

## AMERICAN ANTOINETTE

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The first time Rodrigue saw her, she stood in the center of the square. Her pale skin was wrapped in emerald green, the perfect contrast to her dark hair and long lashes. He approached her unknowingly, as though a magnet pulled the core of his very being. She had plump pink lips and a sprinkle of freckles and when she smiled, *oh*, that smile turned the world.

She caught his gaze with a playful glance, looking down at her heels, turning her toes inward. He grinned like a madman, unable to help himself. It was summer in Belgium and his English was mediocre at best, but between the warmth and the couple of pints he'd already finished, he was confident beyond measure.

Her name was Antoinette and she loved lilies and the color purple. She drank sherry and smoked cigarettes and her lips tasted like raspberries and sunshine. The tips of his fingers memorized the curve of her collarbone and the softness of her earlobe, the way she sighed when he kissed her neck.

But in the morning when the sun broke through his sheer curtains, she jumped from his sheets with her eyes wide, scrambling to make sense of the clock on his bedside table. She'd threaded up her stockings, tearing a hole with her toe, and was out his door before she could strap her shoes together.

"When can I see you again?" he called from his first story window, panicked and vulnerable.

She turned, hopping as she fastened the buckle of her heel and shouted, "Never! I'm scheduled to sail back to America — to New York — just this morning." She blew him a kiss and Rodrigue nearly chased after her, but New York was on the other side of the world and he knew, in the depths of his sinking heart, that any attempt to get her to stay would've been impossible.

That should've been it. He should've gone on with his life, drinking at pubs and taking pretty girls to the Antwerp Zoo or Den Botaniek, the botanical garden. But two months later, at Christmas Eve supper, Rodrigue saw the Red Star Line advertisement in his mother's magazine. He'd heard of ships that crossed impossibly wide seas, transporting people from place to place. But traveling from Antwerp to New York cost more than three month's salary.

He stewed over the next few weeks, thinking of Antoinette's lips and the way her face flushed and the sweet, floral smell of her that had faded from his bedsheets far too soon. There was part of him who knew he would never forget her, never be able to taste or bed a woman the same way after he'd been with her and that alone made him realize he had to do something about it. And suddenly, there was a way. He couldn't scrounge together the money but he certainly could apply to work on the ship.

Early the next Tuesday morning he dressed in his best

tweed suit jacket and marched down to the Red Star Line employment office to offer them his resume and persistence. He had no sailing education, but he didn't tell them that. They asked him his experience in a bridge and, having watched his mother play the card game many nights, he told them he had plenty. When asked about funnels, stems, and foredecks, he nodded his head at them, too. It took two interviews and approximately forty-seven lies to be offered the job, but by the end of it he'd negotiated just over 2,000 Belgian francs a month and a ride to New York.

America! Rodrigue had only ever seen faded photos in the paper, but when people talked about that place it seemed like a land of possibility. If he was ever going to see Antoinette again, America was the place to do it.

He boarded April 4th, a few months later, after kissing his mother and saluting his father and handing in notice to the steel factory. He laced up his boots and shouldered his travel bag and met the vessel that would be his home for the next few weeks, depending on winds and weather.

The SS Belgenland was built to hold some 2,500 passengers and traveled 18 knots at maximum speed. Unbeknownst to Rodrigue, she would carry some fine folks including Eleanor Roosevelt in '29, Douglas Fairbanks in '31, and Albert Einstein in '30 and '33. The massive oceanliner rocked gently in the sea, its keel a rich black, dotted with windows.

Rodrigue was startled to learn this was the ship's maiden voyage, but he took this as a sign of good luck and opportunity and dressed in his uniform with pride. He straightened his cap, gave his shirt a good tuck, and met with the rest of the crew. The ship itself was state of the art, the most modern and expensive thing Rodrigue had seen in his short life. With four decks and unobstructed sea views, the SS Belgenland was pure beauty in the sea.

Passengers arrived hours later, spilling onto the decks, waving at loved ones who shouted to them from the docks. They were well-dressed and hungry for entertainment and excitement and in the chaos of welcoming them, Rodrigue almost forgot he was supposed to be working. He followed his fellow sailors to check the ship cargo gear, tuning out as they seemed to be speaking another language to one another. Twice he slipped away from the work and towards the main decks, smiling at the children and wealthy couples who were bubbling with infectious excitement.

