eat at the same time. I'd rather they just keep eating their food. It's not good cold. It's barely good warm.

I always do the same dinner plate. First a mountain of potatoes. Then a coral reef of buffalo wings, a yellow scoop of mac and cheese, a lake of ranch. Some trees planted around the edge—roasted broccoli. The girls always tell [JM1] me to eat better, but I can't be bothered. I tell them fishes come in all different sizes, don't they? And besides, I saw what the spinach did to Goldy that one time.

I sat alone at a back table, like always. I liked to scope out my audience before the show while the other girls did shots and made themselves throw up. It was a shame. But nothing I could do.

This crowd had looked pretty good. Nothing out of the ordinary; just a buncha old people trying to squeeze something out of the time they had left, a few colorfully dressed families determined to make their children like them, a few of those single dudes who shell out money for this shit because they know the girls here can't run away. A few people, green in the face, afraid of the water. They were the people I took the most seriously. It's healthy to be afraid of these things, as long as it don't swallow you.

After I sat down, Francine did her own plate, coming out from where she was peeking. It looked like the bottom of the ocean floor, I'm telling you I could see from my seat the amount of gravy she poured over her potatoes. Fried shrimps stuck out like bits of broken driftwood. But I'm not one to judge.

She sat near me and ate quickly. Didn't look up until she was done. Then she just stared at me. Like she forgot all her manners.

When I finished, I stood up to go get a cup of water, maybe, I don't remember now—and she followed me again. She took her dirty plate with her. It was creeping me out, the way she watched me. She had a spot of gravy on her chin. I told her so.

“Oh.” She wiped it away quickly. “Thanks.”

“You're welcome. And you can stop staring.”

“Oh.” Looking like a damn fish. “Sorry. I didn't mean to.”

“It's okay, girly. You excited for the show or something?”

“The show?”

“The gig. With the mermaids. *Moi*. That's French. It's part of the *Turquoise Escape* entertainment package. Didn't you get a brochure?”

“Oh, I don't know—”

“You can come here in an hour and watch me. If you're going to stare, might as well enjoy yourself, right?”

She nodded. “Are you— who do you play?”

“Who do I play? I'm one of the mermaids. The green one.”

“What's your name?”

“I don’t have a name,” I said.

“Your name in real life.”

“This is real life,” I replied. “Come by at 8.”

Her lips twitched. “Okay. I’m Francine.”

“Okay, Francine. See you in a few.”

I didn’t really expect her to come. I think I had seen her walking about with some guy earlier, probably her husband. He didn’t seem the type to want to watch a bunch of mermaids sing about love and pearls. I told myself she would be gone in a week, and it was a comfort.

When we climbed out of our clamshell and onto the stage, I wanted to turn right back around, because she wasn’t there. I shouldn’t have been surprised but I’d gone and got my hopes up. The lights caught the green sequins of my top, dappling everyone’s faces, and then they went to Pinky, dousing everyone in sunset. The music started. Still, I did not see her—just stranger’s eyes, staring, and I was a fish out of water. But then there she was, standing in the doorway holding a plate by her chin. I sang with my mouth wide open and hurt my ears with how loud I was. She did not smile, holler, or clap. She went back and forth between chewing her food and staring at me.

Pinky shot me a look afterwards. “What’s gotten into you?”

I shrugged and didn't say nothing. I left her and Goldy treading in our dressing room, laughing and rolling their eyes over a man who had too much to drink and kept shouting "The water is rising!" whenever the music got low.

I thought I'd miss her, but Francine was there on the deck, smoking a cigarette. She flicked the ash away with one thick finger, splattering into falling stars that hissed when they hit the water.

"Did you enjoy the show?"

"Oh yes." She threw her cigarette overboard.

"I don't care if you smoke."

"Can I tell you something? Your voice is lovely."

There was this one time, when I was young, we had company. My daddy was sitting in his green chair. He looked so old, hunched over like that, while everyone else was standing, holding their plates of cheese and crackers and laughing. I didn't think he could get any older without dying, but then all of a sudden, he sneezed real loud. His legs shot out before thudding back onto the floor and a big drop of silver spit hung out of his mouth. Seeing him lower his head and try to suck his explosion back inside of himself made me feel the same way I feel looking out at the sea, at its comings and goings that don't actually go nowhere.

