



The Last
Voyage of
Mrs Henry
Parker

a missing husband
a failing memory
an unforgettable love story



JOANNA NELL

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Parker

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Also by Joanna Nell

The Single Ladies of Jacaranda Retirement Village

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For Stretch

*The sea, once it casts its spell, holds one in its net of
wonder forever.*

JACQUES-YVES COUSTEAU (1910–1997)

No-one should be alone in their old age, he thought.

ERNEST HEMINGWAY, *THE OLD MAN AND THE SEA* (1952)

Tea, Biscuits and Toucans

SHE WASN'T IN BAD SHAPE FOR HER AGE. ALTHOUGH HER classic lines might be considered old-fashioned compared to the faster, newer vessels that adorned the glossy brochures, the old girl was indifferent. She floated imperiously at the dockside in her bright, white splendour, her years revealed only in the layers of flaking paint that could be counted like the annual rings of a mature tree, or in the rust leeching from the anchor box. There was an uncommon wisdom about her, an inner stillness, as though she was simply content to be.

The white-uniformed security officer greeted the passengers as they trailed miniature cases up the shallow incline of the gangway. Evelyn waited patiently behind a trio of little girls whose pink cases each bore a different cartoon character she didn't recognise. They fizzled with excitement, pointing to this and that. Like princesses crossing a drawbridge into a fairytale castle. Far below, a thin moat of dark green water divided ship from shore, and one world from another. For Evelyn, the

magic of embarking the ship at the beginning of every cruise never staled, each voyage unfolding with the anticipation of an empty page in a well-thumbed travel journal.

‘Welcome home, Mrs Parker,’ said the young security officer as Evelyn stepped aboard with her right foot. ‘Six hundred and sixty-two cruises already.’

Evelyn smiled, squinting at his name badge. ‘Thank you, Ruben.’

Six hundred and sixty-two voyages since she and Henry had stepped aboard the brand new Sunset Cruises flagship. Six hundred and sixty-two cruises since a fading opera singer agreed to be godmother to the ship, naming her *Golden Sunset*, and released a bottle of champagne that made a ding in the fresh white paint at the prow. There was a framed photograph of the moment in the atrium marking the moment the champagne bottle exploded with good luck. The opera singer was long dead, but Evelyn remembered the day like it was yesterday, she with a new handbag over her arm and Henry in his finery, both seated in the VIP section at the naming ceremony. Ahead of them, their twilight years and a never-ending voyage in the lap of luxury.

Golden Sunset had plenty of life left in her, taking passengers away from their everydays and returning them seven or ten or twenty-one days later, fatter and happier. Her engines were sound, marking her progress in hours rather than miles, each turn of the prop like a heartbeat.

‘Is Dr Henry Parker on board yet? I seem to have mislaid him,’ said Evelyn. She was grateful that she had someone like Ruben. He was one of her special people, her not-for-worrying people. With Ruben to keep tally of her voyages, there was one

less thing to worry about. But then some things were easier to keep track of. Husbands were a different matter.

She scanned the faces climbing the gangway behind her. None of them was Henry's.

'Don't you worry, ma'am,' said the security officer. 'I'm sure he will turn up.'

'Most troubling,' mumbled Evelyn.

Ruben looked anything but troubled. 'May I see your cruise card please?'

Evelyn stiffened at what looked like a gun in his hand. A young couple stepped impatiently in front of her and handed over the blue and white plastic cards that hung from their necks on gaudy woven tapes bearing the Sunset Cruises logo. All the passengers wore them. They had a name. Lanterns? Halyards? *Lanyards*.

Evelyn reached into her handbag and fumbled for the familiar tangle attached to her own cruise card. Instead, she found the loose foil at one end of a packet of mints, and a wad of letters in sealed envelopes, secured by a rubber band. She thrust each item back down into the cavity of the bag, her rummaging eventually producing a white plastic card attached to a lantern-halyard-*lanyard*.

'Is all this rigmarole really necessary?' said Evelyn. 'I've only been ashore for a few hours.'

If the security officer knew her by name, knew exactly how many cruises she'd been aboard already, why did they need to repeat the whole tedious process every turnaround day? With a head of pure white hair, and a stoop as if she were permanently walking into an invisible wind, Evelyn was hardly terrorist material. She'd passed some shifty-looking types in

the terminal building. But her feet hurt and she needed a cup of tea. Now wasn't the time to voice her suspicions.

