

Jefferson's Bistro

"Send back this, that, and this," said Mr. Walton of the scallops, bruschetta, and Pinot Noir. "Bring back French onion soup for the table and a bottle of Mary Ann Red."

"Of course, sir," said Daniel.

On board the Northern Star, a goliath of a cruise ship, one could dine at a myriad of restaurants: two sizable main dining rooms for those who desired a casual night, a Greek restaurant for the exotic, a sushi bar for those with refined palates, a sweet little Italian restaurant tucked away at the back of the ship, and of course, the intimate Jefferson's Bistro.

Jefferson's Bistro was mid-ship on deck 7. Its theme was derived from Thomas Jefferson's Monticello estate; faint mossy green walls, white table tops, maroon booths and chairs, and a sprinkling of portraits of the man himself. The gem of the place—the more difficult tables to get reservations at—were located in the corner nook designed after his study. With walls covered in books, the section had only three four-top mahogany tables. A place designed for the elite, the wealthy, the classy—an area that John F. Kennedy or Leonardo DiCaprio would belong in. Not a single item had the slightest imperfection: all the silverware perfectly spotless, all the seats lavishly comfy, all the shelves cleared of dust—not even a speck of dirt.

Of the 14 restaurants on the ship, the Bistro's galley was the smallest. Through the automatic doors, after the final prep station, was the dish pit, the bartender's cage, and then a small five-person line of chefs working feverishly to complete a never-ending list of orders.

A wall of steam greeted Daniel as the dishwashers continually shoved racks of dishes into a steel box. Daniel dumped the appetizers in the already full compost bin and stacked the plates with the others in front of the poor guy stuck in the dish pit. The discarded scraps of food floated in a swirl of soapy water. Hot steam melded the stagnant dishwater smell with the metallic aroma of the bartender's steel cage (when a restaurant lacked a sit-down bar, they shoved a bartender in a metal box of booze in the back to mix drinks for the tables). To save space, the bartender's cage faced the dish pit.

Daniel spun around to exchange the bottle of wine. He slid the bottle through the bars and told them it wasn't good enough. Nearly all the bartenders on the ship were gorgeous: "It's just good business," the Food & Beverage Officer would explain if someone had the nerve to inquire.

Hearing Daniel's voice, the bartender peaked over her shoulder, but refused to turn around. "What the hell's wrong with it?" she said while harshly cutting lemons and oranges for garnishments. She scooped up the citrus slices and dumped them into her garnish bins.

"It's not good enough."

"Then what is?" She turned around and snatched the bottle from his hands.

"A Mary Ann Red." He watched her reach up for the requested bottle off a high shelf. Her shirt was untucked—revealing her lower back. "Kenzie, are you alright? You seem shorter than usual."

"Oh, shut up. You better make enough tips for both of us tonight. I can't make jack-shit in here. This is the worst cage too. It was made for giants. I need a god-damn stepping stool for half of the good shit."

"I think I got this one tonight. The tables look good," he said and grabbed the heavy black bottle she was pushing through the bars. "I've got the study tonight. By the way, your shirt's untucked."

She looked down and hastily retucked her shirt. Before Daniel could react, she shot her hand between the bars and grabbed his black tie to pull him close. Almost squishing his face into the cage, saying, “Don’t be creepy, Daniel. I know your cabin number-- I’m not afraid to jump you in your sleep.”

“I hope you do,” he said with a smile.

She fixed his loose knot, gave him a wink, and pushed him away.

With four soups and the new wine, Daniel returned to the table. He placed the wine in the ice bucket with a crunchy slush and carefully served the appetizers.

In front of the table with a wide grin, Daniel started, “Is there anything else I—”

“That’ll be all until our main course,” inserted Mr. Walton. His wife rolled her eyes and pushed her empty wine glass closer to him. Mr. Walton gripped the neck of the bottle and yanked it out of the bucket, sending bits of ice and water across the floor. He uncorked the bottle—after a moment’s struggle—and poured his wife a glass and then did the same for his two guests.

