



THE LOVE BOAT

THE ONLY THING MORE ROMANTIC THAN A TRANS-ATLANTIC CRUISE IS GETTING MARRIED ON ONE.

BY STEPHEN HEYMAN

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e were the sixth couple ever to be married aboard the Queen Mary 2. For 171 years, the British-flagged Cunard Line, which has sailed the world's most storied ocean liners — among them the Lusitania, the Queen Mary, and the Queen Elizabeth 2 —

registered births and deaths at sea, but never weddings, owing to a quirk in British law that requires marriages to be officiated in a publicly accessible place, and such a place cannot move, much less splash its way across the North Atlantic.

Last year, however, Cunard switched the registrations of its ships from their historic home port of Southampton, England, to the anything-goes maritime hub of Hamilton, Bermuda. This change was purportedly made so that the company could cash in on weddings at sea. But it also allowed Cunard to skirt

a recent British labor law that could have prohibited the hiring of cheap foreign crew.

Yana and I set sail from the Brooklyn Cruise Terminal, in Red Hook, the neighborhood where we usually go to buy cheap furniture and olives. Even our cab driver was excited as we drove into port, exclaiming, “Queen Mary 2!” into his Bluetooth headset between bursts of Urdu. Of course, on the quay, there was none of the hullabaloo of the 1920s, when a scrum of reporters nicknamed “Gangplank Willies” kept tabs on the scions and starlets who would stream off trans-Atlantic steamships.

Our stateroom was decked out in as much nuptial folderol as Cunard could muster: flowers, canapés, marc de Champagne truffles, bottles of Champagne. We sat on the lounge chairs in the balcony, snacked on strawberries and called our mothers to say goodbye. Both were wounded that we were getting married without them — without anyone, actually — but they expressed this sentiment in different ways. My mom wouldn't even admit to it, which became awkward, whereas for weeks before we left, Yana's mother could not stop saying, “I'll never forgive you.”

As we pushed off, the Champagne displacing whatever feelings of guilt we had, I reminded Yana that, technically, we had also gotten engaged on the water. It happened a year earlier, on the first day of a trip to Europe. I had wanted to do it on the plane ride. But we were seated in a center row right behind the lavatories, and not a minute would elapse without the high-pitched flushing of a toilet. So I waited. We landed obscenely early in the morning and our hotel room wasn't ready, so we dropped off our bags and went for a walk. When I asked her, the sun was coming up and we were in a strange city on a bridge that spanned a harbor. Some might think this scene romantic but the truth is the early summer sunrise cast us in a rather clinical light and we looked sickly and tired, and although Yana laughed a bunch and then said yes — we had been together since college, and decided years ago that we were it for each other — I think both of us felt strangely untouched. It wasn't until two nights later, in Athens, that Yana told her mom, who wept openly via Skype. Hearing her, my vision went blurry and I realized I was crying, too.

Even though the crossing could be accomplished in under four days, Cunard pads the voyage out to seven, to improve fuel economy and to have guests spend more money at the blackjack table or at Todd English's restaurant (crossings start at \$1,345 per person, based on double occupancy). Our wedding was scheduled in the afternoon on the fifth day. Until then, we were just ordinary passengers, experiencing the pleasures and privations unique to this mode of conveyance. We drank as though the ship was doomed, as though there were U-boats and mines and icebergs everywhere. We spent our hangovers in the steam room or in the sanatorium-style “relaxation room,” lounging in our bathrobes, reading British shelter magazines. On the exposed decks we sat on teak lounge chairs, covered ourselves in heavy wool quilts and sipped teacups filled with hot bouillon. It was blustery, at times freezing, even in June. Yana couldn't wear her floppy sun hat, and our bathing suits were reserved for daring midnight sorties to the whirlpool.

On the appointed day, we poured ourselves two glasses of gin with ice and lots of lime and began to get dressed. Getting dressed is the best part of cruising, and on a typical crossing,

three of the nights are formal (tuxedos for men) and two are semiformal (jacket and tie), so there's a lot of repairing to the cabin, making cocktails, playing music, primping and preening. On any Queen Mary 2 voyage there is no restriction on the amount of luggage you can bring along, and our suite came with a giant walk-in closet spacious enough for one of Cunard's 133-day around-the-world voyages.

Yana's bouquet arrived. A day earlier, we had gone below deck to consult with a florist named Mikey, and had ordered a white rose boutonniere for me and something called the "exotica" bouquet for Yana. This was a mistake. Mikey had not created a bouquet as much as a tropical ecosystem; the stems were wrapped in what looked like surgical tape, and Yana couldn't fit her hands around them there were so many. We loosed the ugly thing and made a smaller, makeshift bouquet out of a few of the calla lilies.

