

Anna Lewis

High Hopes

Calypso adjusted her glasses. She could feel sweat seeping from her cheeks and the centre of her forehead, and the bridge of her nose was growing slippery. She tugged out the paper napkin from beneath her plate and bunched it between her hands, rubbing the damp from her palms.

When she looked up, Donna had lit a cigarette and was leaning back on her chair, beckoning the waiter. She tossed her hair over her shoulder as he approached. "Can we have another glass of white each, please, my love?"

"Not for me," said Calypso quickly.

The waiter nodded, and turned to Donna. "Just one, then, Madam?"

"Oh, please, call me Dolores!" Donna winked across the table at Calypso.

"It's Spanish. My father was a merchant sailor."

"What a lovely name. It suits you." The waiter looked at least forty, roundfaced and thick-chinned, but he simpered as he spoke, glancing at his feet. Donna dipped her head and blinked slowly, beating heavy eyelashes.

"It's a lovely terrace you have here," she said. "A gorgeous view."

"Oh – it's only the best for our – our lovely clientele."

"Oh, sweetheart!" Donna batted a hand in the air as though swatting a wasp, and the waiter blushed as he backed away.

Calypso rolled her eyes. "Donna, do you have to?"

"Oh, it's just a bit of fun. Girls' weekend away. You should get into the spirit, love."

"Well, he's about twenty years too old for me. Not for you, obviously."

Calypso shifted round in her chair to look out over the sea. The tide was beginning to retreat, leaving a band of darker sand at its edge, much like

the faint moustache that dappled Donna's upper lip. A speedboat arched across the mouth of the bay, while in the shallower water parents jumped the waves with their children, foam bickering around their shins.

The waiter returned, bowing slightly as he set Donna's glass on the table. "Won't you have one?" Donna grabbed Calypso's wrist. Her fingers were hot and bony, and Calypso shook her off, glaring at the waiter. "Can we have the bill?"

The waiter looked at Donna. "Madam?"

"Oh, if we must. These young kids can't keep up."

After the waiter brought them the bill Calypso opened her purse and began to poke half-heartedly through the coins, but Donna pulled a face. "Don't be silly," she said. "My treat." She finished her second glass of wine in a few gulps and tucked a crumpled banknote under its foot, then led Calypso down the steps from the terrace to the promenade and away from the busy seafront, in the direction of the harbour. Calypso walked with head lowered; the sun seemed to spin against every glass window pane and the metal of every passing car, its glare wheeling straight into her eyes.

"We could take a boat trip this afternoon." Donna pointed at a chalk board propped up against the harbour wall, offering "Historical Coastal Tours" along with "Cruising with Dolphins" and "Island Ferry Trips". They crossed the narrow road and stood peering down at the sign.

"Dolphins? Round here?" Calypso asked doubtfully.

"I shouldn't think so," said Donna. "It must be a trick. What about the Historical Coastal Tour? That sounds nice, relaxing."

"I suppose so." Calypso shaded her eyes with her hand. Beyond the wall a small herd of sailing boats jostled in low water, clinking and creaking on

their moorings. The air smelt of petrol.

“I think it would be nice,” said Donna. “Then we can have a little stroll around town, maybe go back to the hotel for a bit, then go out and get some dinner. There’s a nice pub I saw near the seafront, the Old – Old something – looks like they do all sorts in there. Pasta, curry, steak – how does that sound?”

“It’s a b&b, not a hotel,” said Calypso.

“Well.” Donna ran her fingers through her hair. “Whatever. You want to go on the Historical Tour?”

“Okay.”

Donna linked her arm into Calypso’s and pulled her back the way they had come, towards the seafront. “I think I saw a kiosk by the loos, selling tickets.”

“Great.”

The boat was smaller than Calypso had expected: no more than a motorpowered dinghy with a wooden bench running around the inside of its hull, already wet with spray. A young man stood with one foot on the jetty, one foot on the boat’s lip, helping the passengers on board with a strong hand. He had untidy black hair and pale blue eyes that were too big for his face. Donna giggled as he took her hand and guided her into the boat. “Hello, sailor!” she yelled. The man smiled politely and held out his hand to Calypso, who felt her cheeks grow hot. “You’re not sunburnt already, are you?” asked Donna as Calypso balanced herself on the bench beside her. As the boat stuttered out into the bay Donna closed her eyes and leant back against its rim, her face tilted up to the sun. Calypso took a deep breath, trying to ignore the stink of petrol, and twisted around to look

down at the swell. The sea at the jetty had lightly swung to and fro, limply clipping the side of the hull, but now blunt shoulders of water collided against the boat with force, shattering into white rubble on impact. After a few minutes the boat slowed down and began to follow the line of the coast. The young man threw up an arm to the scuppered castle on its mound between the east end of town and the sea.

“I’m sure you’ll all have already noticed the castle,” he announced, then began to speak quickly, as though reciting. “The castle was nearly destroyed in the thirteenth century by warring Welsh factions. An army from the north attacked from the sea, and for weeks if not months after the battle, bodies from both sides washed up on the beach.”

