

Tomica Šćavina  
**A Room at the Bottom of the Sea**

*Translated from Croatian by Ellen Elias-Bursać*



**KAVLAZ** – a reptile that feeds on unfinished stories, yet is not a fairy tale creature. It is the heaviest creature on Earth.

“I cannot believe he’s done this” said Santino, polishing a fork.

His movements were jerky, his eyes blue and too, too light, as if they’d been drawn by a child who’d been erasing a mistake.

“What am I to do with you?”

I shrugged.

“I mean, it’s not your fault,” he sighed and tossed the fork in among the others.

I knew it wasn’t my fault. The head manager assigned me to him, I’d be his busser, this was my first day, I’d never worked on a cruise ship before, and I had no experience in hospitality.

“We’ll make this work,” I told him.

“You’ll make this work,” he replied.

We were standing on a crimson rug sprinkled with tiny gray crowns; arches spanned over our heads and came together at a crystal chandelier. So this was where I’d landed. In this vast space, a dining room, a restaurant serving two thousand people. Among the round tables covered in white tablecloths bustled waiters and bussers whose skin was of every hue. Out of two hundred wait staff only ten were women.

While twilight, through the portholes, blurred the dark surface of the Gulf of Mexico, I listened to the muffled thrum of the ship’s motors and wriggled my toes in my new black shoes that looked like big swollen cockroaches. They were called safety shoes. Shoes that won’t slip.

“Where are you from?” I asked Santino, trying to build some sort of wobbly bridge for communication between us.

“Argentina. You?”

“Croatia.”

“So things are a shitshow there, too?”

“What do you mean?”

“Look around.” He nodded to the neighboring tables around which swarmed dark-skinned waiters and bussers. “India, the Philippines, Trinidad and Tobago... All of them are shitholes. Now and then a gallivanter wanders through. Are you one of those?”

A gallivanter? Barely moving my lips I repeated the word.

A nice word, it rippled across the roof of my mouth like a flag.

"Listen, for a girl like you, barely a hair over five foot two..."

I looked down at my hands and feet. I really was here. I was really wearing the black pants, white shirt and the oversized vest with the American flag design. In the round glass of the porthole I looked like a ghost floating in a big soap bubble rimmed with clasps, but I guess I was real. Though skinny. My short, black hair looked like a scribble.

From a bag in a rolling cupboard I took a wig and pulled on straight blond hair that reached down below my chin.

"Good plan," said Santino, still polishing forks. But pointing to the sweat bands on my wrists, he added, "Take those off, they're not part of the uniform. Nothing will help. This job is a killer," he sighed. "Look over there," he pointed to an angular, dark-skinned waiter whose left shoulder blade jutted from his back. "He has been doing this for fifteen years."

"What's wrong with his back?"

"What's wrong?" he glanced at me with his tin-blue eyes. They looked like a marble, lost years ago. "What were you expecting—a picnic?"

"Did he get that from..." I pointed to the big, dark brown elliptical tray on the serving trolley.

On the tray were loaded plates for the main dish, the soup, the salad. Pyramids of cups and forests of glasses. A plastic box with dividers for knives, soup and coffee spoons, dinner and dessert forks. To lift something so heavy you first had to bend your knees, hoist the tray up onto your right shoulder, straighten up without bending your back, support the middle with your open palm, and then rush off in whatever direction the waiter sent you. We'd practiced during a course I took before leaving for the ship. The course was supposed to meet five times, but three were canceled. We'd practiced with an empty tray.

"Women only started working here two years ago," he said.

There was a trace of pity in his eyes.

"Enjoy your last breath of freedom in peace and quiet," he gestured toward the porthole. "Sit and look out at the setting sun. In five minutes the head manager will be here to hold his motivational speech.

"Motivational speech?"

"I have to listen to it every week. Yesterday the head managers switched. Our man David is back," he sneered and scratched behind his ear with a spoon. "David with his good ideas."

"Ideas?"

"Well," he glanced back at me over his shoulder. "You. Here you are with me, like, you'll help me, but you've had no training. You're supposed work, but you have no clue what to do. I don't know who will be worse off, you or me."

He raised his arms and began to circling them, loosening his shoulder blades.

"So like I said... Go, enjoy the sunset. You've got another five minutes. Don't forget what it's like to be at peace," he said and stopped with his arms mid-air and blinked, as if a sharp memory pebble were irritating his eye.

