

Che

I met Che on the third night of our Caribbean cruise after leaving Ochos Rios.

My husband John had a migraine and had confined himself to our dark quiet cabin. I kissed him then left him be uninterrupted. I ventured down the soft carpet in the narrow passageways of our section to the wider foyers and common areas which then led to the countless indulgences the ship had to offer.

I admired my tan line now under my watch (a prized possession given to me by my mother) from the day's sun. Dehydrated from the day's excursions, I made my way to the exterior of the ship and walked along the outer deck in the warm breeze in a round about search for water. My wanderings brought me to a small dimly lit bar on the second deck on the opposite side of the ship. It was a three walled watering hole that was left open to the inviting Caribbean breeze. A radiant full moon with only the odd shimmer of cloud lit up the ocean. I hoped John would see this tomorrow night.

The bar was almost unoccupied, with a small group of women that sat huddled in the corner in a circular booth. They looked and sounded well on their way to an evening of debauchery and would no doubt get louder as their inebriation got worse. One cold water, two if I opted for wine while I was out, and I would be on my way.

The back ground chatter from the group made my small talk with the bartender difficult. From the group it sounded like a high-pitched man's voice in the group shamelessly quoted "The Parliament of Fowls" by Geoffrey Saucer. (Something I would not have known without a masters in English Lit.) I had decided to just take my water

with me when the voice said, “A lady should never drink alone. Isn’t that right girls?” To which several “girls” readily agreed with giggling.

I turned around towards the group. Mid spin, I indicated to them I had heard enough plagiarising of Chaucer’s verbatim from university sophomores to last two lifetimes, thank you very much. I now noticed the five women I had initially seen were joined by a parrot and it appeared that he was the one that had spoken to me. He sat in the center of the group, his wings spread out behind those sitting closest to him.

I looked first at my drink, then at the bartender trying to confirm there weren’t hallucinogens in my water. He only smiled and winked.

The parrot cocked his head a bit to the side, taking a better look at me. “Chaucer, indeed. Come, my dear, I must now really insist you pull up a chair. Join the yarn.”

I am not the adventuring type, not even if the adventure only means talking to a better- than-average speaking parrot in the safety of a bar. I smiled, put a hand up to show no offense, and declined the offer. “I’m only here for a moment and then I’m going to check on my husband. Thanks though.”

“Suit yourself, but twenty years down the road you may find yourself thinking back to this evening. And you may even kick yourself for not stepping a bit out of the mundane and seeing what a macaw that quoted long dead literary greats had to say. Unless you just don’t care. In which case your next drink is still on me and I bid you adieu.” He tilted his upper beak a bit into what looked like a smile.

I got up and walked towards the table.

“A man loves the meat in his youth that he cannot endure in his age,” the macaw narrated. Shakespeare this time. We shared a smile. “I’ll stop,” he promised as the group shuffled to make room for me.

I’m the first person to tell you I do not see myself as worldly, but I do read. And I do know a thing or two about parrots, albeit less for macaws. However, I was completely taken aback by the macaw’s confidence and his ability to speak in such an articulate manner.

Che, for that was what the macaw went by, was much larger than I initially thought. Three feet from head to tail, his body was a deep royal blue with a strip of yellow under his powerful looking beak and bright yellow rings around his eyes. He had a large hoop earring clasped through a blue feather over where the hole of his ear would be. His talons looked like they could crunch stone. Che introduced everybody around him. A few of the girls had to remind him their names, and Che showed no sign of embarrassment at needing to be reminded.

He carried the conversation, bringing it occasionally to myself or one of the other girls, but for the most part provided anecdotes on himself, the world, and ship life. He said he headlined a magic act that I had somehow not been aware of to this point. Accenting the conversation were odd impersonations of everyone from Ronald Reagan to some rapper named Lil John that said “OK” a lot. Not a normal ok- OKAAAY.

Che had origins in Brazil, where a vacationing talent scout on a chance eco tourism safari had noticed his abnormally well-defined talons. Contacts led to more contacts, and two short months later he was signed with a modeling agency out of New

York, New York, baby. He found himself in projects that specialized in close ups of flag worthy American Bald Eagles. When the time came for the "talon works" as his agent called it, Che was put in as a substitute. Some of the eagles were pissed, for sure, but modeling wasn't unionized and the bosses did whatever they goddamn wanted in this industry.

