It is all very well to dream of climbing through the ceiling of a newspaper office via the branching ladder of an overgrown pot plant, out into the starry night sky. But even if you elect to take a more sensible approach — tender your resignation in warm and regretful terms, work out your notice, and leave through the front door on a Friday afternoon after a few paper cups of cask moselle — you still find yourself as bewildered as if you really were adrift on a rooftop, staring into the benignly unhelpful face of the Town Clock, with nothing more than a Mini with a busted door, twenty-seven pairs of red shoes and an arts degree to your name, wondering what on earth to do next.

I went to see Eve.

‘What’s it like?’ I asked her, part way through the third bottle of wine, having invoked the privileges of dear friendship and rare appearance in order to keep her up drinking long past the hour Adam had excused himself and gone to bed.

‘What?’ she asked sleepily.

‘All this,’ I said, waving my hand to take in the new and tasteful expanses of the remodelled picker’s hut, the room where her calm and dependable husband lay in his half of the marital bed, the nursery where their little boys were twinned in deep sleep and rude good health, the pair of matching dogs as flat as rugs before the open fire, and the walls ripely hung with painted apples. ‘You always were five steps ahead of me, Evie.’

‘That depends entirely, dear girl, on which direction you’re headed.’

‘But where do I go now?’

She threw a cushion at me. ‘Go to sleep, for God’s sake. I’m up to my neck in toddler shit in two and a half hours.’

A few weeks later, I set sail.

Although, I find ‘sail’ to be a curious verb for the action of the floating white American skyscraper upon whose luxurious decks I stood as I pinned to my lapel the shining name tag that bore the legend ASSISTANT PURSER ROSIE LITTLE.

Oh please, admire me in my cruise company uniform: the snug-fitting bottle-green skirt, the matching fitted jacket, the nylon nanna-print blouse, the beige pantyhose (that I ripped through at the startling rate of one pair every two days due to a ridiculous propensity for snagging), and the sensibly low-heeled bottle-green pumps. And please, do reach into the breast pocket of my jacket and bring out, for your amusement and mine, the laminated card which I could (and did) get a written reprimand for failing to carry, and upon which are printed the ten commandments of my life aboard the vessel. My favourites were always Number Three: 'I smile, I am on stage', and Number Ten: 'I never say no. I say "I will be pleased to check and see" '.

I shared my flimsy walled, lower deck cabin with a Texan called Beth. Although she quite possibly had to have the pom-poms surgically removed from her cheerleader wrists before she took up her job as a shipboard dancer, she was forthright and funny and we were friends in an instant. Her boyfriend, also a dancer, was a Mexican called Octavio, whose polished manner and industrial strength hairdo remained undented even after a full day of cha-cha-chaing the wibbly flesh of seventy-year-old Nebraskan matrons.

'Octavio is the only man in the world who would take his girlfriend on an outing to Tiffany's to show her the ring that he's going to buy for himself,' was Beth's favourite of her stock complaints about Octavio, all of which she would deliver with a 360-degree roll of her wide eyes and follow with a full-lung-capacity sigh.

If you have ever been a passenger on a cruise ship, then you will know that there are diversions scheduled on the half-hour, at least. There are dance lessons in a variety of styles, cooking classes, ice sculpture demonstrations, investment seminars, nature talks, and auctions of the kind of art that is designed to pick out the colours in your curtain fabric. But not one of these activities is more favoured by the American retirees — who come aboard in order to fully exercise the hard-earned privileges of a lifetime of work in the family carpet/rubber/plastics/44-foot motorhome business — than the activity in which it was my thankless task to accommodate them: complaining. Some might disagree with me, and put forward the view that eating is more popular even than complaining. But I always found it difficult to think of eating as a discrete activity when — much like blinking — it was something that passengers seemed subconsciously to be doing whenever they were awake.