While I was listening to the clatter of tableware and the dull rumble of the ship's motors, my transparent reflection, trapped in the porthole pane, stared back at me and asked: *Are you gallivanter?*

I'd flown from Zagreb, landed in Houston, I'd boarded the ship in Galveston and here I was on the Bay of Mexico, on a four-story cruise ship with two thousand passengers and who knows how many sailors, waiters, machinists, cleaners, cooks, actors, doctors, croupiers. The ship had restaurants, pools, a cinema, a theater, a night club, a casino, even a jail which was actually a small room lined with foam rubber where they'd thrown a swarthy man, of unknown name, who'd gotten into a fight with a cook and bitten off the man's double chin.

Was I gallivanting?

*Gallivanting, gallivanting...* I moved the word around against the roof of my mouth like a piece of hard candy. It sounded like the kind of word Tea might come up with.

"Let's go," Santino brought me around. "The clown has arrived." He tucked his dish towel into his belt and tugged me by the sleeve.

We made our way through the lively bustle of waiters and bussers who were pulling up chairs to form a circle around a graying man in glasses. Right next to him sat two men from India, and a light-skinned man with long legs.

"The bald one is your paesano," whispered Santino, pointing to the long-legged man, and taking the chair next to me.

"Meaning?"

"Meaning he comes from where you come from."

"I see, a compatriot? A Croat? That's what you mean?"

"Exactly, a paesano. Aygor."

"Igor?"

"Aygor. A brown-noser. They are all brown-nosers."

"They're our bosses?"

"Yes. This is the ship's hierarchy. At the very bottom are the bussers, then the waiters, then the head-waiters, and then the manager."

"Good evening, one and all!" declared David, flinging open his arms.

The head waiters applauded, and after them everyone else did too, including me.

"You had another great week, right?"

"Yes!!"

"And the coming week will be great, am I right?"

"Yes!!"

I tuned out. I couldn't listen.

While he talked about how we have to help one another and how we're all one big family, I stared at the crystal chandelier and wondered whether my roommate from the Philippines and I would both be able to maneuver around our cabin. It looked like one of those molded shower stalls into which a double-decker bed has been wedged. I thought about how I'd paid for my plane ticket, put down a deposit of \$500 for the return ticket, bought two shirts, two pairs of pants and the safety shoes, and they were already giving me blisters.

"*We love you, maaaaan!*" David suddenly crowed.

Everyone applauded. Me too.

"That's how he ends each motivational speech," whispered Santino, clapping his hands together indifferently. "That's his motivation phrase, his inspirational greeting, something like that. He'd like us to greet the guests with our arms open wide, as if we're saying: *We love you, maaaaan!*"

"Ugh."

"Ugh? You are clearly a gallivanter," he said looking at me sideways. "What's your profession?"

"Nothing."

"What do you mean, nothing?"

"I graduated from a prep school, and in Croatia you don't have a profession if all you've got is prep school. For that you have to go on to study at the university."

"So? Why not go on?"

"I'm not much of a student," I answered quietly.

"Then why attend prep school? Why not go through vocational training for a waitress instead?"

I got up and put my chair back in its place.

"I never liked that much."

"So why end up here?"

I pretended not to hear him.

"See the Dutch woman over there? She's here because she wants to buy a BMW. And that kid over there is British. They're the only ones."

"Only whats?"

"The only gallivanter. Everyone else is here out of hunger, poverty," he stopped and scratched his head. "Or fear. Take me, for instance..." he leaned over to me. "The police are after me."

"Really?" I stepped back. "Why?"

"No need to be scared, I'm no criminal."

"Then why are the police after you?" "Well, I was smuggling natural gas."

"Gas? Where?"

"From Uruguay to Paraguay. And you?" he asked. "Why are you here?"

"I... I needed a change," I said.

"You're nuts," he snapped the dish towel with a flourish and—as if by so doing he'd opened a door into a new reality—the restaurant doors flew open and in poured the guests.

"Over and out," sighed Santino.

Thousand Island dressing: cream, mustard, ketchup, salt, balsamic vinegar, olive oil, mayonnaise, garlic. Caesar salad dressing: lemon, mustard, anchovy paste, Worcester sauce, garlic, olive oil, sour cream, salt and pepper.

"Do I really need to know all of this by heart?" I asked, staring at the piece of paper on which there were ingredients listed of at least five more salad dressings.

He didn't hear me, he was greeting the guests.

The chatter sounded like a crowd loudly chewing their gum. Texans. Supposedly, dear and generous guests.

"What happened?" Santino prodded me. "Go from table to table, introduce yourself, ask what they'd like to drink."