"I'll tell ya, its hard to believe what a rich middle aged stock trader will pay for a model as they figure out how to express themselves through artistic mediums," Che joked as he over enunciated his words in a feigned high society British accent. "But in the defense of New York's elite, that is where I fell in love with poetry more so in comparison to prose."

He quickly bored with the world of modeling, he continued to tell us. Whereas the lifestyle was unarguably affluent and more than one could ever hope for, he longed for the sea and to explore more of the world. So, he loaded up his steamer, made a few phone calls of people in the entertainment industry he had met, and here he was.

I had the two glasses of water I had promised myself, then quickly switched to wine. The chilled wine countered the humid breeze of the Caribbean waters, and the noise from our table didn't seem nearly as bad now that I was part of it.

As the evening's conversation and laughs went on, I looked at my watch less often, usually just prior to ordering another half glass. Just a bit longer, I would tell myself. Besides, my poor husband needed the alone time. I dreaded the thought of sneaking into the room and accidentally waking him up.

One of the women at the table, a blonde pretty young thing named Marla I believe, laughed harder and louder than everyone else. She would playfully wave her hair out of her face as she leaned in unnecessarily far during conversations. Her persistent attempt at eye contact with Che allowed the other girls to roll their eyes at each other when she wasn't looking.

At length, Marla finally made her move. "Well, I had best be going," she broke a brief silence. "Che, you know the layout of this ship, right? I mean, it's so big. I don't even know where to go to get back to my room. Would you mind showing me? It wouldn't take long, I'm sure," she added as she slipped out from the booth.

"OKAAAY!" Che answered in his Lil John voice. He looked at the rest of us around the table. "I'll be back, ladies!" and he fluttered his wings as he flew onto Marla's shoulder. Marla flashed a grin at her counterparts and they left the bar.

As soon as Marla and Che were gone, two other women got up. I don't remember their names but remember smiling when they called Marla a whore for doing what I presumed they themselves wanted to do.

That left me and two other women. They were a mother-daughter situation, and I wonder if they were kept on good behavior and not also vying for Che's affections due to the other's presence.

Anne was a bit older than me, Jess a bit younger. They were from Canada, and it was their first cruise. They both smoked and asked if I minded. I hadn't smoked since sixth grade, when my friend would "borrow" the odd cigarette from her mother's purse. I not only didn't mind, I also asked if they had one to spare. Through a nicotine haze that

combined in smell with cherry wine and sea spray they explained to me this was a get away of sorts after Anne's husband, Jess's father, died a year earlier after a brief illness. The other three girls they had told me were from Britain and the Netherlands, acquaintances to them only through the alcohol drank on the ship.

We talked about life and of Che until the bartender told us it was last call. Both mother and daughter had reached their limit by now, taking the opportunity to excuse themselves. Anne left me one more cigarette. We promised to cross paths again on the ship and soon they along with the bartender were gone. I would have returned also but wanted to give John a bit more time.

I took my wine and went over to the railing overlooking the ocean. I looked down and took comfort in knowing that if I were to fall or be thrown over the railing, I would simply fall below to a splattering death on the deck immediately below instead of flailing in the ocean until sharks came to eat me.

I put the cigarette in my mouth and reminisced about grade six. Then realized Anne hadn't left a lighter. I left the cigarette dangling in my mouth as I leaned over the railing and took in the full moon. The gentle murmur of the ship's engines played a melody of sorts with the breeze in my face. It was hard not to get caught up in the romanticised notion of Black Beard and the likes of someone like Jack Sparrow sailing these same waters hundreds of years ago, a hand on the rigging as they stared at the same glorious moon I now looked at.

“The problem with this world is, everyone in it is three drinks behind,” Che slurred his best Humphrey Bogart impersonation as he smiled while perched on the railing beside me. He held a partially drank bottle of spiced Captain Morgan in his wing.

“They said you would be gone for the night,” I pointed out, happy that THEY were wrong.