As a passenger on a cruise ship you may, three times a day, take your designated seat in the Emerald Court dining room and order anything on the menu. You may order everything on the menu. And since the food is included in the overall price of the cruise, this is precisely what you do. You order six plates of food and take two mouthfuls from each, retaining room, of course, for whichever dessert the pyromaniac of a chef is flambéing on that particular day. Should you miss a meal, or get peckish, you can dine out any old time at the pizzeria, or call into the patisserie for a snack. And should you be on deck in the deep night of an ocean crossing, you might be lucky

enough to see the ship perform a moonlit excretion: a colossal tide of waste food mingling with an equally colossal tide of human shit in a gleaming, spreading slick.

I spent a year in bottle-green uniform. And then another. Pulling into port at dawn, setting sail for somewhere else at dusk, I gathered the seaside cities of the world in postcard-sized impressions. From behind the smooth curve of my reception-area desk, I fielded complaints about the standard of toilets in war-torn nations and the unacceptable wait for the between-decks elevators. I pacified indignant passengers returning from shore excursions having learned that not every shopowner on the planet provides change in American dollars. Occasionally I was let out to join a shore excursion, ostensibly as an interpretive guide, but actually as a shepherd for our white-haired and woolly-brained charges.

I tolerated as best I could my English and chook-bum-mouthed supervisor (whose parents spelled her name ‘Natarsha’, with the extra ‘r’, just to be absolutely certain that she sounded like a insufferable prat), who once squeezed me into her cupboard-sized office in order to tick me off for taking three turns, instead of two turns, in the elastic bands that we used for securing the change bags at the end of each day. It was Natarsha who routinely checked that I was carrying my commandment card by asking me to take it out and read to her Number Six: ‘I wear proper and safe footwear that is clean and polished, and I wear my name tag’, or Number Eight: ‘I answer the phone with a smile in my voice’, and who filed a formal reprimand with Head Office on the day she caught me without the commandments in my pocket.

As for the Love Boat? Ha! The old saying was true: the only people who took cruises were the overfed, the newlywed and the nearly dead. And for two years, my romantic adventures went no further than the vicarious enjoyment of Beth and Octavio’s turbulent tango, and a mildly flirtatious friendship with a croupier in the onboard casino. Garry was from Adelaide, told the kind of filthy jokes that could only have been scraped off the floor of an Australian pub, and he could kick my arse at the pool table. We each earned ourselves a demerit point when we were caught, in the early hours of the morning, in the passenger-only zone of the on-deck hot tub. It was my second strike, but it was Garry’s third.

‘One for the road?’ he asked, gesturing to his cabin door with a hitchhiking thumb on the night before he was sent home, unemployed.

‘Thanks Gaz, for the offer, but “I will be pleased to check and see”.’

By the time my two years turned into two and a half, it was summer in the northern hemisphere and the ship was sliding like a big white Monopoly hotel up and down the shattered-diamond coast of Alaska. And as it dodged through dense archipelagos and followed curving bays with mouths full of the bared and aqua-blue teeth of glaciers,

both the passengers and Assistant Purser Rosie Little were introduced to a new kind of diversion.

He was older than me — just enough to make me feel younger — but not very much taller, and he came aboard for the season as a visiting writer, to give daily readings in the Top Deck Lounge and to mess up my composure with his speckled, teasing stare.

‘Rosie and Russell. Oh, that’s cute,’ said Beth, when I confessed to the fizz of excitement I’d felt on the day that it had fallen to me to give him a tour of the ship, after which I’d stayed in the back of the lounge to listen to him read in his wiry Scottish accent a suite of tender poems about bird flight and heartbreak.

‘Why cute?’ I asked.

She stretched out on her bunk in her pale blue babydoll nightie, and opened a packet of Oreos. Beth was impervious to the gut-lifting sensation of the ship heaving on an ocean swell. I, on the other hand, sat up in bed sipping ginger tea.

‘You know,’ she said, ‘that nominative thing you’re always talking about.’

