# Cruise

# John Updike

Islands kept appearing outside their windows. Crete, Ogygia, Capri, Ponza. Calypso, who had became Neuman’s cruisemate, his wife at sea, liked to make love sitting astride him while gazing out the porthole, feeling between her legs the surging and the bucking of the boat. Her eyes, the color of a blue hydrangea, tipped toward the violet end of the spectrum in these moments. Her skin was as smooth as a new statue’s. He called her Calypso because the entire cruise, consisting of sixty-five passengers and forty crewpersons, was marketed as a duplicate of the tortuous homeward voyage of Ulysses, though everyone including their lecturers kept forgetting which port of call represented what in *The Odyssey*. Were the cliffs of Bonifacio, a chic and slanty tourist trap on the southern tip of Corsica, *really* the cliffs from which the giant, indiscriminately carnivorous Laestrygones had pelted the fleet with rocks, sinking all but the wily captain’s dark-prowed hull? Was Djerba, a sleepy hot island off of the Tunisian coast, distinguished by a functioning synagogue and a disused thirteenth-century Aragonese fort, *really* the land of the Lotus Eaters?

“Well, what is ‘really’?” their male lecturer asked them in turn, returning a question for a question in Socratic style. “*Tí*  Or, as the French might put it, ‘*Le soi-disant* “*Ding an sich*,” *c’existe ou non?*’ ”

Their on-board lecturers were two: a small man and a large woman. The man preached a wry verbal deconstructionism and the woman a ringing cosmic feminism. Clytemnestra was her idea of a Greek hero. Medea and Hecuba she admired also. She wore gold sickles around her neck and her hair was done up in snakes of braid. Our lovers—cruel and flippant vis-à-vis the rest of humanity in their ecstasy of love newly entered upon—called her Killer. The male lecturer they called Homer. Homer sat up late in the ship’s lounge each night, smoking cigarettes and planning what he was going to say the next day. He looked wearied by all his knowledge, all his languages, and sallow from too much indoors. Even while trudging up and down the slippery, scree-ridden slopes of archaeological digs, he wore a button-down shirt and laced black shoes. The lovers felt superior to him, in the exalted state brought on by repeated orgasms in the little cabin’s swaying, clicking, cunningly outfitted space. “*Aiiiieeee!*” they cried. “*Aiae, aiae!* We are as gods!”

There were rough seas between Malta and Djerba. Neuman threw up, to his own surprise and disgust. He had thought, on the basis of several Atlantic crossings in gigantic passenger liners, that he was seaworthy. Calypso, who in her terrestrial life had been raised on a Nebraska wheat farm and not seen the ocean until she was twenty-one and unhappily married, had no mal-de-mer problem; when he bolted from their table in the seesawing dining room she stayed put, finished her poached sea-trout, helped herself to his squid stew, ate all of the delicious little Maltese biscuits in the breadbasket, and ordered caramelized *pomme Charlotte* for dessert, with Turkish coffee. In the tranquillity of her stomach she was indeed as a goddess—Calypso, the daughter of Thetis by Oceanus. Fleeing the dining room, Neuman held acid vomit back against his teeth for the length of his run down the second-deck corridor; when he got into his own bathroom he erupted like a fountain, disgustingly, epically. Ah, what is man but a bit of slime in the cistern of the void?

“You poor baby,” she said, descending to him at last. Her kiss smelled of caramel and brought on a minor attack of gagging. “I think I’ll spend the night back in my own cabin,” she told him. “After a spot of anisette.”

“Don’t go up to the lounge,” he begged, feeble and green-faced yet sexually jealous. “There’s a hard-drinking crowd up there every night. Hardened cruisers. Good-time Charlies. Tonight they’re having a singalong, followed by a showing of *Casablanca*. Whenever they show *Casablanca* on one of these boats, all hell breaks loose.”

“I’ll be fine,” she told him, her complicated blue eyes drifting evasively to the porthole, which was black but for the dim glow of the starboard lights and a diagonal slap of spray at the nadir of an especially sickening flop into watery nothingness. “Just because we have good sex,” she told him, firmly, “you don’t own me, buster. I paid for this cruise with my own money and I intend to have a good time.”