The security officer shot Evelyn's card with his gun. By some technological magic, her image appeared on the television screen. The startled expression on the old lady's crumpled face was apparently sufficient likeness for her to be allowed back on board.

Evelyn knew that she and Henry, like the ship that was their home, were approaching the end of their lives. Yet the older she got, the less she worried about getting old. It was as inevitable as the weather, and just as unpredictable. Like the weather, it could be forecast but not controlled. Best to be prepared, Evelyn maintained, but go ahead with the picnic regardless. When it came to ageing, the best you could do was to carry an umbrella. And a life jacket.

Stepping over the threshold onto the ship with her right foot – always right foot first – Evelyn tripped, her toe catching on something she didn't see. Hands and arms appeared, reaching from all directions towards her like spokes on a bicycle wheel.

'Are you all right?'

'Steady now, Mrs Parker.'

'Shall I fetch a wheelchair?'

Irritated by the uninvited grasps, she shook off the ministrations. Crew members appeared from nowhere, crowding her with their hands and their uniforms. All nationalities, from every corner of the world, one big happy family. Her only family, apart from Henry, and yet Evelyn struggled to put a name to any of their faces. She imagined it was how the Queen must feel, meeting all these people and forgetting them again almost immediately. And like Her Majesty, Evelyn carried a handbag wherever she went, but never anything as vulgar as

money. By some miracle, her finances took care of themselves. Or rather her solicitor, Dobbs, took care of things.

She had a feeling young Dobbs was more than a solicitor. He was another one of her people, but to her embarrassment, Evelyn couldn't recall his first name. It began with H. Horace? Humphrey? He showed her where to sign her name on forms and had a wonderful biscuit selection. Heath? Herbert? Harvey? It would come to her.

Tripping had taken her by surprise. She was normally so good on her feet, for a woman of her age, attributing her steadiness to a lifetime of counteracting the perpetual movements of the ocean. A human gimbal.

'That's enough,' said Evelyn, brushing away any lingering assistance as if she were removing lint from her sleeves. She pulled the monogrammed handkerchief from beneath the elasticated wristband of her watch and sniffed into it. The air conditioning always made her nose drip.

The cool air inside the atrium was an oasis after the humidity and chaos of the terminal building and the city beyond. The tasteful lighting and sanitised luxury of the interior was always welcome after a busy day ashore, and Evelyn breathed a sigh of relief when she reached the quiet comfort of her cabin. Inside, the bed was neatly made and the floors still wore the tramlines of the vacuum cleaner. Outside the closed balcony windows she could still see the tops of the cranes, like freakish rides in a dockside theme park.

When Evelyn placed her handbag on the bed, it tilted and lost its balance, spilling the bundle of unopened letters out onto the pale blue bedspread. Unlike the standard company issue, the bed covering had been Evelyn's choice, and it had been perfectly to her taste, right up until Sunset Cruises changed

all the floor coverings during the last refit. Wanting the cabin to feel like home rather than a hotel, she'd insisted on keeping it. The new gold and burgundy carpet now clashed horribly with the bed.

Evelyn removed the rubber band from the bundle and balanced the letters on the already teetering pile on the dressing-table-desk. As one of her not-for-worrying people, she trusted young Dobbs would take care of anything important. These were most likely circulars or advertising material. Several were from the Dreadnought Home for Retired Seafarers, who sent her endless brochures and information. She'd stopped opening them. Neither she nor Henry had the slightest intention of ending up in an aged care facility.

There was a parcel on the dressing-table-desk. It was wrapped in brown paper and addressed to *Mrs Henry Parker, Passenger on MV Golden Sunset*. She couldn't think what it could be or who might have sent it. It wasn't her birthday yet. *Was it?*

Flopping into the armchair, Evelyn unwrapped the parcel on her lap. She released the edges of the brown paper with a bony finger to reveal a white shoebox. It wasn't a brand she recognised, and on removing the lid, Evelyn assumed the shoes must belong to someone else. She baulked at the sight of the ugly lace-ups. They were made from white canvas fabric with a flat rubber sole. The kind people wore when they were in a hurry.

'Good heavens,' she said out loud, examining one of the pair at close quarters.

She'd often eyed other women in similar shoes, searching their faces for the same agonising pinch that she experienced with each step. But they all looked as if their minds were anywhere but on what was happening at the end of their legs.