I greeted the guests, introduced myself, and repeated the ridiculous sentence: *Good evening, I am Giana, I'm from Croatia, and I'll be taking your orders for drinks and salad dressing.*

Most of them thought Croatia had been part of the former Soviet Union, and they pronounced Giana like Jayna, so we laughed about that.

On my pad I wrote down: sparkling water, juices, diet Coke.

The first table, the second the third.

Santino shook his head, pointing to his watch.

The fourth table, the fifth, the six.

Now he was standing next to our serving trolley loaded with glasses, swearing under his breath.

"What's wrong?"

"What's with the chitchat? Are you in your right mind? You're way too slow!"

"Where's the water?" I asked him.

"The water is your problem, not mine."

"But a minute ago it was here. The guests are thirsty..."

"Giana," he shoved his face into mine. "Someone stole your water."

"I don't get it."

"You don't get what? Maybe the busser over there did it," he said, pointing to a chubby Turkish man.

"Or maybe it was that one," he pointed at a busser from India who was pouring water for his guests. "So now you have to go and steal water from someone else."

"Excuse me?"

"Steal the water."

"I will not. I'll find more."

"You've don't have the time, your guests are thirsty."

I looked at the doors far across the room, doors I hadn't yet been through. Behind them lay the hidden mechanisms of the restaurant: the dishwashers, the kitchen, the pantry.

He was right. If I were to run over to where they store the drinking water, then to the ice-maker, then back...

Santino clenched his teeth, turned to check a few times to the left and right, and then with an easy swing, as if dancing, he whisked a water pitcher off of one of the neighboring trolleys. He shoved it into my hands, spraying my sleeves.

"Now I did it for you, next time this will be up to you."

He looked me in the eyes and his tin-flat gaze splashed my face like a chilly breeze.

"So what if I won't?"

"If you won't, you might as well go home now. You won't survive."

"So to survive I have to... what? Start stealing, be an asshole?"

"Are you implying I'm an asshole?" he shoved his face at me.

"Get out of my face," I pushed him away.

"What? Bad breath?"

"Santino, try to understand..."

"If you treat them kindly, they'll just laugh at you. You'll have to crush them."

"What are you talking about?" I hissed. "I'm supposed to crush someone over a pitcher of water?"

"Otherwise you won't survive," he shook his head, slipped his tray under his arm and off he strode.

A guest gestured to me. I read his lips: *water*.

I looked at the empty trolley.

"Where are my glasses?"

I'd had at least five.

"They stole those, too?" I muttered.

The Indian busser looked over at me and leered. His guests were chatting and all of them were holding water glasses.

"Pardon me! Water please!" called my guest.

A trolley was nearby and nobody was watching. What should I do? Take it?

"Did you steal my glasses?" I shouted to the Indian.

"Me?" he said, insulted. "Of course not," he winked at his waiter and both of them burst out laughing.

"Assholes," I muttered, grabbed the tray and the water pitcher, and ran off to find glasses.

I flew into a vast turquoise room full of steam, sweaty waiters and bussers who were running around with trays, carrying drinks, salads and pitchers of water. The noise was deafening. The clatter of dishes, the shouts in unrecognizable languages, the jets of water, the clanking of the ice-making machine.

I tore off scraps of a napkin, stuffed them into my ears, and hurried over the slippery white tiles, searching for a friendly face. I grabbed a pale young man by the sleeve; he was dispensing Coca Cola from a machine.

"Where can I find glasses?"

"There are none," he answered without a glance. "New here?"

"Yes."

He shook his head and left.

Santino raced by, balancing a salad tray on his shoulder.

“Still on drinks?” he shouted without stopping. “What about the salad dressings?”

I felt a nasty burning sensation on my right heel. I set the tray and water pitcher on the ice machine, leaned back against the damp door of the huge refrigerator, crouched down and took off the safety shoe. My ankle was bloody.

I dabbed at the sweat on my forehead, dripping down from under the wig, used the napkin to sop up the thick, scabbing blood around the mangled skin. I pulled my sock back up and tried to put the safety shoe back on. The blisters stung. The paper with my list of orders fell onto the wet tiles and my tablet instantly became a nasty, dark blue splotch.

“Holy shit,” I said, snatched up the wet piece of paper from the floor, and reached for my tray.

My arm hung there, mid-air. There was no water pitcher, no tray.