Daniel left the table and returned to the back. While he passed the bartenders cage, a whistle pierced through the hum that came from the dishwasher. Inside the cage, Kenzie leaned against the back counter.

“Was that one good enough?” she asked.

“He kept it.”

“Who sends back Lingua Franca?” She picked up the original bottle and examined it. “Nobody sends back Lingua Franca.”

“It wasn’t the wine, I don’t think.”

“How’s that?”

“He never opened it. Either he’s had it before and didn’t like it, or he’s trying to impress his guests.”

“Is he the type? A fat cat?” She puffed out her cheeks and used her arms to imitate a much rounder physique.

“He definitely fits the bill, and the guy’s rude enough.”

“The rudeness isn’t a good sign.” She placed the bottle off to the side. “I haven’t logged it in the system yet, shall I charge it to their room? If he won’t appreciate a fine Pinot Noir, I sure as hell will.”

“I doubt he’ll notice.”

“Great. Tell him thanks for the wine. I love the willful ignorance of the rich.” She wrapped the bottle in her apron and placed it in a drawer. “Stop by my cabin later for a glass.”

He watched her pull out two more ripe lemons, roll them around in her hand, and start slicing again. “I might,” said Daniel, lingering to admire her for a moment longer before leaving to collect the entrees.

Back at the table, he placed the entrees in front of everyone. He waited for a negative remark, but none came. Mr. Walton, his wife, and guests enjoyed their meals and the wine. When the desserts came, Mr. Walton made sure to send the first ones back—there it was.

At the end of the night, Daniel collected the bill from the table. He opened the black book, and a big fat zero sat at the bottom. Being stiffed is not an uncommon occurrence for servers. Some brushed it off and moved on; Daniel did not. All that work, all that extra effort for jack-shit. He wished he would have ‘accidentally’ spilled the soup or the wine or the whole damn meal on Mr. Walton. It wouldn’t have made a difference in the end. Except, perhaps he

would have been fired, or at the very least, written up. But, without tips there isn't much point in having the job.

Daniel used his tip money for cigarettes and beer. When the nights were slow, he was lucky if he could afford both. Tonight, all he could afford was a pack of cigs. Winding down in the crew bar was one of the things that got him through the grueling day. Exchanging stories of horrible guests and talking shit about higher officers made him feel less alone.

Daniel untied his apron, slung it over his shoulder, and bought a fresh pack of smokes from the crew bartender, who'd been fielding stories from off-duty bartenders doing the same things they were complaining about: not tipping, being impatient, and rude. People are quick to point out other people's flaws, but slow to recognize their own. Daniel tossed a dollar bill in the quarter-full tip jar, and watched it float to the bottom like a feather. All the other closing shift servers began to shuffle in for drinks. He gave a disinterested wave to a few familiar faces and left with an unlit cigarette between his lips.

On the ship, there were two designated smoking areas: one for the guests and one for the crew. The crew got the short end of the deal; their area doubled as the mooring deck. It was tight, windy, and had nowhere to sit, unlike the guest's area, which doubled as a luxurious pool-side bar on deck 13 called The Cabana. The crew's space was tight and always crowded. More than half the crewmembers smoked, and all drank.

Angry, exhausted, and annoyingly sober, the last thing Daniel wanted was company.

There was one more smoking area Daniel found for himself. The crew had access to deck 14, which wrapped around the smokestack. The officers told the crew it was their own private sun deck, when in reality, it was a storage area for the extra lounging chairs. The crew used it as a place to tan or nap between shifts. Security was low here. One of the only places on the ship without cameras: the officers weren't concerned about anybody sneaking off with an eight-foot chair.

At night, deck 14 and the surrounding deck 13 were empty. The passengers were either already in bed or on the lower levels. The off-duty crew were too concerned with getting their nicotine fix and losing their sea legs to come that far up. It was the only place on the ship Daniel had the illusion of solitude. He unbuttoned white dress shirt stir in the light breeze.

He sparked the cigarette in his mouth. Its red glow illuminated his scowling face. From one of the lower decks, he heard a cackling group of guests passing by. "Those bastards," he mumbled and took a drag. "Miserable fucks." They weren't the miserable ones, he was. He knew that. They were guests on a cruise ship, and he worked on one. They were having the time of their lives, and he was stuck with a mustard stain on his sleeve.