Kicking off her signature navy court shoes, Evelyn circled her ankles and splayed her toes in an effort to revive the squashed digits. They were good feet for her age apparently, the girl in the spa complimenting her impressive arches as she filed her toenails. The spa girls weren't very good with hard skin as a rule, but this particular one had been exceptionally diligent with her paring-back tools and Evelyn had graciously accepted the compliment on her taut metatarsals and rewarded her with a mint.

Evelyn untangled the laces and slipped her right foot into the corresponding shoe. To her surprise, it fit. She did the same with the left foot and tied the laces. She felt like Cinderella, although she was more suitably shod for a gymnasium than a ball. For the first time in who knew how long, Evelyn's feet didn't hurt. She'd been suffering the most terrible discomfort in her soles of late. A prickling, burning numbness that made it impossible to feel the ground. She hadn't mentioned it to Henry, in case he started to worry, but she was sure it was the beginning of something. It had a name. Two words. Several syllables. Medical charades. What was the name of the condition? It would come to her.

Evelyn hooked a small footstool with one big toe and pulled it towards her, admiring her new feet. They were just the thing for her daily laps of the boat deck. Four times around was a mile. She had no idea where they'd come from, but Evelyn couldn't wait to show Henry her new walk-a-mile shoes.

With her feet taken care of, Evelyn decided there was just time before the muster drill to fit in her daily brain training. It was as important to exercise one's mind as one's body, she always maintained. And while she could recite her poetry, she could rest assured she wasn't going ga-ga. Half-a-dozen verses were usually enough before her brain needed a lie-down.

Evelyn yawned, a fog of weariness descending, bringing her old friend Samuel Taylor Coleridge and the irresistible urge to rest her eyes.

*There passes a weary time. Each throat
Was parched, and glazed each eye.
A weary time! A weary time!
How glazed each weary eye.*

Some days were more challenging than others, not least turnaround day – which in itself was the cognitive equivalent of conquering Mount Everest. Luckily she had her trusty chauffeur who, like a Sherpa, knew the way, navigating effortlessly to Dobbs’s office in the city and chatting about everything from his family to his childhood. He was friendly, whatever his name was, bordering on overfamiliar, but they always arrived on time, and more importantly, he always delivered her back to the ship before it sailed.

Today the chauffeur had hovered whilst Dobbs discussed her circumstances. There’d been a pot of tea – strong as she preferred it – and a shortbread finger. She’d lost the thread of what he was saying when her hearing aid died. By some miracle the chauffeur had spare batteries at the ready, but by the time she’d caught up, Dobbs had moved on. The incomprehensible legal speak washed over her. For some reason, all she remembered were his socks. They were covered with toucans. Which was odd. Dobbs had never struck her as the toucan type.

On the Tip of Her Tongue

SHE WOKE TO A TINNY ANNOUNCEMENT JUST AS SHE HAD begun to nod off in the chair. It took Evelyn a moment to get her bearings and work out what was going on. It was the captain, whose name was on the tip of her tongue. By the time her brain had tuned in, he was already warning the passengers – and probably half the city given that the PA broadcast on the outside decks too – to prepare for the compulsory muster drill.

Evelyn sank further into her chair, disinclined to leave it for something as trivial as a compulsory safety drill.

She'd heard the whole tedious thing enough times she could recite it word for word. If the circumstances required. That's what came of being blessed with a rather superior memory: the ability to remember verbatim things of little consequence. Things like safety briefings along with more important matters such as the details of obscure seafaring legends and traditions, nineteenth century poetry or, her particular favourite, entire passages of Florence Nightingale's pioneering book, *Notes On*

Nursing. Such things were handy to have at her fingertips, in the right circumstances.

She wondered if her cabin steward Virgilio might turn a blind eye if she eschewed the compulsory drill in favour of a nice cup of tea. Tea or no tea, however, she wouldn't go until Henry returned. It was something they always did together. In the unlikely event that the ship sank, she imagined the two of them, side by side, helping each other on with their life jackets. Her husband was usually so big on safety, and yet today he was showing scant regard both for safety and the itinerary. Once the drill was over, *Golden Sunset* would depart almost straightaway. And still there was no sign of Henry.