She was one of the new women and he, despite his name, one of the old men. Female equality struck him as a brutish idea. Just the idea of her having a good time—of trying to milk some selfish happiness out of this inchoate hyperactive muddle of a universe—doubled and redoubled his nausea. “Go, go, you bitch,” he said. His stomach, like a filmy jellyfish floating within him, was organizing itself for a new convulsion, and he was planning his dash to the toilet once she had removed the obstacle of her trim, compact body, in its chiton of starched blue linen, belted with a rope of gold. She had good sturdy legs, like a cheerleader’s without the white socks. Hips squared off like small bales of cotton. Narrow feet in gilded sandals. “Easy come,” he told her queasily, with false jauntiness, “easy go.”

They had sized each other up at the start, in the ruins of Troy. She was standing in khaki safari slacks and a lime-green tennis visor on Level VIIa, thought to be Priam’s Troy if anything on this site “really” was, and he was down in Level II, not far from where Schliemann and his racy Greek wife, Sophia, had discovered and surreptitiously hidden a hoard of golden treasures from the middle of the third millennium before Christ. Now it was all a mess of mounds and pebbles and blowing grasses and bobbing poppies and liquid-eyed guides and elderly Americans and tightly made limestone walls most probably too small to have been the walls of fabled Troy. “Can this be all there was?” Homer was murmuring to their group. “*Est-ce que c’est tout?* A little rubbly village by the marshes? Schliemann decided, ‘*Es ist genug*. This was Troy.’ ” The poppies bobbed amid the nodding grasses. The rubble underfoot had been trod by Cassandra and Aeneas, venerable Priam and ravishing Helen.

The destined lovers’ glances met, and remet; they measured each other for size and age and signs of socio-economic compatibility, and he carefully climbed through the levels to edge into her group. Their group’s guide, a local Turk, was telling about the Judgment of Paris as if it had happened just yesterday, in the next village: “So poor Zeus, what to do? One woman his wife, another his daughter, straight from head—*boom!*” He hit his fist against his broad brown brow. “Each lady say she the absolute best, *she* deserve golden apple. So Zeus, he looking around in bad way and see far off in Mount Ida, over there, you can almost see”—he gestured, and the tourists looked, raking with their eyes the vacant plains of Troy, vast if not as windy as in the epic—“he see this poor shepherd boy, son of King Priam, minding own business, tending the sheeps. His name, Paris. Zeus tell him, ‘You choose.’ ‘Who, me?’ ‘Yes, you.’ ” The American tourists, broiling in the sun, obligingly laughed; the guide smiled, showing a gold fang. “ ‘Oh boy,’ Paris think to self. ‘Problem.’ One lady offer him much riches, Hera. Another say, ‘No, have much glory in battle and wars, thanks to me.’ That was Athena, daughter straight from Zeus’s head. Third say, Aphrodite say, ‘No, forget all that. I give you most beautiful woman in world to be your wife.’ And Paris say, ‘O.K., you win. Good deal.’ ”

By now Neuman had drawn level with his tennis-visored prey. He murmured in her ear, “The ‘O.K.’ that launched a thousand ships.” A gravelly American witticism, here in this remote archaic place. He liked her ear very much, the marble whiteness and the squarish folds of it. It was feminine yet no-nonsense, like her level gaze.

She had sensed his proximity. The soul has hairs, which prickle. In profile Calypso barely smiled at the pleasantry, then turned to appraise him, calculating his physical and mental compatibility and the length of the cruise ahead of them. Nauplia, Valletta, Bonifacio, Sperlonga. O.K. As if by destiny, without planning it, they arrived at the lounge for pre-dinner drinks at the same moment. With utmost diffidence they chose the same banquette and, their increasingly excited recountings of their separate pasts far from finished, asked to be seated at the same dining table, as the sleek white cruise ship slipped off the tight-fitting Dardanelles and slipped on the sequinned blue gown of the Aegean.