No one seemed to notice. My mama made me sing "Somewhere Over the Rainbow," which made me even sadder. I was about to turn around and run to my room when their friend—Rachel, who I was madly in love with—came up to me and said "Can I tell you something?"

And I hung my head. I looked at my shoes, at my daddy's shoes.

She said I had a beautiful voice. She really did say that.

“She’ll be a siren when she’s older,” she said. My mama let out that tight laugh of hers that meant the conversation needed to end. But I didn’t mind. I was so happy, I decided right then and there that I’d become a singer. And I would always hold onto that blue feeling I got from that memory of my daddy hunched over, the shape of a shrimp, so every time I opened my mouth it would be with that beautiful voice.

I made sure to look into Francine’s eyes when I next spoke, though she looked away. “Come day after tomorrow. There’s always a special show on Wednesdays.”

“Special?”

“Helps people get over the hump. Even on vacation. They start to think about returning to land.”

“I love your outfit,” she finally said. “Green is my favorite color. Like sea foam.”

“Seafoam is shit white. Unless there’s some kind of seafoam I don’t know about.”

She laughed.

“You’ve only complimented me. Say something bad!” I was only egging her on, but she looked mortified.

“I can’t,” she stammered, suddenly nervous.

“Can’t say I’m surprised.” I took hold of her hand and pulled her towards the empty dining hall.

All they had left at that time of night was warm honeydew and the little tower of chocolates they put out to be fancy, though I knew they were just regular chocolates spray painted with a little airbrush full of blue paint.

“I like your nails.” I watched her pick up a chocolate. She didn’t use the silver tongs they left next to the plate, and I didn’t correct her. Her shiny purple polish made me think of little fish picking over everything. I thought about saying that out loud but changed my mind.

“Tell me about yourself,” I said instead.

“I’m just a lady on a ship.”

“Why this one though?”

She shrugged. “My husband and I are from Lake Placid, you know, New York. The Adirondacks.” She said more words I did not know. Then: “We run a little shop. Then Ted said we’d take a cruise—”

“Where did that come from?”

She laughed. “Do you really want me to start from the beginning?”

“Please.”

She paused for a moment, and I took the chance to shove something sweet in my mouth. Then she began.

That's how I'd like to remember her; her telling me the beginning of things with blue chocolate in her teeth. Honestly, it must have been something like love because I could have sat in that creaky chair all day and listened to her tell me the story over and over again.

And that's saying something, because the beginning was all about Ted. Ted Ted Ted. It started with them trying to save their marriage, which I personally find hilarious. One of them got it into their head that it would be a good idea to go to Howard Johnson's before they closed for good and celebrate their anniversary with a nice fat slice of nostalgia.

"I know Hojos. I love their turkey dinner."

Francine nodded. "Everything from there was good."

She said they had both worn their best, which meant Francine was in a dress one size too small in a particular shade of mustard that she never really liked and was no longer in style anyway. I saw her in it the first evening of the cruise. It looked absolutely terrible on her.

"You should wear lipstick like that," Ted had said, pointing to the host as she walked them to their sticky booth.

"I don't like that shit. Makes my teeth look yellow."

"I'm trying to be nice."

"Oh." Her response for everything, that Francine.

She and Ted had been waiting so long in the booth, she knew she would leave a sweat stain. Ted was impatient. "We need a menu."



“I already know what I’m getting.”

“Good for you. I’d like a menu. And you should look at one too, just in case. Where is that waitress?”

Francine shook her head. “Why do you need a menu, for god’s sake? Just get what you always get—”

“My blood pressure!”

“Forget that for one day. It’s our last time here. Unless we go down to Lake George—”

“I’m not going all the way there for a burger.”

“Okay, well, there’s your answer then. Get whatever the hell you want.”

Ted smiled. “You’re right. But I still need a menu.” He snapped the waitress over, who handed them two sticky menus. “Take your time.”

“We just need one minute. Wait right here.”

Jen—Francine finally got a good look at her name tag— stood awkwardly as Ted chewed over the options.