General frustration turned to hatred with the sound of the deck's gate unlatching. For a moment, he hoped it would be Kenzie, but she was in her cabin enjoying a nice glass of wine. He peered in the direction. He didn't recognize the uniform the figure wore. It was too flowy and dress-like to be any department's uniform. He realized a guest had managed to ignore the 'crew only' sign at the gate. He turned to scold the trespasser.

"Crew only," he said. "Can't you read?"

"Can't you?" said the woman pointing to the no-smoking sign on the wall. The woman leaned on the rail and took a cigarette out of her pack. The woman looked familiar, but after two contracts, all the guests blurred together. They all looked like different variations of the same ten people. She was definitely older, but still skinny—that rich, 'hasn't had fast food in twenty years,' skinny.

“There’s a guest smoking area on deck 13, The Cabana.”

“I’m aware.”

“Then shouldn’t you be there?”

“I’m beginning to think you don’t want me here,” she said, lighting her cigarette. She placed the lighter to the side of her breast. Their eyes met as she let go of her first drag.

“You’d be correct.” He recognized her now. “You’re Mr. Walton’s wife, aren’t you?”

“Only by law.” Her face tightened when she thought of him.

“Look, Mrs. Walton, I can’t be rude to a guest, but please go enjoy your cigarette with your husband, so I can enjoy mine.”

“Please, when my husband isn’t around, call me Aubrey. That Walton name is purely political. I use it only as a means to an end,” she said as if to justify herself. “Why can’t you enjoy the company of a sweet old lady? Did my Donald upset you that much?”

“This is my spot,” he said after he flicked his cigarette butt onto the docks.

“You sound like a six-year-old, or I guess like any spoiled grown man. ‘This is my spot’,” she mocked. “You men are so possessive. Everything has to be entirely yours or you don’t want it at all. Can’t you share anything? How about this: I share one of my cigs with you, and you share this spot with me? We can both forget about my bad-mannered husband for the time being.” She pulled a stick out of her pack and offered it to Daniel. “How’s that?”

He took it from her and used his lighter. He didn’t say anything else but watched the gap between the ship and the docks grow. The low roar from the chimney deepened as the ship set course for the next island.

“You shouldn’t smoke, you know. It’ll ruin your young skin,” she said.

“You should be a little more concerned about yourself. You’ve still got some youth left; it looks like. These things will take more years off your life than it will mine.”

“Oh, you’re too sweet. My days of being concerned about my looks are long gone. Lord knows that obsession consumed my 20’s.”

“Isn’t every woman in her 20’s?”

“Everyone that I’ve met, sure.” She thought for a moment. “Have you ever broken their hearts? Probably not.”

Daniel took a hefty drag. “One I think,” he said with the exhale. “More often, they’d leave me before I could leave them.”

“Oh, don’t be so dramatic. I’m sure most of those girls made the right decision in leaving. Who wants to be trapped down at such a young age? Nothing is sweeter than the admiration of one’s own beauty. Especially in those early years,” she said with a slow drag. “Sooner or later, the bitter replaces the sweet and we gotta wise up. Start fighting tooth and nail for our place in this world. Start lying and cheating to work our way up the ladder,” she said as she watched the end of her cigarette burn down. “Luckily, men are too wrapped up in their own self-preservation and blinded by their ego that they are easy to manipulate,” she said gesturing to Daniel as if he represented the entire male population.

“And that’s something you would know about?”

She smoked the rest of her cigarette and smashed it on the railing. The smushed butt stayed on the nearby post until the wind disposed of it. Along with the trash, the same wind caught the edges of her white dress and fluttered them about. She lit up another and didn’t say anything for a moment. The hum of the nicotine was kind to her, but she stroked her dull brown hair with a frown. “Why yes, that is something I might know about. Why else would I marry a slob like Donald Walton? He’s an abrasive pig...but, he’s got wealth and more importantly...

connections. Let me ask you this,” she said, as she turned to him with her elbow on the rail and pulling the tail of her dress back to expose the majority of her mildly sun spotted leg, “do you think I could compete with the young girls out there today?”