Malta, a fairy-tale island. Everything was sand-colored—a series of giant sand castles unfolded as they wormed into the harbor. Groggy from one of their seaborne nights of love, Neuman and Calypso, strolling slightly apart from the sixty-three other cruisers, wandered hand in hand through the bustling streets of Valletta, where every swivel-hipped pedestrian wore a dark scowl. The prehistoric Maltese blood had been suffused with centuries of Italian immigration. The palace of the grand masters of the famous persecuted Knights was gloomy with tapestries, and the ruins of the temples of Tarxien were so ancient and their purpose was so conjectural that one went dizzy, right there in the roofless maze of it all, under the blazing overhead sun.

In the harbor of Marsaxlokk, the little fishing boats had painted eyes on the prows; Neuman wondered, though, if they were sincerely magical or just painted on to keep tourists happy. So many things were like that now—the hex signs on Pennsylvania barns, the beefeater costumes at the Tower of London. The world had become a rather tatty theme park, its attractions trumped-up and suspect. A little rusty playground existed here in Marsaxlokk, and Calypso got on one of the swings, and Neuman gave her a push, both of them fighting the sadness welling from underneath—a black sludge leaking up through the grid of the “x”s in Maltese place-names, a dark liquid sliding beneath the progress of the tightly scheduled days, the certainty that the cruise would one day be over. They were both between divorces, which was worse than being between marriages. Their spouses had point-blank declined to come on this educational cruise, and these refusals hung in the air like the humming in the eardrums after a twenty-one-gun salute. In the heat of Malta, on the hike from the bus up to the standing stones of Hagar Qim, her pink hand in his felt as sticky as a child’s.

Marvels—marvels!—began to beset them. Mrs. Druthers, a grossly overweight widow from Caldwell, New Jersey, who maneuvered herself about on metal arm crutches (very gallantly, everybody agreed, especially when she, several days before, had leveraged herself all the way to the top of the hilltop fortress of Mycenae, through the celebrated Lion Gate and along the lip of the great shaft tomb) exhaustedly sat down on one of the stones of Hagar Qim in her sand-colored raincoat and simply vanished. Vanished! A concerted search led by the ship’s captain and the Maltese secret service failed to uncover her whereabouts, though a rubber crutch-tip turned up in a crevice, and a local archaeologist said there seemed to be one more stone than usual, somehow.

Then, at sea, the captain’s Bolivian fiancée, with her striped poncho and bowler hat, began to dress diaphanously and to drape herself at the U-shaped bar with the ship’s purser for hours at a time, while the stern-visaged captain steadfastly steered the ship. The purser was a grave, mustached young man given to exceedingly slow calculations, as he turned dollars into drachmas and dinars; lachrymosely reading a French translation of John Grisham by the ship’s bathtub-sized pool while his surprisingly muscular body acquired a glowering, narcissistic tan, he had been thought by the passengers to be a still-closeted gay. Now he was revealed as a Lothario, a Prometheus flying in the face of authority, and all the female passengers began to need to have their money changed and their accounts audited; they found on the office door a sign saying HOURS/HEURES/HORAS/STUNDEN but not giving an hour, the blank space left blank.

One night, long after midnight, the passengers turned and moaned in their dreams as the ship made an unscheduled stop in mid-Mediterranean; the captain was putting his rival ashore on a barren rock, crinkled like papier-mâché, east of Ustica. Then in a rage he reduced his fiancée to the form of a bright-green parrot and wore her on his epauletted shoulder when he descended, fiery-eyed, from the bridge. He was an erect middle-aged Samothracian, very proud, his uniform very clean. The parrot kept twisting its glistening small head and affirming, with a croak and a lisp, “*Sí. Sí*.”