‘Nominative determinism? What do you mean? Whycute?’

‘Look up “Russell”,’ she said, flinging me the baby name book that she kept in her bedside drawer and used for the purpose of making long lists of possible first and middle names for the children she was sure she would one day have with Octavio.

‘Ruben, Rudolph, Rupert … here we go … Russell: the colour red, or red-haired one,’ I read out.

‘See? Rose Red meets her man!’

‘Beth,’ I said, closing the book and running a finger down its spine, ‘that actually is a bit weird. Because guess what his last name is?’

‘What?’

‘Short.’

‘No way! Rosie Little and Russell Short? Oh my God,’ she said. ‘You two are MFEO.’

‘What?’

‘Oh, c’mon. Made For Each Other.’

Russell Short and I began to spend a lot of time together and, for me, the conversation we shared was like an exotic banquet after years of white bread. It was both sweet and piquant, full of allusion and quotation, and it was almost enough to mend my difficult relationship with the word ‘eclectic’. It was a conversation that required footnotes, too, and one that had me up late at night in the ship’s library, cracking open the untouched leather of a fine dictionary to look up words like ‘deliquesce’, or hunting on the internet for the rest of an Emily Dickinson poem, with the opening lines of which — ‘Nobody knows this little Rose/It might a pilgrim be’ — he would quite often greet me.

And so we flirted, up and down the Alaskan coast, until one day when we were on deck, sipping scotch chilled with ice chips from the hunk of glacier that Russell had brought back from a walk in the mountains, and he said, ‘You know, we’re playing a game, you and I.’

His words gave me a little jolt, making me think that he was about to say something dangerously real. But when I looked over at him for a cue, he seemed perfectly calm.

‘We are?’

‘Yes, we are playing a game. But we are only playing it in our minds. Do you want to play for real?’

‘For real?’ I asked, wishing I had the faintest clue what he meant.

‘Well? Do you?’

‘I don’t know. What’s the name of this game?’

‘The name of this game is Not Pushing the Glass off the Table,’ he said, downing his scotch and crunching the last shard of ice between his teeth.

‘And what are the rules of Not Pushing the Glass off the Table?’

‘Ah, sensible girl. A cautious approach,’ he said, inverting his tumbler.

It was one of the kind that tapers into a hexagon of cut panels and he placed it upside down on the table, close to the edge.

‘The aim of the game is to see how far you can push the glass without actually pushing it off,’ he explained, and pushed the glass until a slender crescent of its rim extended over the edge of the tabletop.

‘Now your turn,’ he invited.

‘Like so?’ I asked, moving the glass only a fraction.

‘Oh come on. It’s only your first go. Fortune favours the bold.’

‘Is that better?’

‘Passable,’ he allowed. ‘My turn.’

And turn about, we continued to move the glass, making the crescent grow.

‘You see,’ he said, tapping the glass forward with his fingertips, ‘the wonderful thing about this game is that you can push and nudge the glass towards the edge, but if it falls to the ground and smashes, you always have the consolation that it was most expressly not your intention to break it. Your turn.’

When the amount of unsupported rim was an almost perfect half-circle, I gave the glass a tiny push, stopping just short of the point at which I thought it would begin to teeter.

‘I’d say that’s it. Right there,’ he said. ‘That’s as close to the edge as that glass will go without falling.’

‘You’re piking out?’

‘You think it can go further?’

‘Isn’t that what we have to find out?’ I asked.

‘You’ve played this game before, haven’t you?’

‘Your turn,’ I invited.

‘You’re quite sure?’

‘Not at all.’

‘But you want me to do it anyway?’

‘Yes,’ I said, giggling.

‘And of that you are certain?’

‘Go on.’

‘No, I forfeit. You do it,’ he said.

And I did. I gave the glass one more little push, and when it landed on the deck it did not so much shatter as simply fall into pieces. At our feet were the thick wedge of the glass’s base and several triangular shards — isosceles, equilateral — all of them pointing in only one direction.