Expecting to find either her tardy husband, or Virgilio with a tea tray, Evelyn hauled herself out of the armchair to answer the knock on her door. It was neither. Instead of Henry, or refreshments, she found a stairway guide wearing a fluorescent yellow hat and matching life jacket. Without so much as a by-your-leave, he instructed her to proceed immediately to her muster station.

Muttering, Evelyn went in search of her life jacket. It shouldn't be hard to find – bright orange and the size of a double mattress. She scanned the cabin, her brain failing to register an obvious life-preserving device of any colour. It didn't bode well. This was different to losing her key or magnifying glass. If the ship was drowning, there was no time to try to visualise the last time she used it or implement any of her other handy remembering techniques.

Every horizontal surface in the cramped cabin was crowded with books and framed photographs, piles of papers and unopened envelopes, plus the trinkets and souvenirs she'd collected from their travels. There was no sign of her life jacket.

Leaning precariously past her centre of gravity to look under the bed, she found nothing but more of the hideous carpet that clashed with the bedspread.

With the main cabin searched, she stuck her head into the tiny bathroom. Admittedly it was an unlikely storage place, given there was barely room to comb her thinning hair without bruising her elbows. Her eye registered the clinical white surfaces, finding nothing but her usual pot of cold cream beside the sink, a tiny bottle of complimentary shampoo and a new soap still wrapped in paper. Virgilio's trademark towel monkey dangled from the shower rose and Henry's razor, a few grey bristles trapped between the blades, was resting on the mirrored shelf above the sink, waiting patiently for his next shave. Next to it was his precious aftershave bottle. Henry had a particular favourite, Acqua di Parma – her father's too as it happened– and the tiny bathroom in the cabin was always filled with the citrus, spice, wood and leather of his little extravagance.

With only the wardrobe left, Evelyn was running out of options. To her relief, on the shelf above the clothes rail were two identical life jackets lying side by side like a canoodling couple. She made a mental note to remember their hiding place, in the event of an emergency. Or to allow more time for tea before the next muster drill.

Evelyn's fingers reached the black webbing straps and she prised the life jackets from their cosy embrace between an old cardboard box and the bulkhead. She couldn't think what was in the box, or why it was taking up valuable room in their cramped closet. With space at such a premium, they'd whittled down their belongings to essentials when they moved on board. The cabin was overdue for a sort-out, but there was

no time now. The drill was about to begin and Henry was cutting it very fine.

She was used to him being late, either busy with his patients or, since he'd retired, equally pressing business such as a visit to his favourite bookshop in the city when the ship docked on turnaround day. Evelyn wished Henry had come to see Dobbs, today of all days. She'd left with a sense of deep unease and the feeling that life was about to change.

Evelyn tried not to be irritated. She was worried about Henry. He hadn't been himself recently, wandering off without her. Secretly, Evelyn feared he was going, if not fully ga-ga, then at least ga. Not a surprise as his age, but a man of Henry's intellect could potentially hide his dwindling faculties until his decline was quite advanced, especially in familiar surroundings. She had made the decision to simply go along with it rather than challenge him. She didn't want to hurt his feelings. Humour him and maintain a strict routine. After so many years together, Evelyn knew how to handle her husband. And that included taking his life jacket along to the drill in preparation for his usual last-minute arrival.

She paused at the door, a life jacket wedged in each armpit, reaching for her handbag. Peeking inside to make sure she hadn't forgotten her mints, she slipped the handle over her wrist and studied the diagram on the back of the cabin door.

Your muster station is Lifeboat 10.

There was a helpful red dot to indicate the position of her cabin and a green arrow demonstrating the quickest route to her gathering-in-an-emergency place.

Evelyn stepped out into the alleyway and straight into a stampede of passengers each carrying an identical orange life jacket. Swept along by the press of bodies, Evelyn had to half-jog

to keep up. To her surprise she found the ground unusually springy beneath her new rubber-soled feet. At the stairwell, however, she had to hold the chrome handrail to descend the single flight following the green floor lights that illuminated the route like a runway. It was tricky with the two life jackets, a handbag and all those people, but she managed to avoid the indignity of a stumble or, worse, well-meaning strangers.

The crowd spilled out onto the open deck where more smiling yellow-hatted people directed the human traffic into efficient rows. It was hot on the west side of the ship, the humidity only intensifying the smell of diesel and fresh paint. Evelyn blinked in the sun and took refuge in the shade of a V-shaped man near the end of the back row. Passengers of every shape and size filled the deck in orderly lines.