The passengers murmured sadly. Donna elbowed Calypso; one of her false lashes had come unstuck at the end, and it drooped down over the corner of her eye. “Pretty gruesome,” she said.

“Yeah,” said Calypso.

“The Great Wall,” said the man, indicating a strip of stonework that curved behind the beach towards the castle mound, where it suddenly broke off. In parts it towered over the seafront, but elsewhere it straggled almost to ground level and then rose again. The boat droned forwards slowly. “It dates from around the same time as the castle. It was built to safeguard the town from any danger – from attack, or just from stormy high seas. But as you can see, it didn’t really hold up to expectations, and by the late Middle Ages it was fatally damaged – it no longer really served as a wall at all.”

Calypso glanced sideways at Donna. Her eyes were closed once again and her head lay back against the boat’s lip, lolling from side to side with the motion of the water. Her stiletto heels were splayed awkwardly against the bottom of the hull and the tip of her nose was beginning to burn, but

she was smiling, her hands loose in her lap. The boat picked up speed and slowed again as it approached the headland.

The young man was pointing to some darker patches in the cliff. "We can't go any closer," he called, raising his voice above a squall of circling gulls. "There are sharp rocks further in, under the water. But here you can see the smugglers' caves – and the largest one is there, the High Cave. Local smugglers used to keep their goods hidden inside – alcohol, tobacco, sometimes firearms. The cave is set high in the cliff so it's rarely reached by the sea. But if there was a sudden storm and the sea levels rose, that would be that – all their contraband swept away. Disaster."

The passengers nodded. Calypso nodded too. Donna was silent, her eyes still closed, her lips a little apart. Calypso thought she was sleeping, but when they pulled back into the jetty half an hour later she sat suddenly upright, eyes clear. "I can't be bothered with all that history stuff," she whispered to Calypso as the man jumped onto the jetty, ready to help his passengers disembark. "I reckon they make it all up. He has a nice voice, though, hasn't he?" She squeezed Calypso's hand and stood up, nudging past her to get off the boat.

The pub was called the Old Lighthouse, although it was a square-shaped building only two storeys high. It stood on a bend in a narrow street dwindling downhill to the promenade, and was separated from the road by a small cobbled yard, where Calypso and Donna sat with their drinks in the sinking light. At the bottom of the street a wedge of sea was visible, purple now in the dusk, the sky above it pebbled with red cloud.

Donna smoked a cigarette, breathing deeply. When she went inside to investigate the toilets, Calypso pulled her mobile from her pocket.

“Hi Susan, it’s me.”

“Callie! How is everything going?”

“It’s okay. We’re about to have dinner now.”

“Have you had a good day?”

“It’s okay. It’s very sunny.”

“Well, don’t forget to use the sun lotion. Is she behaving herself?”

“She’s being okay. She’s just Donna.”

“Well, so long as you’re getting on –”

“ – she told the waiter at lunch her name was Dolores.”

Susan’s laugh was beaded with static. “She doesn’t stop trying, does she?”

Never mind. Just try to relax and have a nice time.”

“I am trying.” The front door of the pub scraped on the cobbles and Calypso said goodbye, hung up quickly. Donna picked up her glass from the table and drained the last of her drink. “Are you ready to go inside? I’m starving.”

“Sure.” Calypso got up, glass in hand, and followed Donna through the front door.

Inside, the walls of the pub were painted in thick blue and white bands that made Calypso feel slightly dizzy. Wooden ship tillers in various sizes were hung like paintings, and stuffed sea birds stooped along varnished shelves. Calypso and Donna sat in the corner; at the centre of their table was placed an old wine bottle with a candle jammed in its neck, cold ribbons of wax spilling down over the glass. A waitress brought them menus and lit the candle.

While they waited for the food, Donna told Calypso about her new job – she was working as a receptionist for a dentist’s practice; it was only temporary, to cover someone on maternity leave, but it was all good

experience – and about her new boyfriend, Carl, who was assistant manager of a small restaurant. He wanted kids; they'd been trying but nothing was happening, it was probably too late. She'd been looking up IVF on the internet but it seemed like a lot of hassle – easier for Carl to go out and find a younger model, truth be told. We'll see.

Calypso digested the news in silence, pouring herself a second glass of wine before Donna had finished speaking. She felt blurry, her thoughts several beats out of time with her body, and she was glad when the food arrived.

"You'd want another child? Really?" she asked after a few mouthfuls.

"I thought you never even wanted to have me."

Donna exhaled through her nose. "Not when I first found out I was pregnant, no, that's true. The last thing I wanted was a baby on top of – on top of everything else. But then I got used to the idea, and started to look forward to it." She twisted her fork into her spaghetti. "I thought everything was going to change, when you were born. And when the midwife put you in my arms, it was like – well, it was like sunshine and music and a triple measure of Caribbean rum, all rolled into one."

Calypso shrugged. "Maybe it was the epidural."

"Look, I know it didn't work out as I wanted – I know I haven't been enough – but it was all more difficult than I thought it would be." Donna lifted her fork from the plate but kept turning it; the spaghetti wound deeper and deeper around its prongs, like wool around a spindle. "And it all worked out for the best, I think, you going in with that nice family – what are they called, Richard and Susan, and the kiddies – they did a better job than I would have, you know. Really." Her eyes across the table were huge.

