

The Second Voyage of Calypso

Melissa, the Writer

Jacques, the Explorer

John, the one who does both.

Setting: *The observation chamber of the R/V Calypso, possibly the most famous non-military ship in recent history. Two people are there, an American woman dressed in whale-shark patterned dive leggings and a matching swimsuit top with a fleece hoodie half-unzipped over it, and the Frenchman, whose prominent nose and red watch cap make it obvious that he's the late, great, Jacques Yves Cousteau. There is, however, another man present... it's John Steinbeck.*

The lights are dim, the better for the cast to see the occasional fish flitting by outside.

They are sharing a pot of tea as they talk. No, it's not Earl Grey (hot). It's just plain old Lipton (the brisk tea).

MELISSA: *(offering a package to Jacques)*

I know space is at a premium here, but I couldn't come empty-handed so I brought you these. I thought we could use them for our tea.

(to John)

I'm sorry, I didn't know you'd be here.

JOHN: I didn't know I'd be here. Where is 'here?'

MELISSA: We're off the coast of La Paz, Baja California Sur, in the Gulf of California.

JOHN: The Sea of Cortez...

MELISSA: No one calls it that anymore. It's considered appropriate, to use the names given by conquerors.

JOHN: Appropriate.

MELISSA: Racist.

JACQUES: *(opening the package as he speaks, trying to lighten the mood)*

You did not have to. It's enough to know that a love for the sea and that which dwells in it lives into the future.

(reveals the gift – a quartet of vintage submariner's mugs. They are white. And have no handles.)

These are exquisite. Your father served, perhaps, or your grandfather?

MELISSA: My grandfather was career Army. My father-in-law was a Navy man, but never served on a sub. These were a gift from my uncle. His father wore dolphins. I know they're military, but...

JACQUES: But the *Calypso* was also military, once upon a time. A minesweeper. Now we sweep the sea for new discoveries and better understanding of ourselves and our world. *(beat)* I find it very appropriate when military creations are repurposed for peaceful use. Don't you?

MELISSA: Oh, I do!

JOHN: They look like they'd make a decent *thunk* when you set them down on a table. In the mess, maybe. Do you know why these were made without handles?

MELISSA: I do. It was so the submarine officers on watch could wrap their hands around them for warmth.

JACQUES: Warmth is something we all need when we are at sea.
(he places the mugs on a low table between them, and pours tea from a pot into each)
Do you need milk or sugar?

MELISSA: I used to. Not so much anymore.

JACQUES: I find I like the bit of astringency that comes with black tea. It's bracing. Reminds you you're alive.

MELISSA: I doubt you need much reminding. Either of you.

JACQUES: *(teasing gently)* Perhaps. Perhaps not. But you did not come here to talk about tea.

MELISSA: No. I guess... I wanted to know more about you. I've been visiting Baja Sur a lot over the last couple decades, and I grew up on your documentaries, but there's a lot left unsaid.

JACQUES: I suppose what you have to understand is that the ocean is my lover, and Calypso is my mistress. *(laughs)* I'm not so sure that's flattering to my wife, but she is very generous about what I do. Understanding. Even supportive. Are you married?

MELISSA: Twenty-five years next month. Well... my next month.

JACQUES: And your husband, does he support your dreams?

MELISSA: He does. He... I tell people that he's the string to my kite. He keeps me grounded but gives enough slack for me to fly.

JACQUES: That's a vivid image.

MELISSA: You're not exactly a stranger to those.

JACQUES: No, I'm very fortunate. I get to see vivid images in front of me every day, and then I attempt to translate them into images that are vivid to others, on the television, in papers, in words.

MELISSA: You said once that the sea was your lover... how do you mean?

JACQUES: Other people attack the sea; I make love to it. I immerse myself in it. I...

MELISSA: You become one with it.

JACQUES: Oui. Yes. Exactly.

MELISSA: It must make you sad, what we humans are doing to the oceans.

JACQUES: Sad. Angry. Water and air, the two essential fluids on which all life depends, have become global garbage cans.

MELISSA: It seems pretty hopeless. We've destroyed so many species of plants and animals. We fight over guidelines to keep the air and water clean, but money seems more important than sustaining life.

JACQUES: It isn't hopeless.

MELISSA: You sure about that?

JACQUES: Absolutely. Listen, were we logical, the future would be bleak, indeed. But we are more than logical. We are human beings, and we have faith, and we have hope, and we can work.

MELISSA: Faith? That's an odd term from a scientist.

JACQUES: What is a scientist after all? It is a curious man looking through a keyhole, the keyhole of nature, trying to know what's going on. (laughs) I am not a scientist. I am, rather, an impresario of scientists.

MELISSA: That's an interesting way to put it.

JACQUES: Is it? I don't think so. Plato said that science is nothing but perception. Perhaps I have a unique point of view, my own perception.

MELISSA: And your perceptions are mostly about the water.

JACQUES: The water, and the air. You cannot have one without the other. But you know this.

MELISSA: I do.

JACQUES: I am at a loss. You know what I do; but I know nothing of you. What do you do?

MELISSA: I... I write. I'm a writer. Mostly I make stuff up. I tell stories.

JACQUES: Sea stories.

MELISSA: Sea stories. Space stories. I try to use the other – monsters, aliens, androids – to explore emotional truth. (*remembering John's presence and addressing him.*) I'm not well-known, like you are. You... you write real people so vividly.

JACQUES: (*watching both*) I see why you brought Mr. Steinbeck to join us.

JOHN: Because she likes my work?

JACQUES: No... because she sees a kinship between herself and us.

JOHN: A kinship. Because we both love Baja?