**LIDOR**—a compass made from the bone of an unknown animal that was never in the north.

*Dear Tea,*

*I have to write to you, I need to scoop up time in my hands and splash my face with it. I'm finding myself dispersed through this endless series of metal grooves and plastic rooms they call a cruise ship so I need to go down deep, because this feeling of everything existing in a single dimension will iron my heart out into a nasty Rorschach inkblot and anybody will be able to see whatever they like in it: a sparrow in flight, a cave-man's hairy foot, the silhouette of a dead grandmother. I've stumbled into a blender that is processing my life, and once the lid covers it, I'll be done for. As long as I keep writing I'll have a way out, the blender lid will be ajar and freely spray exclamation points and question marks, unstitched sentences, and blunt silences. I'm writing before exhaustion flattens my mind and wrings out my consciousness. The brain is like a lemon, consciousness like lemon juice. Fainting is a variety of lemonade. Did you know that? Well, now you do. But what's the point,*

*you're dead anyway, your consciousness has been wrung out for good. And I, too, am dead in my own way. I'm the most agile corpse the world has seen. I run around, serve guests, even smile. My mouth stretches into a smile in a millisecond and then my jaw goes slack. They say the face has forty-three muscles. Today several of mine snapped. They pushed up the skin as if wriggling out from under a blanket, slid down my neck, and off they went into the night.*

*I'm in my cabin, lying on the upper bunk, holding a little lamp between my teeth, in my hand a pen embellished with the coat of arms of the cruise company. Marissa's asleep, I know I should be, too, but I need another few minutes.*

*How long is a minute? Will you stretch it for us?*

*Do you remember how we used to stare at the clock in third grade? We practiced on the round one with the cardboard face and the black mustaches that were the clock hands. We moved the tips of the mustache and learned how time is not the invisible epidermis of space but a gap between the mustaches on a paper clock face. They dictated time to us and this so warped our thinking that we could no longer pretend we had no idea we'd have to stop playing outside at six and go home for supper. Who knew a cardboard mustache was actually the long arm of mother's wooden spoon, taming time.*

*Before time grew a mustache, a half-hour lasted forever and the street we lived on had no end. While we hopped around in the puddles and spit cherry pits onto the pavement, the sky was so close that our echoes bounced off of it. Time swept us through space and we were the small, billowing sails of this world.*

*Minute's up.*

*Giana*

**JASVAL** – a bubble of childhood slipping under the skin which makes the surroundings seem a shade lighter. It appears suddenly, out of profound longing or despair.

The shells have been raining down all night long. When they whistle that's a good sign, it means they're flying above us and will explode somewhere far enough away.

The cellar has been changed by the war. Before it was a place where two kinds of things coexisted: the ones seldom used, and the ones that had been discarded. The war has now turned the cellar into a place where people live.

The other place one's allowed brief stays, aside from the cellar, is the bathroom up on the first floor. Each of us dashes up there whenever we must and we do what needs to be done as fast as possible. Some do their business so quick they don't even have time to flush the toilet, or the whistling of the shells interrupts them mid-piss and they go right on pissing as they sprint back down to the cellar.

Every few days I clean the bathroom. Not because I want to. Nor because I have to. But to redeem myself.

"It is no help to me that you feel guilty. Today you'll wash the bathroom and tomorrow you'll take off again and I won't know whether my child's alive or a soldier will appear at the door and summon me to identify your body."

While I listen to her, one sentence spins around my mind. *Mama, I'm sixteen years old. When will I live if not now?*

We are sitting at the foot of the cellar stairs, and there are four elderly men, five women, seven children and a baby all living here.

"You have to stay right here in the cellar, period," says Mama, but she doesn't sound as if she believes this herself.

Since the war began, the creases around her mouth had drooped, and her gaze was at ebb tide. I feel like shaking her and saying: *Mama, this is war, hey, war. When will you live if not now? Forget Dad, forget your brother, forget me. We're all grownups.* But I know what she'd say then. *You grownup? You're not even of age.*

I admit, I feel more grownup than Mama. I passed her in age a long time ago, when I turned ten. And then, when the child in her says I have to stay down in the cellar, how can I take her seriously?

As soon as I "go to the bathroom" next time, I'll vault handily over the fence and dash off into the twilight. When the shells start whistling again I'll dip into the nearest shelter and wait for a lull, and then I'll go out looking for Pepa or follow my nose and join a small group of people I know who are going to someone's house for local wine and a bit of fun, or off to take action.