“I know what I want so I’ll go first. Burger, medium (I remember that), and the unlimited salad bar—”

“Francine. Sorry, just give us a minute. Just a minute, please.”

Jen cast him a look before leaving.

“Francine— what about something else?”

“Ted, are you serious? That’s what I want. I can smell the wings from here. You just called this poor girl over—”

Ted sighed deeply. “Don’t ruin this.”

“Give me a reason why I shouldn’t get the meal I want. I’m hungry, Ted.”

This was where I clapped and told her that it was good she stood up for herself. But then she got that sad look again.

I have to give Ted credit. He saw the fractures in his life and instead of doing the work, decided the best thing to do would be to tap into what his father and his father’s father gave him—the audacity.

In short, Ted was a coward. Afraid of his own wife’s hunger. He thought the proper solution would be to hold something over her head; threaten her with the ocean, because everyone wants to be skinny for the ocean. It’s not really true, of course—have you ever been collecting on the shore and looked for a skinny rock? Good luck. And the most exciting waves are the big ones that could kill you. Bigness is the ocean, and that’s that. Ted didn’t realize what he was tangling himself in when he came up with his scheme.

“Because we’ll go on a— a cruise. How does that sound? A cruise, baby. You want to look good for that, don’t you? For me?”

It was the first time he had spoken softly in years. He reached across the table to grab her hand. A great sadness overwhelmed her. She had imagined paradise as a kind of loneliness, post-divorce, where she just floated along and looked at the outline of islands from the outside. But then there was Ted, offering her what seemed like love. Maybe there was hope. And if there was anything Francine loved, it was hope.

She whispered, "Really, baby?"

"Would I lie?"

She had tears in her eyes as she told the waitress she would like the Hojo chef salad. She hadn't been to the beach since she was a child, didn't remember the best stones are the ones that fill your whole palm, that even skinny lines of melting vanilla ice cream end in fat, heavy drops. She requested no cheese, no dressing, which is just sad. Ted ordered the Heavenly Chicken.

"We've got savings. We could do this. We could go anywhere!"

When they received their food, Francine struggled so much with her dry-ass lettuce that she worried she couldn't get a word out to thank the waitress for refilling her water. She worried she would choke and die before she could taste the salty air. She didn't, of course, and that was how they ended up here, because as hopeful as they were, their budget didn't give two craps about hope.

Their room was economy. They got a big bed and a mini fridge, but it was empty, because, again, economy. The duvet was blue and silky. She laid down and tried to ignore the rocking sensation below her. Ted rubbed his hand against the bedspread. "Do you think this is real?"

Francine shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“You should know what silk feels like,” Ted said flatly. He still smelled like pine trees and the shop back home.

She held her breath and exhaled before answering, “It’s probably not.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing. It means it’s probably not real silk, I mean we only paid—”

“You think this is cheap?”

(No, but if you think it’s the *Seven Seas*, you’re blind.)

“We—”

“I shelled out all the savings for this trip. That *you* wanted to go on!”

Francine sought something to grip but her sweaty fingers slipped over the possibly-fake silk.

Everything around her rocked, back and forth, back and forth.

“—You said it was a great idea—If you leave this room—“

The only reason why he stopped his blubbing was because Francine said she was going to be sick, and hurried outside.

“The rest is history.” She smiled at me, and I felt the rocking of the ship for the first time in years.

When I asked her how she even ended up with a man who didn't let her pour her own water, she said they met through mutuals. On their second date, they were walking through the park because they thought they had to do something before having sex, but all Francine could do was look at the flowers and feel queasy. She said she been nauseous her whole life.

I thought she was saying she had a bad stomach, but she blamed it on the green woman. The green woman was some unsmiling lady she seen in the park when she and her mother took a walk as a child. They had been sitting on a bench, sharing a cup of vanilla ice cream. Her mother wanted to help her husband close up shop, but Francine threw such a fit that they finished their ice cream there on the bench. That was when she saw her. The lady was wearing a mint-colored dress with lace all around the edges and it moved like water.

“It had to have been real silk,” she said. “Or something else, real soft.”