JACQUES: That probably sparked the flame, but no... it's because she sees us as alike. To this lovely young woman –

MELISSA: Hey, I'm almost fifty; I'm hardly young.

JOHN: Maybe not in years, but definitely in miles.

JACQUES: You have youthful energy, my dear. In any case, as I was saying, to this lovely young woman, we are the same. We are both explorers. I spend more of my time under the sea, you on the surface, but... in this we are the same. (to MELISSA) You... you're an explorer as well.

MELISSA: I... guess?

JACQUES: Embrace it. We all have a calling, and many of us never know what it is, what we are meant to be until we are old and feeble.

MELISSA: I've always been torn, between writing and performing. But... I'm really bad at sharing what I create.

JACQUES: You must learn to be good at it. Look, you brought a gift to an old man you conjured up from memories of books and television presentations, so I know you are generous. Use this.

JOHN: He's right you know. You've gotta grow a thick hide. See each rejection as a celebration that you made the attempt. And our French host is right about the generosity.

MELISSA: Generosity?

JACQUES: Creation is generosity. It's the greatest act of it. It takes generosity to discover the whole through others. If you realize you are only a violin, you can open yourself up to the world by playing your role in the concert.

MELISSA: (*musings*) I like that.

JACQUES: I thought you might. So, what sea creatures speak to you.

MELISSA: Sharks, rays, octopuses.

JACQUES: You're not afraid of sharks?

MELISSA: I used to dream of diving with them – in a cage I mean – but not one of those diving companies that uses chum and ruins the environment.

JACQUES: And you have not done so?

MELISSA: I... I was told I shouldn't *ever* dive because I have chronic sinusitis.

JACQUES: But you still swim, yes? You snorkel?

MELISSA: When I have the chance, yes.

JACQUES: Keep doing that... the sharks will come if you're meant to see them. Just be calm when they show up.

MELISSA: I'll try to remember that.

JOHN: I can't help but wonder if sharks are a metaphor for you.

MELISSA: A metaphor?

JOHN: They represent the sharp edges in each of us. The dark corners of our minds.

MELISSA: Should I avoid them, then.

JOHN: No. We need those dark corners... What good is the warmth of summer, without the cold of winter to give it sweetness?

MELISSA: Good point.

JACQUES: *(reacting to something unseen)*

I'm afraid our time together is ending. There is another... I think he is also no longer present in your present... a singer... songwriter. We share a commitment to the environment. He wrote a song about this ship.

MELISSA: John Denver?

JACQUES: You know him?

MELISSA: I know his music.

JACQUES: Good, good. So, my dear writer, is there a wish I can grant you?

MELISSA: Are you a djinn now?

JACQUES: I am your construct. You brought me a gift; I wish to respond in kind.

MELISSA: I think you know...

JACQUES: Oh... yes, I suspect I do.

(He removes his watch cap, leans over, and places it on MELISSA's head.)

Wear it well.

MELISSA: I promise...

JACQUES: And remember...

MELISSA: Yes?

JACQUES: The sea, the great unifier, is man's -

MELISSA: *(amending, teasingly)* - and woman's -

JACQUES: *(accepts the correction with a nod then continues)* - only hope. Now, as never before, the old phrase has a literal meaning: we are all in the same boat.

MELISSA: *(adjusting her hair beneath the hat)* You really made that pun?

JACQUES: *(not at all contrite)* But you find it charming, because I am an old man.

MELISSA: I... well... yes. Thank you for talking with me.

JACQUES: No, my dear. Thank you for remembering.

The set begins to dissolve as blue light takes over the stage. The ship set transitions into MELISSA sitting at her desk, a laptop open in front of her. She puts a pair of earpods in her ears, and presses a button on her phone. We hear what she is hearing... John Denver's song CALYPSO, and she sings along with the chorus.

MELISSA: *(singing)*

*Aye, Calypso! the places you've been to
The things that you've shown us, the stories you'd tell.
Aye, Calypso! We sing to your spirit
The men who have served you so long and so well.*

(The dim cabin fades away to be replaced by the deck of another ship, a wooden boat. JOHN is still there. And MELISSA. They lean on the rail and stare over the ocean, toward Isla Espiritu Santo.)

MELISSA: I thought my adventure was over.

JOHN: It was. And it wasn't. Listen, you wanted advice.

MELISSA: I didn't ask for -

JOHN: Maybe not aloud, but we both knew you were seeking wisdom. Interesting that you chose men. Perhaps we remind you of aspects of your father.

MELISSA: Not really. It's more what Jacques said. The kinship of being explorers.

JOHN: Sure. We'll accept that premise for now.

MELISSA: Okay. Well, if you think I want advice, lay some on me?

JOHN: You've got to stop seeing writing as a competition you can win or lose. Every day you write, you win. Don't worry about losing. If it is right, it happens - The Main thing is not to hurry. Nothing good gets away.

MELISSA: All my life I've been told to slow down. Don't finish things so quickly. Don't talk so fast.

JOHN: Maybe you should have listened.

MELISSA: Maybe. *(there is a bump, as if the boat has reached a dock and hit a bumper)* What was that?

JOHN: We're home. It's time I left you, too.

MELISSA: Will I see you again?

JOHN: Every time you read something I've written, or walk the streets where I lived.

MELISSA: I don't want the journey to be over.

JOHN: Who's to say it is? Many a trip continues long after movement in time and space have ceased.

(MELISSA turns to say something, but she is alone. A desk appears on the deck of the docked ship, with a chair. A laptop computer is on the desk. She goes to sit in it, opens the computer, and begins to write.)

Blackout