On eBay, I had bought a vintage sharkskin Lanvin tuxedo for \$150. I'm not immune to toffishness, especially at a discount, and plus, I said to myself, this was a nod to the bygone glamour of the trans-Atlantic. (I thought of Cary Grant, who had met one of his five wives on the original Queen Mary.) I had spent a fortune altering this tux and as I was struggling — even with the help of six different YouTube instructional videos — to manage my bowtie, the knee of the trousers ripped apart. I put on a backup suit. Yana's dress, meanwhile, was made of white crepe. It was sleeveless, short and had a slit down the back.

As soon as I exited our stateroom I ran into a red liveried porter waiting outside. This was Yana's usher, and he looked exceedingly uncomfortable under his bellboy cap. We smiled obsequiously at each other, then I turned and took the stairs up two decks to the brushed-wood cocktail lounge, the Commodore Club. By this point in the voyage, we had come to know the Commodore rather well; it's where we liked to take our predinner, after-dinner, late-night and noontime cocktails, and it was also home to Churchill's, the enclosed, air-purified cigar bar, where we smoked Romeo y Julieta cigarillos and made friends with a Saudi financier. Upon learning that it was our wedding cruise, he insisted on buying us a bottle of Champagne and then asked us where he should open up his next Zara franchise.

The wedding itself would take place in a private room off the Commodore Club called "The Boardroom." There was a podium and a makeshift altar with more "exotica" flowers. Our one-tier wedding cake was inside and wedding programs were placed on rows of armchairs, even though we had no guests. (Cunard's wedding program, which starts at \$2,500, was only a few months old at this point, so some hiccups were to be expected.) I walked Christopher Wells, the Queen Mary 2's steady hand, a spindly, somewhat persnickety Englishman. "Hallo, Captain!" said the assembled staff, which included a ship-appointed photographer; the captain's secretary, a ruddy Dane named Christel; and the ship's social secretary, Tanya. (Tanya and Christel would serve as our official witnesses; Bermuda law requires two.)

Rather than introduce himself, the captain immediately began to tweak the wedding decorations. "Why do we have the cake in here?" he said. "I don't like that table there. To me, that table shouldn't be there at all." I could feel myself blushing as the minutes passed and the staff moved things around and the captain still hadn't said anything to me.

Finally, he asked, "You're the groom? Well done! Your best man should be with you. Oh, it's just the two of you?" He looked down at my drink. "Feeling brave, eh? A glass of fortitude is a good thing. Well done ... where's your mother?"

Meanwhile, the bellhop had taken Yana arm in arm and led her down toward the lounge. They had a mother tongue in common, and speaking Russian seemed to make him more gregarious because, on the way to the altar, he began to gossip about the sexual habits of his Filipino crew mates. When he delivered Yana to the Commodore Club, 15 minutes too early, a small panic surged through the wedding party. "The bride must be late!" the captain lamented. "It's tradition!"

Then the captain's secretary, remote control in hand, activated a CD player that began to play Wagner's wedding march from "Lohengrin." The bellhop took Yana to the doorway of the Boardroom, but she walked the rest of the way herself. Before she got to the podium, the CD skipped and shut off and the room unexpectedly fell silent.

Feeling ridiculous, Yana quickened her pace. "You're walking too fast!" the captain shouted, before smiling and taking her hand. "I'm trying to make Stephen here extremely nervous. Because it's tradition. And you of course have just come in as a rose, and put him at his ease."

She did look radiant; her cheeks had turned pink because of this whole silly scene. "Nevermind what's happening outside," the captain said, now in a soothing whisper. "Bellboys and rooms and flowers and candles and all of that. This is about making a commitment to each other. That's all a wedding is."

It was June 21, which the captain noted was the summer solstice, the longest day of the year. (He was just a day off; the 2012 solstice was on June 20.) And it was now 4:30 Greenwich Mean Time — half-past three as far as the ship's clocks were concerned — and we were 900 miles from the southern tip of Greenland, 1,000 miles from the Irish coast. In other words, smack in the middle of the North Atlantic, at 49.93 degrees north latitude and 31.6 degrees west longitude.

I know these coordinates because they're printed on my wedding certificate. After coming home, when I entered the latitude and longitude into Google Maps, I got a fright seeing how deeply lost we were; zooming out from that tiny point and seeing nothing but the cruel blue actually felt a bit like falling. "You are stateless at this very moment," the captain told us, and it was the most affecting thing he said during the ceremony because it meant, or we took it to mean, that we were tethered to nothing except each other.

At a certain point, after we were told to hold hands and the captain's voice got a bit more stilted, we drifted into the "to have and to hold" boilerplate, which I will not belabor — we've all seen movies — except to say that the captain did admirably and we were, if not moved, then genuinely charmed. He ended the proceedings like this: "As master of Queen Mary 2 and by the legal power vested in me by the laws of Bermuda, I now pronounce you husband and wife. Stephen, you may now kiss your bride." And so, the captain, the captain's secretary, the social secretary and the cruise photographer watched us smooch. ■

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