His cabin had a porthole that was sometimes a circle of blue waves and sometimes a circle of sky. Most times, though, it held the line of the horizon, and as this line moved up and down with the motion of the ship, the porthole appeared to fill and empty with water. As the season progressed, I came to think of that porthole as a kind of spirit level that measured my own equilibrium as I ebbed and flowed in Russell’s bunk.

In the lounge, in the dining room, on the deck, he was always older, wiser, worldlier, wordier than me. But I loved the fact that in his cabin, within the white wash of daily-laundered sheets, there were moments of silence in which I could pick up the scent of vulnerability on his naked skin. Or I thought that I could.

‘Rose,’ he said, one afternoon, as I slowly subsided in his arms.

‘Yes?’ I said, from where my head lay in the bony hollow of his bare shoulder.

‘I should probably tell you that on the last cruise of the season, my wife will be coming aboard.’

‘Your wife?’ I asked, propping myself up to look into his face.

It wore an expression that was quite unconcerned.

‘Yes, minikin. My wife,’ he said, quite definitely, at the same time as he tenderly fingered my cheek.

‘Your wife?’ I repeated.

He shrugged. ‘Oh, Rose, you remember the name of the game,’ he said.

‘Game?’

‘It isn’t called Pushing the Glass off the Table,’ he said.

Very clever, I thought. I could almost have applauded his immaculate groundwork. For now I knew that even if I were to fall to the ground and smash, right in front of him, he could easily excuse himself with the fact that it was most expressly not his intention to break me.

One final word from Rosie Little

On the day that I left school, my favourite English teacher took me aside to give me some parting words of advice. And I remembered her words clearly, even though I did not immediately understand their relevance. It's important, she said, with not the faintest trace of irony in her voice, to know when to use the cake fork.

What was this that she was offering me? A dot point from her nanna's etiquette manual? A titbit of snooty trivia, useful only in the context of high tea at a ladies' service club, or the odd occasion on which one might dine with the governor? Or was it something else entirely?

Now that I have had a few years in which to think on it, I am almost certain that my teacher was speaking to me of words. For is not a precisely or cleverly used word just like a cake fork: a fine and delicately crafted thing, ideally adapted for one specific task? Is not the pleasure of attacking a passionfruit sponge with a dainty silver fork, quite similar to the pleasure one takes from having to hand just the right, exquisitely honed word?

But while it is a joy to have words like 'accismus' and 'stridulate' tucked away in your silver drawer, you would hardly want to use them every day of the week. You can eat cake perfectly politely without recourse to a cake fork, after all. There are times when a dinner fork will do just fine. And there are other times when, even if a cake fork is laid out for you, it is best to ignore it and use your fingers. And there are other times still, when nothing less than a pitchfork will do. The trick, of course, is to know which is which is which.

I think that my schoolteacher's advice is worth passing on, but with an amendment that I made in the light of the filleting I suffered at the hands of the sesquipedalian Russell Short. For cake forks, like other small silvery things — mirrors, flying fish, the tips of some people's tongues — can be deceptive. So to you, I would say it's important to know when to use the cake fork, but it is equally important to know who is using the cake fork on you.

Horribly early on the day after Russell Short casually tossed his wife into our post-coital bliss, I sat knees-together on a small, rear-facing seat in a minibus full of cruise passengers. While the automated section of my brain supplied the cheery patter that I delivered into the overheated mouthpiece of a headset, I used the conscious part to wonder if there was one precise word for 'I've taken a king hit from a direction that I did not expect, but even if I had, I could not have known that I would feel so profoundly winded'. If there was such a word, then I couldn't think of it.