When her mother finally dragged her away, the green lady was just opening a book. Francine cried in the car and moaned for as long as she could until her mama threatened to leave her on the side of the road.

When they got to the store, she wiped dust off the tchotchkes and imagined what her life would be like if she and the green lady lived together in one of the little Christmas box scenes they sold for \$9.99, sharing hot chocolate and eating mint ice cream by the fire. The lady would suck on the little chocolate chips until all the ice cream was gone, and then she would spit them into a little dish for Francine to eat.

I laughed when she told me this, but she told me she wasn't kidding. So I kept listening.

“I thought about her since then. The green lady saved me, time and time again,” she whispered.

“Whenever I was sad or lonely or just bored, I thought of her. And then Ted and I met through our friend Pat, it was his idea—and he bought me a mint ice cream.

“It was a sign!” She rolled her eyes. “I never should have believed that anything was ever given to me. I thought—”

“What happened to her?”

She shrugged. “I only saw her that one time. But I never forgot.”

It grew quiet after that. We realized we had picked our treasure clean, so all that was left were a stack of dishes with smudges where the chocolate had melted and a light coating of green glitter. I was shedding.

I reminded her to come back tomorrow. She said she didn’t need to be reminded. Well, that really did me in. I went to sleep that night thinking about her in that room with Ted, laying on the bed, and imagined that each time the boat rocked it was from them, from Ted, trying to capsize everyone. Ted and Francine, in a room sprayed with air freshener so the smell of the ocean didn’t get in, flopping on the silk duvet. Which is fake, by the way. I should have mentioned that earlier. But that don’t mean nothing. No one on this cruise could afford real silk anyway.

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For the first time in years, I drank with Pinky and Goldy before the show. I still went to the buffet, but it felt like I had swallowed a bunch of sea urchins and after one plate I went into that dark room to drink. When we emerged, we sang and danced though I was dazed by the light

bouncing off the floorboards. Goldy had cracks around her lips she had forgotten to cover. Pinky threw her pearls at the crowd and didn't seem to care. We lamented over our love for humans. I thought I saw a tear on Pinky's cheek.

The lights dimmed. I was not used to drinking so much; my stomach sloshed and I pressed myself together, trying to hold it all in.

"Do you hear that?" Pinky cried. All the eyes in the audience shot up. It was Wednesday. We had to give them something.

The audience murmured. Pinky repeated herself, louder. "I think—it's Poseidon, calling us home!"

"Poseidon!" We cried. I lifted my arms up to the ceiling. The lights looked like two giant eyes, light green. "Poseidon!"

When I first started working, I asked Theo what was up with us shouting for the sea king. Were we afraid and wanting to go home? Or were we happy where we were, letting him know we were okay?

He just shot me a look and said it didn't matter as long as I was loud enough. I didn't ask questions after that. Couldn't be bothered if that's the attitude I'd get.

We cried out again a third time. Always three, because it builds momentum. Any more than that you're beating a dead audience. I got on my knees and the girl's smiles froze in place. I stared at those green lights. My eyes was burning but I was afraid if I blinked, she'd go away. The sea urchins swam in my belly, and now my bladder felt completely full, close to bursting.

“Who is he calling?” Pinky continued with her dialogue. “Can you hear him?”

Lately the audience had been picking Pinky to go out. But that night a man stood up and pointed at me.

“The green one!” He cried. The green one. I was so spooked I looked away from the green lights and towards the man who had spoken. I didn’t realize who he was until I saw Francine next to him, looking mortified.

The girls looked at each other and then at me. After a beat, I wobbled to the middle and sang the spiel about dying. Normally they liked to watch the young pretty girl die. I get it. Whatever gets your heart going, you know.

I swam through the crowd, not looking no one in the eye. I made it out the door and the air felt good.

This was what made the *Turquoise Escape* so spectacular. We advertised a show of surprises and that’s what they got. Only the bravest and warmest dressed followed me out to where Theo, minutes before, had set up a nice board for us to sashay out on. Some stayed inside and watched Pinky and Goldy sing half-heartedly about missing *moi*.

There were no stars out. I thought of Francine’s cigarette and shivered with the air all around me. Finally, I reached the edge and looked back at the crowd. Francine was watching.