But most marvellous was what happened to old Mr. Breadloaf. He was the oldest passenger, well into his eighties. His mouth lacked a number of its teeth but he smiled nevertheless, at a benign slant; his white countenance was rendered eerie by the redness of the sagging lids below his eyes, like two bright breves on an otherwise unaccented page. From Djerba, a group including the elderly gentleman passed over to the Tunisian mainland on a ferry noisome with Mercedes-Benz diesel trucks. A bus met the cruise passengers and carried them through miles of olive groves to the ruin of a Roman city in Gigthis. Here, close to the sea, pale stones—pavements, steps, shattered columns, inverted Corinthian capitals—still conveyed the sense of a grid; milling about in their running shoes and blue cruise badges, the Americans could feel the presence of an ancient hope, an order projected from afar. AVRELIO VERO CAESARI GIGHENSIS PUBLICE, an upstanding reddish stone stated. Killer stood on a truncated pillar and, with a jaunty diction originally designed to capture the attention of inner-city students, translated it for them: “I, the emperor Aurelius, be sending you this boss little Roman town, with its forum and shops and public baths and spiffy grid street-plan, as a sample of what the power of Rome can do for you. Yo, guys, get with the program!”

Dinnertime was nearing; the bus drivers, slim men with two-day beards, smoking over in the dunes, were letting their Arabic conversation become louder, as a sign of growing impatience. The blue sky above them was turning dull; parallel shadows were lengthening in the orderly ruins. But as the tourists began to gather and to straggle toward the bus through the collapsed arcades of limestone, Mr. Breadloaf, standing alone in a paved space like a slightly tilting column, was transfigured. He grew taller. His cane dangled down like a candy cane, and his knobby old hand released it with a clatter. His irradiated white face spread out along a smiling diagonal bias. His wife of fifty-six years, hard of sight and hearing both, stared upward in habitual admiration. Her husband’s radiance was by now quite diffuse, and his disturbing eyelids were smeared into two thin red cloudlets near the horizon, about the storied wine-dark sea. Mr. Breadloaf had become a sunset—the haunting end to a day satisfyingly full of sights.

As the ancients knew, nothing lasts. The lovers’ supernal bliss was disturbed on the eleventh night by Calypso’s repeated sniffing. “There’s a funny smell in the cabin,” she said. “Worse than funny. It’s terrible.”

Neuman felt insulted. “Do you think it’s me?”

She bent down and sniffed his chest, his armpits. “No. You’re normal masculine. Nice.” She dismounted him gingerly and walked, nude, around his cabin, opening doors, bending down, sniffing. Glimmers from the starboard lights, bounced back by the waves, spotlit now her squarish buttocks, now the crescent of her shoulders and the swaying fall of her hair, unbound from its pins of spiralled gold wire. Her voice pounced: “It’s in here, down low.” She was at his closet, in the narrow corridor to his bathroom. “Oh, it’s foul.”

They turned on the light. There was nothing there but his shoes, including a pair of sandals he had bought in a row of shops near Houmt Souk. “One dollar, one dollar,” the Tunisian outside has been chanting, but when Neuman went inside and was trapped in a rear room between walls of worked leather and horsehair fly whisks and souvenir mugs with a picture of the Aragonese fort on them, men kept tapping him and thrusting sandals in his face and saying, “Thirty-five dollars, only thirty-five.” He had panicked, but as he crouched to barrel his way through the scum and back into the open a voice had said, “Ten,” and he—as keen as Odysseus to avoid unnecessary violence—had said, “It’s a deal.” The sandals were beige and cut rather flatteringly, he thought, across his instep. He had worn them once or twice to the ship’s pool, which had been deserted since the Grisham-reading purser had been marooned for hubris.

Calypso held the sandals up close to her pretty white Doric nose, with its sunburned nostril wings. “Ugh,” she said. “Fish. Rotten fish. They used fish glue to hold the soles on. Throw them *out*, honey.”

Her tone reminded Neuman unpleasantly of his land wife, his legal wife, thousands of air-miles away. “Listen,” he told her. “I paid good money for those sandals. I risked my hide for them; suppose one of those guys in the back room had pulled a knife.”