The scenery upon which I was commentating was barely visible, only just coming up

into greyscale with the creeping dawn. Our passengers were on their way to take a hot-air balloon ride on the soft early-morning air currents, and it was still not fully light when the minibus pulled into a car park where four flaccid but colourful sheaths were slowly inflating upwards from the bitumen. By the side of one of these stood a woman in a white lacy dress, clutching a small white Bible and a posy of white flowers, and a man in a tuxedo, who was nervously clasping and unclasping his hands in front of his crotch.

‘Say,’ said an elderly gent with huge and stiffly cartilaginous ears, as I helped him down from the bus. ‘Are those two going to get married up in one of them hot-air balloons?’

‘No,’ I said. ‘They came to this car park a while back and thought, wow, what a place to tie the knot!’

I caught Natarsha’s disapproving look from the far side of the bus door, but it wasn’t until later, when I was back aboard the ship and cornered once again in the tiny empire of her office, that I realised how final a mistake I had made.

‘Number Ten, Rosie. Number Ten,’ she said, filling in the blanks of my third and final written reprimand. ‘I think of it as the cardinal rule. We never say no.’

I have to say that it was more of a relief than anything to be terminated before the arrival on board of the no-doubt lovely and erudite and uncreasable Mrs Short. And after so long aboard an American cruise ship, it was no small consolation that by the time my reprimands had been collated and the paperwork for my dismissal finalised, the ship had sailed into the sisterly waters of Canada.

‘Go on then,’ said Beth in our cabin on my last morning, handing me the last tissue from the box and wiping her nose with the back of her hand. ‘Get out of here.’

I handed in my uniform, smiled insincerely at Natarsha, and clodded down the ship’s gangway in my dear old Doc Martens, onto a wharf in a city half-rimmed by mountains. I felt heavy, and not only because of the weight of the two suitcases I carried. But I tried to buoy myself with the knowledge that this city was the one I would most probably have chosen, if I’d had to choose a city in which to be cast out. It was, after all, the city within whose credibly ramshackle arts precinct was my favourite tearoom in the world.

The Junction Tearoom was a converted house: the kind of grand old home that would once have had lawns and a tennis court and a commanding view of its surrounds, but was now squeezed tight into a corner block by the encroachment of urban clutter. Its wide and rickety verandas were glassed in and filled with rattan chairs and small, unsteady tables, each with a pile of assorted secondhand books, their topics

alternately banal and arcane. But it was within the former bedrooms and sitting rooms and drawing rooms of the old house that the real magic of the Junction resided, since each of these rooms was lined with shelves, and all of these shelves were filled with teacups.

To wander through the house was to chart the modern history of the teacup. Represented were all the great potteries, and the lesser ones too, all the famous patterns, and many of the forgotten as well. There were ladies' cups and children's cups, Victorian cups and art deco cups, serious cups and silly cups. And not one of them was behind glass. They were there to be used. At the Junction, you see, you not only ordered tea, but a teacup too. Each was assigned a number, and had tucked into its saucer a small card detailing its provenance. Predictably, there were Junction devotees whose mission it was to have tea from each and every cup in the collection.

I arrived there late in the morning and chose a table whose pile of books was topped by a yellow-jacketed tome titled British Poultry Standards. And although I walked through all of the interior rooms and looked at the hundreds of cups I could choose from, and considered seriously a gold-lined Aynsley with burnished fruit, a Blue Paragon with roses and a Womble cup depicting four of the little scavengers paddling a bathtub, the cup I really wanted was one that I had drunk from before. I knew that I should try something different, but I was feeling low, and in need of comfort, and it was no time to be stern with myself. So I asked for the Red Domino (Midwinter Pottery, 1953, designer Jessie Tait), a good-sized white cup with a red rim that was trimmed with small white dots, and it was brought to my table, along with a plain white teapot and milk jug, by a waiter with a black apron strung tightly across his narrow hips.