The water’s always cold, but the tips I get afterwards make it worth it. Plus, the applause sounds like a thousand lips smacking together, just for me.

When I hit the water, I let everything go. The world around me turned warm.



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On Thursday night, Francine came up to my table.

“I just got away from Ted. He’s meeting up with a guy he met the other night.” She fiddled with her drink. “You know, I have an idea.”

“About what?”

“The show.”

“There’s nothing wrong with the show,” I spit an olive pit onto my plate.

“I know,” she said hurriedly. “But this will make the show new. This isn’t about you. You’re perfect.”

I don’t know why she said corny shit like this, but she believed it. She believed that because I wore green, I was her green lady. And maybe I was but also maybe it was just a coincidence and maybe Ted was just a piece of shit who didn’t want his wife to embarrass him in front of an underage waitress, as if she cared. But the love still felt good so honestly, even if it was built on bullshit, I took it. I took it because I needed it too. I had been on this small boat for a long time.

So I thought about it for a second, though it was mostly for show. The ship was clearly strapped for cash, with its rusted deck chairs, stinky rooms. Our show clothes were from when I still had most of my real teeth. And on top of that, Francine made me want to say yes. I would say yes to anything.

“Spill.”

She did. It was supposed to go like this:

While our hair dripped, she would say, "I think I'm in love with you."

I picked a piece of seaweed from her skull. "No, you're not."

"I am."

"You just want to leave your shitty husband."

"I really do. But I love you."

"I don't have anything but this boat. I hope you realize that."

"I don't get seasick."

"I saw you throwing up the first day here."

"I'm used to it now."

When I'd kiss her, I'd taste the truth. No puke taste, just salt and brine. When I'd take off her dress, I'd pick the seaweed from her skin. I imagined her nipples like big barnacles. When we'd kiss, maybe we'd knocked teeth like we was kids. When I'd open my mouth to laugh, she let herself in. She needed something to laugh about, she did.

Then we'd celebrate the new show, and our love, at the buffet. We would hold hands under the table. I'd feed her baked salmon with a spoon.

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What really happened:

A new week started. Pinky asked if she could borrow my green dress for the evening. I asked her what green dress, and she said the one that made that woman who died look like a real sea thing.

“Woman who died?” I pretended like I didn’t know. I looked up at her kind of cross-eyed, but it felt strange to pretend. “Fine. Give me a second.”

Theo came up to me later and said I was on thin ice because of what I pulled the other night. I didn’t believe him, didn’t even get nervous when everyone cheered Pinky on the most. My voice gave out halfway through. I guess I didn’t want anybody looking at me.

Theo demoted me to side stage afterwards. And I said: I don’t care. I’m retiring. I’m done. I was going to before Francine came, but something stopped me— don’t ask me what, because I won’t say. All stories, they’re shit.

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If I could tell you one thing, Francine—actually, two things. Just two things. First of all—why did you have to go and do that? Why didn’t you tell me you couldn’t swim? I never would have let you be part of the show, let you walk the plank with me, if I had known. And did you know? Did you get a chance to hear that applause? People cheered, as if we returned home. It was so loud, I could hear it in the water. Did your stupid hope make you think you’d know how to swim? Or that I could lift you? Wet things are heavy things, Francine. Everything in this world— heavy.

The second thing would be that I stay awake at night thinking about how the ocean levels are rising. Not about you. Some guy told me that over a drink my last night here, and I thought it was the same guy who gave us a problem last week, but this was a different man, same blues. I

told him he was horrible at flirting and he said he wasn't flirting. He bought me another drink and when I got up to go to my room, he got angry and threw it on me. I got Theo and he apologized but I still cursed him out and made him leave. Then I sat at the bar for the rest of the night. Still sitting here. My ass hurts on the chair but I like listening to the people eat and meander. Anyway, I can't go back into my room, there's something wrong with the lighting and the fake silk cover and it makes me feel sick. So I'm just going to sit here for as long as I can.

I wish the ocean would hurry up and rise faster. I'd still be sitting here, thinking of you and that stupid green lady, until the water covered my feet and legs and eyes and I'd see you again.