“Why are you asking me?”

“I’m sorry... I thought I could confide in you.”

“I’m a stranger to you. Why would you trust me?”

“Not trust... but, again, confide,” she corrected pointedly. “I won’t see you ever again after the week is over. Whatever I tell you will never come back to me because you have no idea who I am, and I have no idea who you are beyond this ship. To me, you’re another stranger in the vast sea of people that exist on this planet. To tell you something is the same as throwing a letter in a bottle to the sea. You’ll just drift off into the world with the words of a stranger.”

The wake became more substantial as the ship gained speed. Daniel watched as a seagull glided alongside the hull. The air was becoming bitter with salt as the sweet smell of the island flowers became distant. “I suppose that’s true,” he mumbled.

“It’s rather therapeutic, confiding in strangers. You should try it sometime.”

“I think I’m fine. I prefer to keep to myself.”

“Yeah, I gathered that. What happened to you that made you so bitter? Why do you act like the whole world is against you, huh?”

“Excuse me?” said Daniel. “You want to know why I’m so ‘as you say’ bitter? It’s because of people like you—people like your husband, masquerading around with inherited money. While I have to work for a living. While I have to work my body into the ground, so that you can have a *nice evening*. All because you and people like you who were born in the right place, at the right time, to the right people, and I wasn’t. I’m not *bitter*. I’m rightfully pissed off.” Daniel took a drag and a second to cool his fire. “I don’t know you, Mrs. Walton, but let’s keep this relationship the same as it will always be. You be the illustrious trophy wife on a cruise, and I’ll be the waiter who you will never see or speak to again. You want to trust something? You can put your trust in that.”

He finished his cigarette and flicked it into the ocean. She pulled another out of her pack and offered it to him without looking in his direction. She was watching the lights in the distance. He took it instinctively. Her eyes shifted to the seagull below.

“You see that bird down there?” asked Aubrey.

“Ya.”

“What’s it doing?”

“It’s flying.”

“No, shit. It’s using what’s around it for assistance, so it doesn’t have to work as hard.” With the cigarette between her fingers, she traced the bird’s flight along the water. “Surely, it could be flying above the ship, but then it would have to fly all on its own. Down there, it can use the disturbance from the ship to keep it above the water, only needing to flap its wings a few times to maintain its course.”

“What’s your point here?”

“My point is that you can work on your own if you want, it’s exhausting, but you can do it. Or you can observe your surroundings, take note, and use it to your advantage. The world is constantly providing things for you to take advantage of. All you have to do is swallow your pride and take the help. But, maybe you’re too dense for my point to come across. It happens sometimes.”

“You talk to most strangers like this?”

“Only the ones I like or the ones I hate.”

“I won’t ask you which one I am,” said Daniel. “I don’t often take the advice of strangers.”

“Good. Never trust someone you don’t know, but that doesn’t mean you shouldn’t listen to what they say. You can learn a lot from those around you.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Do you remember those people we had dinner with?”

“I’ve served a lot of tables.”

“Those were the Boltons. They aren’t our friends, despite what my husband might say. They are potential clients—potential investors. They could bring us into a new world of living. One with smaller, more intimate cruises, faster cars, and bigger houses. It means very much to my husband that they respect him. That they like him. So, he puts on this act: the *macho tough guy that gets what he wants*. He likes to think he’s a good judge of character, but that’s only half-true. He fumbles around more often than he would admit to, but he lands on his feet most nights. My husband has yet to connect a few dots. The Boltons own a non-profit. They’re looking for someone compassionate, because we only like those who are the most like ourselves.”

“That’s a nice lecture, lady. Unless your husband’s business has an influence on my paycheck, it’s of little interest to me.”