“With that kid? Please.” He scoffed as he pointed to his bottle. “See, I have discerning tastes. You don’t give me enough credit.” Che continued as he took a swig. “Besides, she got sick. I woke up her roommate and she’s her problem now.”

“Ahh.”

“Beautiful, isn’t it?” Che asked as he stared at the moon. “Selene, Artemis, whatever you wish to be called. In your glory, we salute you,” he added as he waved out his wing that was holding the bottle. He hadn’t yet passed enough of the bitter drink through his esophagus to counter the weight of the bottle’s remaining contents. Che lost his balance and fell over and outwards into the night. I dropped my own drink in shock as I tried to catch him, and feared him dead, unconscious in the ocean awaiting his fate. Fucking sharks. I wanted to sound the man overboard alarm but knew I would likely be thrown in cruise ship jail if I raised a ruckus over a parrot that could fly. I wondered if John would visit me.

I heard a flutter of wings and out of the darkness a shape became a macaw holding a bottle of rum. “Didn’t spill a drop,” Che said with a wide grin.

From that point on we thought it best to stay away from the railing, as I do not have the same luxury of wings and cannot fly should I fall too. We sat side by side on

the floor in the shadows, our backs against the ships steel wall, facing the ocean and moon. So covered in the shadows were we that when security walked by, they didn't see us. Or pretended not to. We giggled like kids in elementary school.

If one stays conscious long enough during any drunken conversation, topics tend to go deep. Deeper than sober conversation will ever allow, even for those that know each other well.. The trick is to stay awake.

Che confessed he had never known his father. Both his 'da and grandpa had "flown the coop" early in their relationships. He added his family motto under their coat of arms should be changed from "First in Flight" to "Promise her the world, tell her you love her, and give her fuck all". His grandpa he was last told was on a merchant marine ship off the coast of Greece, his father headlining cabarets in the Mediterranean on a cruise ship such as the one we were currently shit faced on.

Che waved a wing across the sky. "I sometimes wonder if they ever see each other, and if they ever think of me. Or even know I exist. I would like at some point to catch a good tail wind, throw my duffle bag over my shoulder and head over to that part of the world to seek my fate and perhaps find them. Christ, listen to me. A few more drinks and I'll be crying to Patsy Cline. I WOULD like to meet them though."

"And offer them a drink of your spiced Captain," I giggled.

"I AM the spiced Captain," Che corrects me, and we both laughed. We sat in silence for a bit, and I realized I was falling asleep. Passing out. Whatever.

I'm not sure how long we sat for after that.

"I need to go," I finally told him.

"I'll make sure you get there ok," Che offered.

"I'll be fine," I insisted, but he was persistent.

He helped me back through the maze of foyers and hallways, then down the narrow passageway and finally we were at my room. I put a drunken finger to my lips to indicate he had to be quiet. He settled on top of the hallway table near my room and drew me near.

I thought he may kiss me and closed my eyes, but he merely ran his wings down my arms and whispered into my ear, "You had twelve half glasses of wine. That means you need to drink eight full cups of water. Don't forget," and with that he was gone, fluttering down the hallway.

I went into my room as quiet as I could, forced the eight cups of water down, and quietly lay on the bed waiting for the room to stop spinning.

The absurdity of the evening has sat with me for a long time. Not so much how charismatic a blue macaw can be. That I'm comfortable with. The absurdity is that I fell for that charisma because as he was running his wings down my arms and warning me to drink water, he was sliding my mother's watch off my arm.

I caught up with Anne two days later along the buffet line, and she told me Marla had fared out even worse. Che had helped her to her room, then helped himself to her credit cards and cash. Along with the credit cards and cash of her room mate that had also been asleep.

Security had informed Marla that “Che” was actually named Delroy Sheldon. He was born and bred in Kingston Jamaica, now working out of Ochos Rios, and he had a rap sheet as long as his three-foot wingspan. He was notorious for fleecing unsuspecting victims of their valuables after tagging along their ships after leaving port. Then he would simply fly back home with his goods before the ship sailed too far. Macaws are good fliers.

As much as I hate Che, I believe what he said about his grandfather and father. And I hope he catches up with them someday, wherever they may be.

I never did tell John about the macaw. He can't stand birds.