In those moments just before they departed from the port, Rodrigue felt no guilt or shame for lying about his experience — his only motivation was to see Antoinette again. He would've done anything to feel her softness or whisper gently into her ear. He was, quite literally, crossing the ocean for her.

Once the checks were made and the cargo loaded and the passengers were all safely aboard, the SS Belgenland took off into the ocean, steadily making its way away from Antwerp, the captain's sights set on New York.

At first, all was well. There were enough sailors aboard that Rodrigue could hide himself or make himself look busy without too many questions. He figured he would learn as he went and even in those first few hours, began picking up the names of different equipment or parts of the ship. Confidence found him as he climbed up and down the decks, looking for opportunities to escape or sink into the shadows. Even though there were moments of unease, Antoinette's smile kept him going.

That was until he'd ended his first shift and retreated to his room. He laid in his bunk, bolted to the floor and closed his eyes, silence a welcome companion. But the silence made the ship's movements so obvious that when his eyelids closed

he could feel it all — the waves and the sloshing. His head spun so violently he had to sit up.

The moment he thought of his nausea was the moment his stomach churned and he knew what would come next. And so he fled, barefoot, from the sailor's bunks, down the hall, up the stairs, around a corner, out into the night and violently vomited over the deck railing. He watched the contents of his stomach splatter across the unblemished ship as he retched again.

Once his stomach had emptied, he straightened himself and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, trying desperately to ease his head from spinning.

"Never seen a seasick sailor before." The voice laughed and Rodrigue turned, heart hammering in his chest. An older woman with gray hair piled on top of her head smoked a thin cigar. She watched him with twinkling eyes, the shadow of a smirk on her thin, painted lips.

He tried to think of something smart to say — an excuse or a joke, but instead he said, "I've never sailed before."

The woman didn't react. Instead, she took one long drag and breathed the smoke out between her lips. They both watched as it glided away into the dark, salty air.

"Well," she said with finality. "I suspect you are a spy."

The proclamation made Rodrigue laugh. "You've already figured me out! I would be a terrible spy."

The woman seemed to consider this. "Then, pray tell, why are you here?"

Rodrigue leaned on his forearms over the deck railing and stared into the water, his stomach churning despite having nothing in it. "I'm chasing a dream," he whispered into the night. Relief flooded through him as he told the woman about Antoinette and how he was sure he loved her — how he had waited his whole life to find a feeling like that and would do anything to feel it once more.

"Love is a drug," the woman said smartly, after he'd finished and she'd flicked her cigar away.

"Do you think I'm foolish?" Rodrigue almost couldn't bear her answer.

"I think you're a man," the woman said, studying him. "And love makes us do foolish things. But no—" She shifted her gaze to the moving sea. "You are not foolish. All love is beautiful."

She had left then and Rodrigue never found her back on that deck where he vomited regularly when his stomach couldn't take the rocking or the swaying. He had started to grow pale and weak, sweating profusely when caught in another lie. He counted each passing day as his head throbbled from seasickness, praying the ship would dock soon.

Luckily for Rodrigue, the SS Belgenland's maiden voyage only lasted a mere ten days and on April 14th, he could see the skyline of New York City from the lower deck. He'd been written up six times and gotten into a fist fight, but he'd made it to America, no worse for wear. After cleaning out his bunk and shaving the stubble that had grown, Rodrigue straightened his tie and disembarked the ocean liner.

New York was filled with life. Passengers hugged loved ones or set off from the dock in search of their next destination. Rodrigue stared out at the fancy new cars and the high-rise buildings, overwhelmed by the concrete and brick. How would he ever find Antoinette in a place like this? It was too late to turn back now, so Rodrigue took his first step forward, only to feel a tug on his arm.

The woman who had smoked the cigar on his first evening stood beside him, her eyes shining in the daylight, a mischievous smile crossing her face.

"My seasick sailor," she said endearingly. And as she

moved to the side, Rodrigue nearly gasped in shock. “I’d like to introduce you to my granddaughter, Antoinette.”

The woman of his dreams, now dressed in yellow, stepped out from behind her grandmother’s shadow and flushed pink. And without hesitation — despite having no money, little belongings, and a lingering ache in his belly — he knew the rest of his life was about to begin.