Mrs. Walton flicked the remaining half of her cigarette overboard. “You and my husband are very much alike. You’re both as dense as a brick wall. If the circumstances were different, I’m sure you’d both be pals. Look I’ve shown you his cards—whatever you choose to do with that is up to you. You can’t blame anybody for the hand you’re dealt but it’s your responsibility to get the most out of it.” She turned and began to walk back to the gate. “Enjoy your cigarette. I’ll see you tomorrow at dinner.”

Daniel enjoyed the last of his cigarette. He flicked it overboard to join the rest of the litter and took the elevator to deck two.

He knocked on Kenzie's cabin door. She answered with a glass of wine in her hand. “Can I help you?” she said with a wandering eye. There was lipstick on the rim of her glass—a lot of it.

“I could use a drink if you have any left.”

She opened the door for Daniel to come in. “I might,” she said. She took two and a half steps and was at her make-shift bar counter. Her cabin was small. It was closer to a large walk in closet than to a living quarter. She poured the remaining wine into Daniels glass, but it was barely above half a glass.

“I see you have a sizable head start on me,” Daniel said as he picked up his glass.

“Maybe I do, maybe I don’t.”

Daniel wandered over to the princess bed of the cabin and plopped down. There are three beds in a crew cabin: two are stacked on top of each other as bunk beds, and the third is on the opposite side of the room with nothing but space above it. That bed was reserved for the crew member who had been aboard the longest, the most luxurious accommodation for any crew member; hence the name.

“Long day?” said Kenzie.

“Same as yesterday,” he said with a swig of wine.

“Me too. Well, Charlotte and Lindsay are both staying in their boys’s cabins, so feel free to stay here tonight if you want.”

“Of course, I want that.”

“Good, me too.” She finished her glass and tossed a stick of gum at Daniel.

“What’s this for?”

“You smell like cigarettes. You really shouldn’t smoke as much as you do.”

“Spare me the lecture. I’ve had enough of those tonight,” he said as he tilted his head back to swallow the remaining bit of wine. He could feel its magic working into his muscles—loosening them. He laid back with his head on the only pillow.

“You should listen to me more. Us women often know what’s best, but I’ve told you that before.” She sat on the bed next to him, ran her hand across his chest, and laid her head on him like a pillow.

Daniel heard snoring shortly after, and he knew he was going to be stuck in that position for a while. So, he laid awake, with Kenzie asleep on his chest, thinking about his conversation with Mrs. Walton.

On the last night of the cruise, the hostess showed Mr. & Mrs. Bolton to a table in Daniel’s section. Daniel greeted the table with some water and bread. He asked if they wanted anything more to drink, but they insisted on waiting for the Waltons to show up.

Mr. Bolton was skinny, had a peppered beard, and short hair. Mrs. Bolton had long, full hair with its original color still intact. Her face was broad, and her chin came to a point, much like a chipmunk. Her eyes showed little aging, but crows-feet were starting to peek through. They both looked healthy for being middle-aged.

“If there is anything else you need, please, let me know.”

Mrs. Bolton took a sip of water and lifted her finger in the air while she swallowed, “Tell me, where are you from? We’ve asked nearly every crew member on the ship.”

“I’m from Oregon, Ma’am.” He pointed to his nametag, which had his home town listed below his name: Astoria, Oregon.

“Oh, it’s beautiful there. We’re from California. We’d move to Oregon if it wasn’t for all that rain you guys get. What made you want to take up this line of work?”

“To get away from the rain, believe it or not, and for the experience.”

“I’m sure the money is quite the incentive too,” said Mr. Bolton.

“It pays alright. Nothing to write home about.”

“But the tips? The tips must be fabulous,” said Mrs. Bolton.

“Some are good, and some aren’t.” He remembered the conversation from the previous night about getting the most out of the hand he’s been dealt. “In fact, I’m glad to hear you’re dining with Mr. Walton again tonight. He’s a very generous man. Very kind of him to leave such a large tip the other night.”

“Generous you say?” said Mr. Bolton, looking at his wife with one intrigued eyebrow raised. “That’s wonderful to hear.”

Daniel thanked them for coming and left to attend to his other tables. After taking some orders, Daniel noticed Mr. & Mrs. Walton had arrived. While he dropped off the entrees to the neighboring table, he heard three crisp snaps. He turned to see Mr. Walton insisting on his attention. Daniel walked to the table with his notebook and pen ready. Daniel greeted them both.