At the beginning of each cruise, Evelyn liked to appraise the new arrivals, their fashions and habits, and to eavesdrop on their conversations. They were after all, apart from her visits to Dobbs in his office, her only link to the outside world. Long ago she'd given up reading shore-side newspapers or watching the endless loop of terrible happenings on the news channel of the ship's TV. Instead, everything she needed to know was written in the ship's newsletter, delivered under her cabin door each day by her steward.

Evelyn dropped her handbag and both life jackets onto the deck and tried to remove her light woollen cardigan to relieve her prickling skin. Her heart fluttered for a few beats before finding its rhythm again. She swooned in the heat and only just managed to stay upright, but not before she had elbowed a lady beside her in the cramped space.

Evelyn mumbled an apology and shook off several offers to summon medical assistance.

‘I’m perfectly fine, thank you,’ she said. ‘Besides, I am a nurse and my husband is a doctor.’

This seemed to appease the onlookers, who turned their attention back to the life-jacket-donning demonstration. Naturally Evelyn could do this with her eyes closed, should the need ever arise. But today for some reason she found herself trussed up in an embarrassing tangle of straps. Had they changed the whole not-for-drowning jacket design since last time?

Nearby, a grey-haired couple were trying to wrangle the three princesses who’d been behind her on the gangway. She smiled. She loved children. As long as they behaved.

Evelyn startled at a shrill sound. She turned to see one of the youngsters blowing into the orange plastic whistle dangling from her not-for-drowning jacket. When a meaningful stare didn’t work, Evelyn spoke up. For the sake of her fellow hearing-aid wearers.

‘You should never whistle on a ship, my dear,’ said Evelyn. She saw the little girl’s face drop.

‘Why not?’ said the little girl warily.

Evelyn softened her voice. ‘It’s bad luck.’

‘Who says?’

‘It’s an old seafaring superstition.’

‘Why?’

Evelyn’s patience was beginning to ebb. It was most frustrating. She was usually so good with children. ‘Well, it is said that whistling annoys Saint Anthony, the patron saint of wind. He might send us the wrong kind of wind. We don’t want a storm, do we?’

The little girl narrowed her eyes at Evelyn. ‘I’m not scared,’ she said. ‘I like thunder storms.’

Evelyn changed tack. ‘Germs then. That whistle is covered in germs. Nasty little things, bugs.’

‘But I like bugs too,’ the girl jutted one hip. Evelyn did the same. ‘Spiders are my favourite.’

Once upon a time, children had been seen and not heard. Nowadays, they were far more obvious. Quite impossible to ignore, in fact. ‘I’m talking about the kind of bugs that can make you sick. Very sick.’ Evelyn wagged a finger to indicate just how sick. She considered herself something of an authority on the subject, having come top in hygiene. Admittedly that was in 1950, but the world was still a filthy place. ‘The human mouth contains billions of bacteria. *Streptococcus, staphylococcus*. Not to mention the anaerobes like *Bacteroides*. Don’t they teach you anything at kindergarten?’

‘I know “The Wheels on The Bus”,’ said the girl.

This was a ship, not a bus, thought Evelyn. Honestly, no wonder children were so ignorant nowadays. Someone had to prepare the younger generation for the real world, and it might as well be her. She cleared her throat and began. ‘*The causes of the enormous child mortality are perfectly well known; they are chiefly want of cleanliness, want of ventilation, want of whitewashing; in one word, defective household hygiene.*’ She wondered if Florence Nightingale had had a similar affinity with children. Evelyn waited for the girl to process the information. Holiday or no holiday, she wanted to add, there would be a test at the end.

The girl was thinking, running her tongue around the inside of her cheeks. ‘I don’t understand,’ she said, ‘if there are billions of bugs that can make me sick already living in my mouth . . . then how come I’m not sick?’

She might be a little slow on the uptake, but she had a point. Evelyn could have talked about commensals and how the bacteria were simply hitching a ride, living side by side in harmony with their human host. As long as nothing upset the delicate balance between them, no harm would come to either. Instead, she smiled, defeated by the child's irrefutable logic. With his predilection for a good philosophical debate, Henry would like her. Evelyn couldn't wait to introduce him to the insightful little girl who liked spiders and thunderstorms.

Henry.

Now, where was that husband of hers?

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