Meanwhile I'll go for a stroll along the beach and collect pebbles which I'll later have to shake from my pockets because they'll slow me down while I'm dodging the projectiles. I'll listen to crickets and cicadas and stomp on hairy, black caterpillars which inch in rows over the concrete embankment by the sea. I'll roll up my

jeans, wade through the shallows, and every sense, scene and inhalation will matter, because who knows, maybe this will be my last.

And I won't go back to the cellar. Every time I leave there, I leave as if I'll never go back. Because in war that's fine. To stroll out and die.

**LATEMTA**—the search for one's own back which appears, like a mirage in the most unlikely places.

*Dear Tea,*

*grand words are to blame for all of this. Nation, territory, armed conflicts. Packed into each of the grand words is so much reality. Thrust into nation are all the people with their favorite breakfast foods, detested obligations, the children they do or don't shout at in their rooms, houses, on summer vacations with and without household pets. Packed into territory are the dry and damp soil full of worms, stones and roots, then the hills, rivers, mountains and meadows, the evergreens and deciduous trees surrounded by shrubbery, mushrooms and the tiny rodents that lead altogether different lives. Crammed into armed conflicts are all the murdered young men and their soldier friends who collected their bodies, the razed and torched houses, the rapes, starvation, hopelessness and all those nights when the stars are in a safe place even though they glimmer as if they're afraid.*

*Politicians juggle the grand words with ease, as if they have the right to juggle everything the words denote, even what will forever remain unknown to them. When they do not prevail with their grand words, they reach for the bodies of soldiers. The frailty of the grand words can be measured by the number of young, dead bodies.*

*Giana*

**Haidna** - a ban against all that harms. All babies of the world invoke it by cooing, yelling and crying, but nobody understands them.

*Tea,*

*sometimes I imagine that down there, deep in the sea, we'll meet. You step out of one darkness, and I—out of another. We dive. We've swum down too far but we have enough air in our tanks and there are powerful lamps in our hands and with them we sketch circles in the dark. We dive to the wreck of a sunken destroyer from World War II and under its deck there is a small cabin overgrown in seashells and seaweed. We sit inside, we listen to the huff of our breath and in the light cast by the lamps we watch a flurry of bubbles which, like a flutter of silvery jellyfish, floats up to the low ceiling of the cabin and there creates a mirror of thin, watery skin.*

*This scene, this meeting, this is all I have. From then on we can speak in the language of the fish, become mermaids or ordinary women who do their shopping at the open market and change their children's diapers and organize everything in their lives around the next meeting in the watery deep. We might open our mouths like whales as they feed on plankton, we might cocoon in our towers and rooms full of loneliness. We might meet for a half hour between life and death, swim under one another's skin, become travelers on the sunken destroyer and survive all the devastation intended for us.*

*Giana*

**PAVATA**-a permit which is actually a blank sheet of paper on which one can write whatever one wishes. Viable only in wartime.

*Pliss-plass, pliss-plass...I cannot sleep. The drone of the engine and slap of the waves leave me with the sense that I'm not below decks but inside a washing machine. Pliss-plass, pliss-plass... In the bunk below me are my roommate, Marissa, and her boyfriend from Romania who are sighing softly and guzzling as if*

their mouths are full of half-eaten gummy bears. I toss and turn and sweat while images from the evening flit through my mind: the faces of the guests, the salad dressings, the pile of dishes with mashed lumps of food on them. I feel grimy though I showered for ages. The smell of ketchup reaches me from the bottom of my soul.

*Pliss-plass, pliss-plass...*The guests weren't happy, they waited for their drinks for almost half an hour. I served caffeinated coffee to the woman who'd ordered decaf, her blood pressure shot up and her heart raced. I broke eighteen plates. They slipped straight off the tray. Everyone turned to me and clapped. That is how it's done here, when someone breaks something everybody claps to cover the mishap. That was the fun part of the evening.

Among other things, I made the acquaintance of Dishwashing Dude, a huge black guy; the whites of his eyes all bloody from the steam; the wait staff slip him ten dollars a week to be handed their dishes faster. He left me standing there for ten minutes. *You want quick, ten dollar*, he told me, pulled the hot plates right from the dishwasher and plunked them onto my hands. I screamed and dropped them onto the floor, this time no applause.

By the end of the evening, Santino was crazy. I was limping. Blood was oozing along the edges of my safety shoes, my fingers were sticky with diet coke, mint jelly, and cheesecake.

*Pliss-plass, pliss-plass...*OK, they're nearly done. Marissa's pretending to orgasm and the Romanian is following along naively. What a fool. Doesn't he hear that her 'ah, ah, ahs' sound like midges flying into a windowpane?