Daniel asked the table, “Something to drink?”

“Another bottle of Mary Ann Red,” said Mr. Walton.

Mrs. Walton was looking at the wine menu, “Oh no, honey, let’s have the Don Pérignon 2002 P2. It’s our last night.”

“She makes a good point, Mr. Walton. Tonight, is the night to splurge,” said Mrs. Bolton.

“Don Pérignon it is. Bring that and some crab cakes.”

“Right away,” said Daniel, but before he could leave, a roar of applause erupted from the neighboring table. A man was on one knee with a ring in his hand. Cameras flashed like fireworks. His girlfriend nodded her head and hugged him so tightly it knocked him over.

“Oh-oh, what a moment! Oh, I love it!” said Mrs. Bolton. “We have to congratulate them,” she said to her husband.

Mrs. Walton placed her hand on Mr. Walton’s thigh, “You should buy them a bottle of champagne, honey.”

Mr. Walton brushed her hand away and shook his head. His dismissive demeanor changed to happily obliged when he noticed the Boltons were eager to see him order the bottle.

“One bottle of champagne for the happy couple,” said Mr. Walton in a quiet voice.

“That’s generous of you, sir,” said Daniel as he left to place the orders. Daniel brought the bottle of champagne to the couple. He then delivered the bottle of wine and crab cakes. Daniel opened the bottle and poured a glass for everybody at the table.

Mr. Bolton raised his glass to offer a toast, “To Mr. Walton’s hospitality.”

Everyone raised their glasses and took a drink. Daniel took their orders and brought out their meals.

After they had finished their entrees, the busser cleared the tables. Daniel came back for their dessert orders. The bottle of wine was empty, and everyone sat back in the chairs with their stomachs pushed out.

“Another bottle?” inquired Mr. Bolton.

“Yes, another bottle. We must,” said Mrs. Walton.

“I couldn’t,” said Mr. Walton. The cheer from the Boltons face began to drain. “Okay, another bottle. We’ll pass on dessert.” Mr. Walton pulled his card out and handed it to Daniel. “Close up the tab.”

“Very well,” said Daniel

Daniel returned from the back with the bottle and bill. In one swift movement, he placed the black book in front of Mr. Walton, replaced the empty bottle, and returned to the back. He slid the empty bottle through the bars to the bartender.

“Three of these can really rack up quite the bill. Do you think they’ll want another? I only have one more,” said Kenzie.

“I don’t think so. They are wrapping things up.”

“I’d hate to be footing that bill.”

“Oh, I think he’ll be fine.”

Daniel walked back to his section. He began to reset the neighboring table after the engaged couple left. He saw Mr. Walton had opened the book, and his eyes widened when he saw the number at the bottom.

“How much?” asked Mrs. Bolton.

“Oh, don’t you worry I’ll take care of this.”

“Of course, but how much are you tipping? Excuse me for asking, but I’m sure it’s an impressive amount,” pressed Mrs. Bolton

“You don’t have to answer that. I’m sorry my wife is a curious one,” said Mr. Bolton.

Mr. Walton stared at the bill for a moment before writing down a number and signed the bottom with a flourish. He slid the bill over to the Boltons for them to see. The Boltons looked at

each other with a smile. Mr. Walton took back the book and pushed it to the edge of the table—satisfied.

“That’s very, very kind of you, Mr. Walton. My wife and I heard a lot of good things about you, but I’m glad we got to see some of it in person.”

Daniel came back to the table and thanked everybody for coming in. He grabbed the bill and placed it in his apron.

“Enjoy the rest of your evening. I hope you had a wonderful time aboard the ship.”

“We certainly did,” said Mrs. Walton.

Daniel smiled at her and left the table. The Waltons and the Boltens left the restaurant together. Daniel cleaned up and reset the table before clocking off.

That night Daniel was able to buy plenty of beer and cigarettes. He shared with his friends and bought a special bottle of wine to share with the bartender.