"Except I didn't go in with that nice family straight away, did I? There was

your mum, then the home, then back to your mum, then that other family, then back to the home –”

“ – and then Susan and whoever. You’ve come out of it better than most.”

Donna glanced down at her fork. The prongs were invisible, entirely bundled in spaghetti, and half a dozen strands still connected the fork to the plate. “For God’s sake.” She snatched up her dessert spoon and turned it to one side, using its edge to slice through the strands. Calypso stared, her glass halfway to her lips. When Donna looked up, there were pink blotches on her cheeks. She shook her head and stuffed the fork in her mouth. Calypso lowered her glass back to the table and looked away.

Later that evening, Calypso learnt more about Donna: that she wore pink pyjamas with red and gold sequins, that she slept on her back with her mouth open, and that she snored. Donna’s snoring was louder than the in-coming tide beyond the bedroom window, and just as rhythmic. Calypso tried burying her head under the pillow but she couldn’t breathe, she tried lying on her side with the duvet pulled up over her ears but she could still hear the snoring, and was too hot, her skin clogged with sweat. She thrust back the duvet and thumped her feet to the floor but the noise from Donna’s bed continued, uninterrupted.

Calypso marched to the window and pressed her forehead against the glass – the cold bit into her skin and she stepped back with a gasp, then rubbed her forehead and leant forwards, keeping her face an inch from the pane. She stared out at the sea and the arc of the cliff beyond the town, a black mass punched here and there with vague circles of light. Without her glasses she could make out no detail, but could just tell where the tatty castle staggered on its mound, and could guess where the wall that was no longer a wall curved around the front of the town and broke

off, all hopes of protection fallen away. She could guess where the High Cave was tucked in the crook of the headland, lined with dry rock and the odd half-rotted tangle of seaweed, flung into its mouth on those occasions where the sea was too strong, too swollen, and the cave failed to live up to its name. On the far tip of the headland a light switched on, then off, then on, warning any present-day smugglers or marauders to watch out for the rocks beneath the surface, to keep clear.

In the morning Calypso felt sluggish, with an ache at the back of her head. Donna was cheery; Calypso could hear her singing tunelessly in the shower, the water clapping off her body. She emerged from the bathroom wearing only a thin towel wrapped around her torso, her skinny arms and legs red from the hot water. Calypso looked down at the carpet.

"It's a shame we're only here one night," Donna said. "There's lots more to do I think, lots of pubs we haven't been to. But it's back to work for both of us tomorrow, I suppose."

"Not for me, actually," said Calypso. "I don't work Mondays."

"You don't?" Donna was sitting on the edge of her bed roughly towelling her hair, the other towel fixed around her body with an insubstantial knot. "Why didn't you say? I could have taken tomorrow off, I've got leave owing. We could have made a full weekend of it."

"I need to use the shower," said Calypso. "Can I have that towel you're using for your hair?"

Donna looked at the towel in her hands and shrugged, then passed it over. "It's a bit wet," she said as Calypso took it. "You'd think they'd have a hairdryer."

Breakfast was served in the basement, which had been painted a soft pink

and furnished with comfortable wooden tables and chairs, but still bristled with an underground chill. Seagulls tacked back and forth on the pavement outside the window, just above eye-level. Donna poured Calypso's coffee from the pot, then her own.

"Milk?"

"No thanks," said Calypso. Donna set down the tin milk jug unused.

"Well, I hope you've enjoyed this holiday, Calypso," she said.

Calypso nodded, her mouth full of toast. She wasn't hungry, but thought some food might soothe the bruise in her head. "Good," said Donna eventually. "Good."

Calypso swallowed her toast and sighed. "It's been nice, Donna," she said.

"You've – well, you've really tried to make it fun. And it has been fun. Thank you."

Donna's face fell open into a smile. Without the false lashes glued to her eyelids she looked younger, sweeter, her eyes brighter than usual. "I'm so pleased," she said. "So pleased."

Calypso smiled briefly and looked down at her coffee. Dark grains spun on its surface.

"Calypso," Donna said slowly, and Calypso looked back up. Donna was leaning forwards across the table, her smile smaller but her eyes still vivid.

"I have something to ask you," she said. "I know it might seem odd at first – "

Calypso waited.

"Do you think – only if you wanted to – do you think – you could maybe call me Mum?" Donna paused, and Calypso could smell the coffee on her outward breath. "Not Donna, I mean, but Mum?"

The steam that twisted from Calypso's coffee was mesmerising, parting and merging in new shapes, new directions. Donna was still leaning across

the table, the muscles twitching at the corners of her smile.

“Not yet,” said Calypso. “You’re not what Mum means.”

Donna’s face didn’t change, but she pulled herself back into her seat.

“That’s alright,” she said. “I thought you’d say no.”

Calypso took a sip of coffee, then another, and watched the seagulls stamp their feet above Donna’s head.

“Eat up, love,” Donna said after a moment. “We’ve got to check out by ten.”