“They were poor Tunisians,” she sniffed, “trying to make a sale to a disgusting rich Westerner. You like to dramatize every little encounter. But you’re wrong if you think I’m going to keep making love to a man whose cabin smells of dead fish.”

“I didn’t even notice the smell,” he argued.

“You’re not immensely sensitive, I can only conclude.”

“If you were really as carried away by me as you pretend, you wouldn’t have noticed.”

“I *am* carried away, but I’m not rendered absolutely insensible. Drop those sandals overboard, Neuman, or do the rest of this cruise by yourself.”

“Let’s compromise. I’ll wrap them in a plastic shirt bag and tuck them under my dirty laundry.”

She accepted his compromise, but the relationship had taken a wound. The islands seen through the porthole kept coming, faster and faster: Stromboli, Panarea, Lipari, Sicily. In the Strait of Messina, they held their breaths, between the Scylla of having loved and lost and the Charybdis of never having loved at all.

On Corfu, supposedly the land of the obliging Phaeacians, who turned Ulysses from a scruffy castaway into a well-fed, well-clad guest worthy of being returned to the island where he was king, Calypso took a dislike to the Achilleion Palace, built in 1890 to humor the Empress Elizabeth of Austria’s extraordinary fondness for Achilles. “It’s so *pseu*do,” she said. “It’s so German.”

Her dislike of his sandals’ fishy smell still rankled with Neuman. “To me,” he said, “this grand villa in the neoclassical style has a lovely late-Victorian charm. Statues without broken noses and arms, for once, and infused with a scientific sensibility. Who says the nineteenth century couldn’t sculpt? See how with what charming anatomical accuracy the boy and the dolphin, here in the fountain, are intertwined! And look, darling, in Ernst Herter’s *Dying Achilles*, how the flesh of the tendon puckers around the arrow, as it were erotically! Scrap the ‘as it were.’ It *is* erotic. It’s *us*.”

But she was harder to beguile, to amuse, each day. In anticipation of the injury that her susceptible, vain, and divine nature would soon suffer, she was trying to make their inevitable parting her own deed. No longer riding the boat’s rise and fall, she huddled deep under the blankets beside him as the wistful scattered lights of coastal Greece and benighted Albania slid away to port. Just the sun-kissed pink tip of her Doric nose showed, and when he touched it, it, too, withdrew into the carapace of blankets.

At the Nekromanteion of Ephyra, once thought to be the mouth of Hades, they were led, in stark sunlight, through the maze that credulous pilgrims had long ago traced in the dark, in an ordeal that took days and many offerings. The modern pilgrims were shown the subterranean room where the priests shouted oracles up through the stone floor of the final chamber. The stones smelled of all those past lives, stumbling from birth to death by the flickering light of illusion.

In the little fan-shaped lecture hall, with its feeble slide projector and slippery green blackboard that resisted the imprint of chalk, Homer tried to prepare them for Ithaca. His sallow triangular face was especially melancholy, lit from beneath by the dim lectern bulb. The end of the journey meant for him the return to his university—its rosy-cheeked students invincible in their ignorance, its demonic faculty politics, its clamorous demands for ever-higher degrees of political correctness and cultural diversity. “KPNΩ,” he wrote on the blackboard, pronouncing, “*krino*—to discern, to be able to distinguish the real from the unreal. To do this, we need *noos*, mind, consciousness.” He wrote, then, “NOOΣ.” His face illumined from underneath was as eerie as that of a jack-in-the-box or a prompter hissing lines to stymied thespians. “We need *no-os*,” he pronounced, scrabbling with his invisible chalk in a fury of insertion, “to achieve our *nos-tos*, our homecoming.” He stood aside to reveal the completed word: NOΣTOΣ. In afterthought he rapidly rubbed out two of the letters, created ΠONTOΣ, and added with a small sly smile, “After our crossing together of the sea, the *pontos*.”