Outside it was raining, and although I was not exactly cold, I could still have done with a quilt to pop over my knees, or a hot-water bottle to hold against my chest. I poured my tea and drifted into the clear circle of thinking space that seemed to open up around it. Well, I thought, I had excelled myself this time. Within a matter of days I had bruised my heart and lost my job, however unlovely the job. Was this how it was to be for me? Instead of learning to make fewer mistakes, I would simply rack them up more swiftly?

These were the questions I was asking of myself as I looked out through the drizzling window, and saw somebody that I did not expect to see. It was her. Surely. She was on the wrong continent, of course. And she did not appear to have aged a day in the ten years since I'd seen her last, on a train chuffing through the English countryside. But it had to be her. She was wearing the very same polka-dot dress with the flopping polka-dot bow at its throat, and the same neat little black shoes with their laces and high heels. She carried the same umbrella, but it was opened this time, and she held it steadily above her head as she stood on the corner across the street from the tearoom, looking directly at me.

Raindrops bounced on her polka-dot canopy and the traffic lights changed. And changed again. And then one more time. But she simply stood there, half-smiling at me, until — at last — I understood. That she had been there at every crucial junction, in one guise or another. She was there, that night in the Hyphen-Wilson's boatshed, pinned to the wall as Miss August, wearing nothing more than the pants of a polka-dot bikini. She was at the hospital on the night I had six stitches between my eyes, her long blonde hair held back with a polka-dot bandana while she asked me questions and allowed me to tell myself the truth. She was the smut-cheeked child with the Christmas wreath, and the hand in the spotted glove that I had noticed hovering protectively at the edge of one of the photographs taken on the day of my christening. She was what I had been reaching for when I had chosen, on this very day, the dotrimmed cup that I now held in my hand.

I smiled at her across the shallow river of the wet road. And she smiled back, and lifted one hand to wave: the kind of wave in which the four fingers move as they would in a quick scale of as many piano keys. She stepped off the kerb then, and, without waiting for the lights to change, crossed the road. She entered the tearoom and the chime-bells of the door continued to tinkle while she shook the raindrops off her umbrella, collapsed and furled it. For just a moment, I doubted myself. Perhaps she would simply sit down at any one of the empty tables and order a cup of tea. But no. She took a seat at my table, and as she did so the waiter set down in front of her a cup that was black with white polkadots, resting in a saucer that was white with black. Of course.

'I came to tell you something,' she said, pouring milk, and then tea, from my jug and my teapot, into her cup.

'Tell me something?'

'Mmmmm,' she said. 'Isn't it wonderful when the first sip of tea is precisely the right temperature? One of the great pleasures in life, in my book.'

'You were saying? That you came to tell me something?'

'Oh yes,' she said, her smile revealing some flecks of cerise lipstick on her front teeth. She sipped her tea again.

'What did you come to tell me?' I asked, trying to keep my impatience in check.

She took another sip and inclined her head towards me.

'That your laces are undone, dear,' she said softly.

My laces? I looked down at my boots.

‘And in here, too, dear,’ she said, tapping with skewed and wrinkled fingers at the centre of her polka-dot chest.

I looked inward at my heart. And indeed, there too, the criss-cross corsetry was slackened and gaping. I was all undone. Potentially, I could spill. Or tangle. And so I began to tug at my own heartstrings, pulling them up tight until there was just the right amount of tension at each criss and each cross. Then I bent down to my boots and laced them firmly too, first the left, then the right, finishing off on each side with a surgeon’s shoelace knot.

But when I looked up from my boots, eager to ask who, where, when, why …she was gone.

She was no longer in the tearoom, and she was not anywhere to be seen in the street. The waiter shrugged in answer to my searching face. She had simply vanished, leaving her polka-dot cup on the table, half full of milky tea. I put my hand on the side of her cup and felt both the warmth of it, and the warmth of the knowledge that she was out there. Somewhere. My heart swelled gently within the safe net of its lacing, and my toes flexed inside their casing of cherry-red leather. In a moment, I would take a bold and good-sized step, out into the woods again. But first, I would finish my tea.