*Pliss-plass, pliss-plass...*A cool breeze. Must be the air-conditioning. I turn over on my side and pull the stiff sheet up over my head. It smells sterile like swimming-pool water. Marissa and the Romanian nestle, giggle, and rustle with tissues. For a time they're quiet, and then the Romanian gets up, trips on something, swear softly, apologizes, and leaves.

Yesterday a girl from Chile and a guy from South Africa disembarked and flew home. They'd been on the ship for a week and were going home at their own expense. A vein ruptured on her ankle and he'd dislocated his shoulder. What will happen with me? Aside from my safety shoes chafing my heels raw, and the stealing of glasses, mugs, and water pitchers wearing the morale down to the thinnest ply of toilet paper?

*Pliss-plass, pliss-plass...*The slapping of the waves jostles me just as I'm dropping off to sleep and vestiges of the day float through in my head. Before me I see the large blue basin with all the uneaten slop: lamb chops poking out of tiramisu that is melting into a soup of Coca-Cola, coffee, milk, and orange soda.

I toss and turn, crumple up the coarse sheet.

*Pliss-plass, pliss-plass...* Gotta sleep. Gotta sleep. Gotta...

A bird's chirp, much too loud, jolts me. I pat the plastic wall beside the pillow, find the switch, flick on the light.

"What's this?" I rasp and the dryness in my throat starts me coughing.

*Pliss-plass, pliss-plass...*

I hear the sheets shuffle on the bunk below. Marissa gets up and hushes the chirping alarm. I squint at her from above.

"Is it morning already?" I say hoarsely and rub my forehead.

She nods and smiles. For a moment I think her smile might be sincere, but it fades too fast, like a cigarette in water. I try to move without straining my aching muscles; Marissa collects her things and goes to take a shower.

My throat, head, and veins all hurt. I squirm down from my bunk and pull on broad black pants. I look like Charlie Chaplin, but who cares. I also don't care about the yellow stain on the knee in the shape of a ballerina. I do care that I feel crummy, but I have to wash up, brush teeth, and be up at *Wind Caress* in fifteen minutes. I don't even know what that is, exactly. All I know is that it's on the fourth floor and the guests eat their breakfast there.

I rub my face, eyes shut.

"Are you OK?" asks Marissa as she steps out of the shower.

Her wet black hair falls across the white towel she's wrapped around her body. Her complexion has the sheen of sex while her eyes are opaque like two little wells where all the helplessness of the world has hardened.

"I think the AC did a number on me. I can barely swallow."

"Maybe you go see the doctor?"

"The doctor?"

"Sure, why not. At *Wind Caress* nobody tips anyway."

*Tip.* That's why I'm here. The English word sounds so innocent, but the Croatian, *napojnica*, is disgusting. It comes from the word *napoj*. Cattle feed.

"So we're only tipped at the restaurant?"

"Yes, didn't anyone tell you?" she asks, pulling her underwear on under the towel.

"Nobody told me anything," I croak through my dry throat and cough.

I lean on the bathroom door and inspect our gray-green plastic cabin with no windows. I feel the plastic inching into my body, coursing through my bloodstream and rising inside me like a tide.

I still hear the slapping of the waves and the engine's drone.

"When will we be coming in to port?" I ask and step into the shower stall, leaving the door ajar.

"This afternoon."

"What's first? Key West?"

"Yes, first Florida, then Grand Cayman, and then Cozumel."

"Cozumel is in Mexico?" I ask, while splashing my face with water.

"Yes. We need to hurry, Gi... Sorry, I've forgotten your name."

"Giana," I said, patting my puffy face with the towel.

"Check-in is at six-thirty."

"Check-in?"

"Yes, you report to the *Wind Caress* manager. But if you're going to see the doctor, I'll tell him you'll be a little late."

I go over to the mirror above the little, gray, plastic washstand, open my mouth and peer down my throat. My red, swollen tonsils remind me of meat balls in tomato sauce.

I feel sick.

I touch my neck, under my chin.

"Fuck this ship and the AC," I grumble to myself softly in Croatian.

"Sorry?"

"Nothing. I'm off to see the doctor. Where's the office?"

"Take the left-side elevator to deck no. 1, then down the stairs by the gift shop and..."

"Wait, wait... I haven't gotten my bearings yet. Where am I going?"

She clicked on the hair dryer and, while drying her hair, repeated the same directions, adding a few more corridors and turns. I sighed, tied the apron around my waist, and set off into the unknown.