And the marvellous thing about Ithaca was that it *did* feel like a homecoming, to the quintessential island, green and brimming with memories and precipitous: *ithaki*, precipitous. The bus taking them up the hairpin road to the monastery of Kathara and to Ulysses’ *soi-disant* citadel repeatedly had to back around, with much labored chuffing of the engine and tortured squealing of the brakes. Had the driver’s foot slipped, Calypso and Neuman, sitting in the back holding hands, would have been among the first tourists killed, the bus sliding and tumbling down, down in Peckinpahish slow motion, over the creamy white crags of Korax down to the wooded plateau of Marathia, where loyal Eumaeus had watered his pigs and plotted with the returned monarch his slaughter of the suitors—the suitors whose only fault, really, had been to pick up on the languishing queen’s mixed signals. The lovers’ hands gripped, as tightly as their loins had gripped, at the thought of the long fall with death—*aiae!*—at the end.

But the driver, a tough local kid called Telemachus, drove this route all the time. In the monastery, bougainvillea was in bloom and a demented old blind monk waggled his hand for money and occasionally shrieked, sitting there on a stone bench intricately shaded by grapevines. “At home, he’d be homeless,” Neuman shyly said.

“Somehow,” she said, unsmiling, “it offends me, the suggestion that one must be insane to be religious.” A dirty white dog slept before a blue door, a blue of such an ineffable rightness that Calypso photographed it with bracketed exposure times. Below them, the cruise ship was as white as a sliver of soap resting on the bottom of a sapphire bathtub whose sides were mountainsides.

The bus went down a different way, and stopped at the sunny, terraced village of Stavros. Here in a small park a bust of Odysseus awaited them. Neuman posed for Calypso’s camera beside it; though Neuman had no bronze beard, there was a resemblance, that of all men to one another. Wanderers, deserters, returners. Now in a mood of terminal holiday the Harvard graduates posed for the Yale graduates, and vice versa, while those marginal cruise passengers from Columbia and the University of Chicago looked on scornfully.

Calypso and Neuman drifted away from the square with its monuments and taverna, and found a small store down a side street, where they bought souvenir scarves and aprons, baskets and vases for their spouses and children. He said, thinking of the grip of her loins, so feminine yet no-nonsense, “I can’t bear it.”

“Life is a voyage,” Calypso said. “We take our pleasure at a price. The price is loss.”

“Don’t lecture me,” he begged.

She shrugged, suggesting, “Stay with me, then, and I’ll make you divine. This was the last gasp of your youth. With me, you will be eternally youthful and never die.”

Neuman would never forget the electric, static quality she projected, there with her arms full of cloth and her hands full of drachmas, staring at him in the wake of this celestial challenge with irises as multiform as hydrangea blooms. Did her lower lip tremble? This was as vulnerable as the daughter of Oceanus could allow herself to appear. The disconcerted mortal defended himself as best he could, by distinguishing the real from the unreal: “I am a mere man. Only gods and animals can withstand the monotony of eternity, however paradisiacal.”

She snapped her profile at him, with a wisecrack: “So now who’s lecturing?”

By mutual agreement they slept, on this last night at sea, in separate cabins. But at four in the morning, Aurora Mergenthaler, their melodious chief stewardess, announced to every cabin over the loudspeaking system that the ship was about to pass through the Corinth Canal. The project, cherished by Periander and Caligula, and actually begun by Nero, had been taken up by a French company in 1882 and completed by the Greeks in 1893. The canal is four miles long, twenty-four yards wide, and two hundred sixty feet at the highest point. Dug entirely by hand, it transformed the Peloponnesus from a peninsula into an island.

In the dark of the hour, the walls of earth slid by ominously, growing higher and higher. There seemed to be many horizons, marked by receding bluish lights. The ship, formerly so free, plodded forward in the channel like a blinkered ox. The damp upper deck was surprisingly well populated by conscientious cruisers, some wearing ghostly pajamas, others sporting fanciful jogging outfits, and still others fully dressed for disembarkation on the mainland at Piraeus. Personalities that had grown distinct over the days now melted back into dim shapes: shades. Calypso was not among them. Or if she was—and Neuman searched, going from face to face with a thrashing heart—she had been transformed beyond recognition.